

NOTES

THE ONE17 MAGAZINE | SPRING/SUMMER 2019 | ISSUE TEN



HOMES • INTERIORS • DESIGN • FASHION
TRAVEL • GARDENS • RESTAURANTS • HOTELS

ANNIVERSARY EDITION

COMMON KNOWLEDGE

Three apparently very different independent small businesses reveal a surprising number of similarities in what it takes to succeed.



Photo © Belle and Beau photography
Fireza Flowers workshop

Going it alone in Britain in 2019 is not easy. We interviewed three individuals making their mark in what appear to be very contrasting businesses: signwriting, floral arrangements and leather bags, to find out how they manage to run successful businesses in today's tough economic climate. Despite the wildly different milieu in which they work, common themes came to the surface as we talked.

Being good at what you do is obvious, as is the willingness to work long hours and put up with the isolation this sometimes involves. The need to be organised is also no surprise, but the one ingredient none could do without is the belief that this is what they should devote their working lives to. Passion and a certain stubborn streak – or perhaps we should say quiet self-belief, was evident in all three. What we were not perhaps expecting was the importance all of our interviewees placed on social media for the success of their ventures. »

RUBY CREAGH

Photography © Ruby Creagh

Influenced by early years in the tack rooms of livery stables and the heritage of the British leather industry, Ruby Creagh bags & leather goods are made to last...

Ruby Creagh designs, makes and sells bags, belts and other leather products from a small studio in a converted industrial building in Hebden Bridge. So far, so straightforward. The products are good - very good in fact but she is not alone in this type of occupation. At a time when stress in working people is running close to the red line, Ruby Creagh exudes a calm serenity that suggests she has discovered what she wants to do in life, has gone out and achieved it, and - this is the amazing bit - is perfectly content and happy with the result! Somehow that contentment seeps into her work, giving the products something extra.

A native of Todmorden, Ruby went to London and did various jobs in media, fashion and so on. Great experience but she came to realise it was not what she wanted to do with her life. Always interested in design, she thinks her early involvement with horses and their paraphernalia gave her a feeling for leather that was dormant within her during this time. Ruby also saw people in media and fashion burned out by their fifties, turning away from the madness of those businesses and retreating from the capital to do something more spiritually rewarding.

Not wanting to wait until pressure forced a change of lifestyle, Ruby waved goodbye to London and returned to her roots, taking an apprenticeship with what she describes affectionately as "a grumpy old so and so" but one who gave her the skills she needed, learning through making. "I wanted a slower pace of life" explained Ruby "but I'm also a control freak." As soon as she could Ruby set up on her own, happy to be in control of product design, production and importantly marketing and publicity. "I know a lot of people producing great work that never gets the recognition it deserves."

Admirably aware of the pitfalls of her new life, Ruby says she's playing the long game. "I've seen businesses grow quickly then crash and burn. I'm in this for the long term. I don't expect customers ever to buy more than one or two items from me. Those things should last them a lifetime. If they come back after a few years for some repairs that's great."

Knowing she wanted like-minded people around her, Ruby set up in Northlight Studios, a building bursting with artists, designers and makers of all hues in the heart of Hebden Bridge, a town known as a centre of artistic activity for decades. "We talk to each other all the time" says Ruby of her neighbours. "Collaboration is also critical for me. I get materials and components from local suppliers and I make belts for a local clothing company for example. I wanted my local community to get to know me and trust me before I broadened my horizons." Ruby's gently, gently approach seems to have worked as she has now achieved an enviable profile nationally as well as locally. "Social media is incredibly important for someone in my position but you have to maintain control or it can take over. Focus is everything."

When asked how she chooses what to design, Ruby laughs. "I make bags I want! Luckily they're popular with other people as well. Then again why not? I spend time in both big cities and the countryside and I road test any new design for at least a year, tweaking it as necessary before offering it to the public." She loves the fact that leather lives and weathers over time. "I like to see the journey it takes with me." Practical and pragmatic, Ruby's pared back designs use as few items of hardware as possible: "If a leather bag is intended to last a lifetime it will probably be a zip that will fail first."

When asked about expansion, Ruby seems in no hurry. "If it happens, it will be because it's right. As long as the products are good, I'm happy to see where this leads me." »

www.rubycreagh.co.uk

Follow Ruby on Instagram: [@rubycreagh](https://www.instagram.com/rubycreagh)



HANNAH BROOK

Photography © Aelisabetflowers

In contrast with Ruby Creagh's output, our next designer delights in the transient, the tenuous and the impermanent. Hannah Brook produces some of the most romantic, delicate and ethereal floral displays we have ever seen.

A native of Huddersfield, Hannah studied fashion in Leeds but a job in a local florist's shop saw her fall head over heels in love – with flowers! She spent 18 months learning on the job and followed this with 18 months freelancing for her favourite florists around the country. Apparently the world of serious floral displays is a small one and Hannah built up a network of contacts that gained her freelance work for other floral artists on weddings, events and exhibitions from Mayfair to Castle Howard as well as a burgeoning reputation.

