

Advertisement feature

Estate agent is passionate about high standards

ESTATE agent Jo Preece is passionate about high standards of professionalism.

"I was lucky," she said. "My dad was a good teacher and when I worked with him in business, he brought me up well to treat others as I would want to be treated myself."

A former competitive swimmer and aqua aerobics teacher, Jo Preece's business background has incorporated health club management, credit control and accountancy as well as estate agency experience. In 2001, she and her husband, Stuart, joined forces to launch Preece & Co, a company which has since grown to employ 12 people in offices in both Newbury and Thatcham.

She believes that most male-led businesses are supported by "a woman in the background". "Couples who work together as a team are strong and fully committed to their joint goals," she said.

For Preece & Co, a high priority is to stay personal and not get so big that the clientele become numbers, not people. "We are continually building on our word-of-mouth reputation as a friendly, personal estate agent that considers people's feelings, as well as offering a committed, professional service," she said. "We like to think that people who have come to see us feel that we have broken the mould: there is still such a thing as a helpful, honest, caring estate agent."

With nearly 30 years' experience in valuing and

marketing properties, Stuart Preece is the front focus of the business. However, behind the scenes, Jo Preece is putting the sale together professionally to avoid the disappointment of the transaction collapsing at a later date. This means fully verifying that buyers are able to move forward and, once a sale is in place, Preece & Co will follow its progress to the 'nth degree', keeping both vendors and purchasers informed by way of a weekly written report as well as telephone calls and e-mail.

"A day in my life covers a multitude of tasks, from taking offers on properties to sorting out staffing logistics, training new employees, keeping sales and lettings accounts and handling general day-to-day issues," said Jo Preece. "It is all about juggling and making sure everything is dealt with before you go home."

Jo Preece believes strongly in the importance of putting together a good team to represent the company. "I respect my team and believe they are fully committed to Preece & Co," she said. "They are fully focused at all times. Having a director on hand in the office to help with any problems both supports our staff and reassures our vendors and purchasers that their needs are important to us."

Anyone considering putting their house on the market this year, would be advised to do so sooner rather than later, she warned. From June 1, vendors will have to pay for a Home Information Pack (HIP),



Jo Preece, of Preece & Co

which will include most of the information required for a conveyance, as well as Energy Performance Certificates, at the moment the responsibility of the purchaser. Preece & Co would be happy to clarify the HIP legislation if it is causing concern.

"We are always happy to hear from potential vendors, whatever their property, and I would be

delighted to accompany Stuart and talk you through the procedure.

"All potential customers are important to me and the more people Preece & Co please, the more people will know we are the estate agent that cares."

Preece & Co: (01635) 529333



The EJBC team

A consistent approach to dealing with clients, not just a once-yearly meeting

IN JUST four years, Emma Thomas has expanded her successful accountancy business from serving a handful of local clients from her home, to a team operating from corporate offices on Newbury's Northbrook Street boasting several hundred clients.

The working mother founded EJBC in January 2003 and has transformed it into a dynamic, local firm of chartered certified accountants and business advisors. Customers include some of the best known local independent traders and many others based throughout the UK and beyond.

"We are able to offer the range of accountancy and taxation services normally only associated with the bigger practices in the area. As a result, we believe our clients receive a more personal service and due to lower overheads, or possibly our appreciation of value, very competitively priced fees," she explained.

EJBC's range of services includes payroll, bookkeeping, VAT returns, management accounts, sole-trader, partnership and limited company annual accounts preparation and CIS compliance. On the local side, EJBC prepares both corporate and individuals returns. The latter often includes dealing with income from buy-to-

let rental properties, share sales, redundancy payments and share options. The tax service also covers tax planning, so if you are thinking of selling your business, or looking for advice on how to reduce your exposure to inheritance tax, you can call on the services of its Chartered Tax Advisor. Rest assured, your tax affairs will be in safe hands.

