

# Celebrating 30 years of working together

## and more than 150 kitchens fitted in Henley

BY AMANDA STEWART

**H**USBAND and wife kitchen creators Mick Taplin and Sarah Dunkason set up their design and fitting company Elements in 1995 and as well as marking 30 years in business are celebrating 150 high-end kitchens installed in Henley alone.

But Sarah has also left her mark on houses via her remarkable skill as a decorative painter and artist.

She explains that after secretarial college she “went to the Pardon School of specialist decoration. The Pardon School was run by Leonard Pardon who had been responsible for such places as No.10 Downing Street and various Sultans’ palaces.

“I discovered my love and passion for decorating and learnt to paint in a marble effect as well as many other ways.

“I helped renovate various period houses around Henley as some of the properties when being refurbished were later discovered to have fireplaces that looked like marble, but, in fact weren’t and I was sent to ensure they looked perfect. I could paint a wall to make it look as if it was made of marble.

“These days I often drive into Henley and see some of the properties that I have worked on, especially around the Reading Road, St Marks Road and St Andrews Road.”

Sarah, who originates from Southampton but moved to the area because of her father’s work as a marine engineer, adds: “When I was at school I had wanted to be an architect, but discovered that I was better at design and less talented at maths, which was a requirement for being an architect.”

The couple met when Sarah was 17 and Mick was 19 and admits he “went out of his way” to walk her home after a Christmas party at the former Top Rank club in Reading. They have been together ever since. Mick says he knew “straight away that she was the one”.



Mick Taplin and Sarah Dunkason, founders of Elements Kitchens and inset on their wedding day with children, Frankie and Isaac

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After school Mick, 62, took up an electrical apprenticeship then went on to join Moben Kitchens as a self-employed fitter. He says: “It was during the eighties and people were starting to feel affluent. There were lots of cooking programmes being shown on the television at the time, Floyd and Ready Steady

Cook and those sorts of things and suddenly having a fabulous and sociable kitchen was extremely popular.”

The company “was a natural progression from growing my base of recommendations as a self-employed kitchen installer, then we

thought it would be a great idea to open our own showroom. The name came from one of my brothers who runs his own graphic design and branding company”, Mick says.

“We started trading from home and carrying out site visits with kitchen samples in the back of my car.”

It was not the most conventional way to starting a business, but Sarah says that Mick has been trustworthy, direct and honest from the get go and she thinks those qualities have always stood them in good stead.

Mick says: “The reputation of the company began to grow

and eventually we rented a warehouse, showroom and offices in Reading. Twenty years ago, as their previous offices began to look shabby, they purchased large premises and a warehouse on the Portman Road in Reading where they have remained ever since.

The good aspects of running your own business, says Sarah, is “being able to make personal and business decisions without any hierarchy or politics. Mick is managing director and very hands-on. He likes interviewing the designers and sets them a task to design his kitchen as part of their interview process.

“He says that he can really see who has got flair.”

Sarah, who was once the personal assistant to a property director at Thames Water “when they were possibly more popular than of late”, specialises in the accounts side of the business, particularly the payroll and credit control.

Sarah, who has two sisters, and Mick, who has two brothers, have a daughter Frankie, 29, an architect and a son Isaac, 27, a mechanical engineer.

“Another one of the plus sides of your own business is being able to plan any holidays as we love to travel and have just returned from

the most awesome safari in Tanzania and Zanzibar for Mick’s birthday. Plus we have enjoyed taking the children around the United States in a recreational vehicle, places like San Francisco and Las Vegas. The children loved it.”

But of course there are downsides too, such as the long hours and sometimes the economy. Sarah recalls: “During Covid, we saw many kitchen companies collapse and Mick and I would go and sit in the showroom, lock the doors and wonder how we were going to survive financially along with our employees.

“We have about 25 to 30 staff at any given time and some of those people have been with us for 20 years. We employ all our own fitters, and decorators as well as designers because we don’t just do private kitchens, we do housing estate and private developer kitchens too. It was all extremely worrying.”

An onlooker might be forgiven for thinking that the hard work and long hours were the reason why the couple waited decades before getting spliced, but it was in fact Sarah’s mother.

“She was quite a feminist, which was not so usual back then, and would not have allowed us to marry so young. So, we refurbished houses, had children and concentrated on the business before we decided while on a planned holiday in St Lucia to actually go through with getting married,” Sarah says.

“It was beautiful and not being too religious really worked for us, plus, by that time the options of either a church wedding or registry office had been lifted, so we had more choice and well, who wouldn’t want to get married in the Caribbean.

“My mum made us silk purses with our initials on for our two children to carry the rings in. Mick’s parents joined us. It was all very spontaneous and relaxed.”

Mick smiles: “We got married after our 23-year trial period.”

But work is never far away and sometimes business and pleasure do make a good match. Mick says: “We are happy to travel certainly nationally, but, we recently installed a kitchen



ABOVE: Jumping the kitchen sink! Sponsoring an equestrian event at Royal Windsor. LEFT: One of many examples and styles of their bespoke high quality fitted kitchen

in the French Alps, which was great fun as we managed to squeeze in some skiing at the same time. We both are keen skiers, some of the team came too and it was the

ultimate work/fun experience.”

The couple love Henley “from the abundance of good restaurants to a quiet walk along the river. We are also regular visitors to The Regatta, Henley Festival and, due to our age, Rewind”. And Henley appears to love them.

The couple say: “We have a great reputation in the town for quality, service and choice and have been installing kitchens in Henley for 30 years. We have fitted more than 150 kitchens in round the town and have many customers coming back to us for their next installation or even another new one elsewhere.”

The couple add: “The suppliers we’ve chosen align with our love of quality furniture and design from around Europe and the UK, hence our tagline which says ‘For the finest collection of British, German and Italian kitchens’.”

With designers that have worked with Sarah Beeny, the broadcaster and business woman who fronted Property Ladder, the couple have a sharp eye for what makes a good kitchen designer.

“First and foremost, to ask lots of questions and listen to what people are saying, then more questions and keep digging,” they say. “A good designer will have a flair for creating something different or the unexpected but still work within the brief.”

After so many successful years in the industry, what do they think will sustain the business? “Hard work and dogged determination and listening. We are both very keen on interior design and food.”

Mick adds that what the couple have learnt about kitchens and design over the years is almost ingrained in them: “If you have an eye for detail, you really can tell straight away whether you are looking at a quality product and good design.

“It travels with you everywhere, sometimes I go into a pub and can’t help thinking wouldn’t the place work better if the bar was over there or maybe they could have spent a bit more on the table and chairs. It is a way of life.”