

Elaine Woodman

We all know we hate estate agents. It is therefore a bit disconcerting to sit and talk with Elaine Woodman. Perhaps we would want to make an exception for a successful, self-made businesswoman who is a wife and the mother of two daughters, has a granddaughter, is still in her late forties and is currently distracted by arranging a wedding for her daughter this summer.

Elaine began her working life in the marketing department of the English Tourist Board. She married and moved out of central London to Harrow and then to Buckinghamshire where by chance she took a weekend job with an estate agent in Marlow. This part time job soon expanded to seven days a week during school hours -for by now she had two daughters. The firm moved her to their Flackwell Heath office which was the same premises she has now. The business was taken over by the then family firm of AC Frost.

You may recall that twenty years ago was a golden age for the small estate agents. Banks, building societies and insurance companies thought it a smart move to buy out all the estate agents and take the profit for themselves as well creating an opportunity to sell their mortgages, insurances, loans and investments. Frost sold the business and it passed to Prudential Insurance and then the Woolwich Building Society.

This was not a happy situation for professionals like Elaine who wanted to sell houses but not all the financial bits that the new owners wanted them to press on their clients. She set up an independent partnership with Steve, another estate agent in the village, and in 1994 they opened in the shop that is now Giggles. They agreed to call their business Woodman and Partners because Steve's name is McClughen which is not the catchiest name for a business in Buckinghamshire but "Woodman" is a marketing man's dream. "Woodman" says honest, straightforward and reliable. Just the chap to save Red Riding Hood - or sell you a house.

After eighteen months the Woolwich pulled their burnt fingers out of the estate agency business and Woodman and Partners were able to take over the office where Elaine had started in Flackwell and where they are now. In 2000 premises came up in Bourne End and as the partners knew the area well they decided to open a second office managed by Steve. The business now has the two partners and six other staff.

It is not easy to establish an estate agent's business. You need to have premises with a good footfall, you need to make people feel you are part of the community and it helps if you have a history – when people sell a house they tend to go back to the agent who sold it to them. Elaine has worked in the village for 20 years. Her girls were at school here and she has got to know a lot of people personally. She is a committee member of the Residents Association and as a business she supports schools, clubs, the Cherry Fayre and other village activities.

Tim Kendell