"Our clients know we are available throughout the year to answer any questions, or give advice when they need it. For instance, many clients need help preparing their first VAT return, or want to make sure they are preparing their books correctly. We meet when clients need us, not when we find it convenient, as this is all part of our fixed-fee service, clients never need to worry about paying extra every time they call us," she added.

"Our typical client needs more than just a once-a-year meeting to discuss how they did and what they could have done differently - an approach sadly still to be found in the profession. We have found that by having a more proactive approach, our clients feel we are an essential part of their business, not a necessary business expense," she said.

One of EJBC's key strengths is helping

new business launches - probably because it has recently been through the same process. So if you are planning, or have just taken the leap, into self-employment, EJBC would be delighted to be of service at this crucial time. "We are here to support and answer questions no matter how trivial e.g. should I trade as a sole-trader or a Limited Company, what expenses can I claim, how should I keep my books, should I be VAT registered or what do I do if I employ someone? We will not bombard you with technical accountancy jargon. We offer sound, practical advice that will work," said Emma Thomas.

EJBC's aim is to take onboard the administrative and compliance burden of running a business, so you can get on and do what you do best - secure in the knowledge that you have an able and professional accountancy partner you can trust to deliver.

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A taste of France in Newbury

THERE are plenty of women in catering, but very few in the kitchen. The Newbury Business News met Suzanne Hemchaoui, who owns and runs Le Petit Square, the popular French bistro in the heart of the town.

"It is quite unusual to have a female restaurateur, less so in London, but still unusual; yet this is all I have ever really wanted to do. People often come in wanting to see the 'boss' or 'gov' nor' and are surprised to be faced by me," she said.

"I started out in Essex and went to catering college and from there I decided to hit the bright lights and headed for London. I joined the intercontinental hotel chain, which was a great introduction and within two and a half years I became the head of a department. I did that by the age of 21 and I was the youngest manager in Intercontinental and the only female. While there I also studied hotel and restaurant management in Westminster to further improve my knowledge of the industry.

"I was always hungry for the next thing. I was desperate to get on the Savoy Hotel's trainee manager scheme, but I got pipped at the post. Undeterred I devised my own training programme and when I was 24 I went back to the Savoy... and was appointed restaurant manager.

"I loved being front-of-house and quickly

moved up the ladder. It was then that I was offered and took the job that I had been finding out I was pregnant and soon realised I did not really want to work 85 hours a week anymore.

"I actually gave up work and had a second child too. I'd met my husband Marwan some 13, or 14 years before and we had always had our own careers. However, he wanted to spend more time with the children and that was when we moved to Whitchurch in north Hampshire.

"We were looking for a restaurant and that was when The Square (in Weavers Walk, Newbury) landed in our lap and we moved to Newbury. Originally we called it 'The Square Bar and Grill'; we had been inspired by the Marlow Bar and Grill. That evolved to offer fine dining, not least because of the chef we had; we dropped 'Bar and Grill' and now offer excellent contemporary fine dining.

"Living together and working together can be pretty hard so we were looking for another opportunity, something that I would run, which is how Le Petit Square in the Market Place was born. I love France and I loved French food.

"Le Petit Square is an authentic French bistro. You go to France and this is what they look like. And we offer authentic food too. Newbury has welcomed us and we have built up a loyal and growing clientele.

Businesses, too, enjoy having somewhere cosmopolitan to bring clients and know they will be served fine French food.

"We are experienced restaurateurs and you get to know what people like, the flavours they prefer and which ingredients work. We trust the chef to design the menu and then we'll go through it; we have a good relationship and that translates into an attractive menu."

Both Le Petit Square and The Square are mentioned in the revered Michelin Guide - the only two restaurants within Newbury to earn such an accolade. This is quite an achievement, but what next for Suzanne and Marwan Hemchaoui?

"We would like something with rooms next I think. A hotel, or a restaurant, with rooms; that's where Marwan's strength is and he always worked with the bedrooms in hotels so it would be a natural progression."

Le Petit Square

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Suzanne Hemchaoui in Le Petit Square, the French bistro in the heart of Newbury