

Perfect match

Who can corporate high fliers turn to for clothing advice? Jane Cameron meets Liz Clothier, former head of merchandising for Burton, entrepreneur and now fashion consultant.

What better stroke of luck, than to fall in love with a man called Clothier when you were born with a passion for fashion.

This is exactly what happened to Leeds-based retail expert Liz Clothier, who recently launched her business as fashion consultant helping to shape up anyone from a teenager nervously picking her Prom outfit to a group of multi-tasking business executives. After a life in retail – which saw her rise to senior executive level within the Burton Group – she says her brand has been 35 years in the making.

If it's possible, she was born (in Mirfield) with the retail bug. The daughter of a 5ft, 10in blonde, modelling mother and the granddaughter of a tailor, she "always knew" she would work in the field.

Her first job was with Woolworths aged 13. "At 14, they put me on the shop floor – and that was it!" she says. Her retail bug diagnosis was confirmed and the Woolworths job became the first in a line of Saturday jobs, in which she wooed and wowed customers.

Having been bequeathed a sewing machine by her grandmother, it was at this age she also began to teach herself how to cut patterns and sew properly – even putting herself through City & Guilds qualifications.

"I became obsessed with making my own clothes," she admits.

While it seems a little incongruous for her to study zoology at Durham University, she was an academic high-scorer and this is what she did – and loved it, she says. It's also where she met the fortuitously named Simon Clothier, whom she went on to marry at 26.

But, not so much of a surprise that Liz walked into a graduate trainee post with Topshop on getting her degree. Within six months she was managing her own Basildon store and within a decade, she had been made Buying and Merchandising Controller for department store Debenhams.

She explains her knack: "I seem to know what will sell. I recognise the trends."

The eighties boom-time was, for Liz, a thrilling experience, in which she travelled the

world, managed a budget of more than £20million and opened new stores left, right and centre. A young Philip Green actually pitched a jeans shop-fit to her and she practically regarded the much admired Stuart Rose, later to transform M&S, as family.

But then the nineties recession hit and, after the "Christmas of the Long Knives" in which Burton shed huge numbers of staff, Liz negotiated her own redundancy. She took the opportunity to "be a mum" to her young daughter and son for five years and renovate the family's 18th century house in Boston Spa where she now lives.

In 1998, she and her husband, who had worked in advertising, decided to tap into their entrepreneurial streak. They set up Boxwood Consultancy, which employed graduates, mainly with engineering backgrounds, who they then placed into project management contracts in industry. Liz was in charge of recruitment and establishing the company culture.

Their venture enjoyed phenomenal success – growing to an £18.1million turnover, with £4.2million profit, within five years. In 2004, it was ranked 111 in the Sunday Times Fast Track 100. After opening a number of arms, including an interior design service managed by Liz, they sold Boxwood to their team.

But sadly, she was unable to enjoy this success for long. Her mother had a stroke and her world was turned upside down. In 2007, both her mother and father died.

"I had been at the stage of looking forward to really enjoying the next years," she says, "You have done a whole lot of work and you think because you have had successes in business and you have fantastic kids, it's all sorted.

"Then something like this happens and you're sent into turmoil. You can't control it, I found it very difficult."

A year later, Liz picked herself up and started a forward-thinking online business where people could design their own jewellery. However, once she'd got it up and running, she handed it over to her jeweller partner.

"It wasn't really what I wanted to do, I needed people contact," she explains. "But it got me back into business and out to work again.

"When you go through an emotional period in your private life, it really can have a knock-on effect in your business life. That's why I want to do what I'm doing now."

And so in March, aged 53, she went back to her fashion roots to launch Liz Clothier, Personal and Corporate Stylist. Her aim is to become a stylist to about 20 personal clients, male or female, and five corporate clients. She's not interested in styling the Queen, but envisages grooming, among others, "board executives at the top of the game".

In just a few hours, at £50 an hour, she will meet you, decipher your personality and lifestyle, search out suitable attire in advance and then take you shopping with relaxed efficiency.

"I can make sure you can go from dropping the kids off to a boardroom meeting to an evening networking event. You might need to wear a different jacket or add a belt, a scarf, or change your tie," she says.

She has also been taken on by an independent girls' school to prepare sixth formers for the outside world. Having personally interviewed more than 2,000 people in her career, she knows what she's talking about.

"I look at how they would dress to impress. When I style somebody, I'm asking who is their inner self and how do we express it externally? It only takes a few seconds to make an impression."

But many of her clients are people who, like herself, have gone through a major change and need an external makeover to give them a boost.

"It's not just about clothing," says Liz. "It's about getting people back to where they were, building self-esteem. How you dress is a manifestation of how you are feeling.

"Some people may feel a very British embarrassment about being styled. But it's a bit like having your own GP: people wouldn't think it an admission of defeat to go to the doctors and shouldn't be ashamed to make sure they look appropriately dressed in an important situation in their life – from representing your company to not embarrassing your kids at speech day!"



Favourite Facts

Book: The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Stieg Larsson

Film: Pulp Fiction

Website: matchesfashion.com

Cuisine: Italian

Holiday destination: The Nam Hai Hotel, Hoi An, Vietnam

Pastime: Socialising with friends and family