By early 2018 she was ready to set up her own workshop. Getting her 'own' weddings as Hannah terms it is not easy but that's where the lucrative work is found. From April to October is THE season to make hay – a singularly inappropriate aphorism in the context of the quintessentially English garden style of loose, organic, blousy and intensely romantic displays that are Hannah's trademark. She admits that social media generally and Instagram in particular are essential for her business. "A single image can generate more interest than any amount of words."

What about being based in West Yorkshire? "I'm lucky that there are a lot of great growers in Yorkshire" says Hannah. "It compensates for any handicap of being where I am." Hannah operates at the premium end of the market, partly because of the time her displays require and partly because she is obsessive about sourcing the perfect ingredients. Gratifyingly she reports that "clients do come back and they also recommend me, which is all I can ask."

For someone who walks a gossamer tightrope in her work, where the gentlest of breezes can send a tremor through a display, it is perhaps strange to report that, like Ruby, Hannah's other great passion is horses and in particular eventing. "I've broken my collarbone three times, had stitches on several occasions and taken some heavy falls" she admits. "But my job involves a lot of hard, cold work behind the scenes with many early mornings and all-nighters to achieve the perfect display at the perfect moment in time."

I comment on the transitory nature of what she does and how the things of beauty she creates can be a joy for not more than a few hours sometimes. "True, but the fleeting is romantic. I often use 'imperfect' stems that don't need to last a week or more. Many of my displays look their best just before they die."

This grasp of the fine balances between radiance and decay, delicacy and hard graft will undoubtedly stand Hannah in good stead for the future. »

www.aelisabetflowers.co.uk

Follow Hannah on Instagram: @aelisabetflowers



Paul Banks

Photography © Paul Banks

Paul Banks' stock in trade could be said to be words. Perhaps his work has brought him to an understanding of their true value because he certainly doesn't waste them. During the preparation of this article Paul's answers to our questions were usually shorter than the questions themselves!

Words as sounds are fundamental to human communication; words as things (in the sense of letterforms representing sounds) took time to develop. Pictures and pictograms, being representations of things rather than sounds, preceded writing for an enormous length of time. But once the step change from pictures to words was made, not only did this new form of communication catch on like a bushfire, it rapidly diversified into numerous forms.

Calligraphers, lettercutters, printers and signwriters have all been around a long time, but each and every one still has a role to play in the modern world despite the frantic evolution of computer-based word production. The formats, shapes and colours, as well as the materials employed by each discipline, affect massively the effect of the words on the reader. Think of words spray painted on the side of a railway carriage and then those same words cut into stone in a classic letterform. As Marshall McLuhan said "The medium is the message."

The tools of Paul Banks' trade today would be recognisable to a signwriter from generations ago. The classic pose of paintbrush held in the hand that rests on the mahl stick carefully infilling letterforms, is timeless. In Paul's case he also continues the tradition of gilding: using gold hammered into gossamer thin sheets that is applied to areas of work to give an incomparable sense of luxury and opulence.

Paul enjoys the physical activity of his work. "The best part is working with my hands, brush, paint and gold leaf." He also takes pleasure in bringing an old craft to public attention. Much of his output is produced in-situ, perhaps up a ladder in a high street or literally making an exhibition of himself as he applies paint and gilding to the inside of a shop window. We get the impression that an element of showing off is necessary as Paul admits gold leaf shop window signs are his favourites.

Working alone as he does Paul has to become involved in all aspects of the business. When asked what his least favourite activity is he answers unhesitatingly "Admin!" Paul clearly has a healthy order book and in common with our other two interviewees he quotes the importance of social media – and Instagram in particular – as well as word of mouth in bringing in work.

When asked about how he feels competing alongside the ubiquitous computer generated signage and lettering available today, Paul is philosophical. "There are not many hand-painted signs around today so my work tends to stand out against the plastics and vinyl stuff." It is also gratifying to hear Paul say that he is very aware of the relationship his work has with architecture. "It's very important to me that my signs reflect both the business it's for AND the architectural style of the building and surrounding area." This is the bespoke end of the trade and not to be confused with the off the peg.

Whilst his training and experience mean Paul could no doubt turn out work in a variety of forms it is clear from a look at his portfolio that he has developed a very particular style in his most personal work. Here the opulence of gold leaf is complemented by exuberant and flamboyant designs that I last remember seeing in any abundance on the stalls and rides of travelling funfairs that still visit our village twice a year.

Signwriting of this quality conveys so much more than just the meaning of the words. It conjures realms of wider meaning and speaks of craft and heritage that can only enhance the commissioning businesses. As long as people have the capacity to respond to craftsmanship of this quality there will be a place for Paul Banks to ply his trade.

www.paulbankssigns.com

Follow Paul on Instagram: @paulbankssigns

Three individuals working in very different fields but with many common threads linking them together. Each is following his or her heart and we at NOTES wish them all well for the future. ■

