

On her head be it

The milliner Rachel Trevor-Morgan, 45, who has made more than 60 hats for the Queen, recalls the first time she went to Buckingham Palace

I get up at 7.15 and check the children are awake. Angus is 16, Louis is 13, and Ella's 11. My husband, Andy, is a classics teacher at Westminster School. We'll all sit at the table for breakfast and I'll usually have a boiled egg. There's then a moment of calm when the children leave for school, and I get myself ready and head out too.

We live in Westminster and my showroom's close by in St James's, so I often walk to work with my dachshund, Daphne. It's in a lovely 17th-century building and, though it's quite small, we've a workshop at the back. I like to get in a bit before my three staff, who arrive at 9.30. From then on I see clients by appointment. Most come in with the outfit they plan to wear with a hat, some know what hats suit them, and others need guidance. This takes an hour, usually, then they come back later for a fitting.

I first received a call from the Queen's personal assistant, Angela Kelly, in 2006. I went to do a fitting at the Queen's Buckingham Palace apartments. I was really nervous about meeting her, but the Queen was very welcoming and friendly.

To date, I've made about 60 hats for her, working closely with Angela and latterly Stewart Parvin, who both design her clothes. When it comes to making hats for the Queen, I have to think about practical issues, such as the way she gets in and out of the car — the brim can't be so big that people can't see her face. I never know in advance on what occasions she will actually wear my hats. I have to wait and see, like everyone else.

Every one of my hats is bespoke and handmade. A nice picture hat



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will cost about £700, but prices go up to £1,500. The fabrics used most for the base are sinamay straw (made from banana plant fibres) and stiffened cotton, which I use for silk hats. I also work with fur felt, zibeline and other straws, such as Italian handsewn, grazia, Swiss braid and parabuntal, which is a beautiful, finely woven type of straw that comes from China.

The first process is to dye the fabric so it matches the client's outfit. I do this myself, using a pan and stove. I then have a variety of wooden blocks on which to shape the hats. The fabric is pulled

across the block and steamed and pinned into shape. This is then left to dry. A number of layers are used to make one hat, such as three layers of sinamay straw, but it depends on the particular fabric.

Once all that's done, there's the trimming, and we use everything from silk organza, organdie and tulle to French veiling, crystals and taffeta, which I love because it's so versatile. All our flowers are handmade, too. Again, a fabric is first dyed and stiffened, then cut into petals. We use heated flower irons to press the fabric into shape, and

just one spray can take a whole day to make, so it's a real labour of love. For feathers, we often use goose, ostrich and peacock. The final product is feminine and elegant, so I flatter a woman.

We stop for lunch about 1 and I often have a home-made salad with me. I might also walk into the West End to look for fabrics and trimmings at haberdasheries such as Creative Beadcraft and MacCulloch & Wallis in Soho, or Barnett Lawson in Fitzrovia.

What got me first interested in millinery was the theatricality of hats. We've also got such wonderful hat-wearing events in this country, such as the Derby and Glorious Goodwood... I am always busier in the run-up to Ascot.

I loved the hats my mother wore — maybe that's where it all started for me. I was born in Stourbridge in the Midlands and went to boarding school in Worcester. I moved to London at 18, when I wrote to hat companies asking if I could see how they made them. Luckily, I landed an apprenticeship with the milliner Graham Smith, and then went to work for Philip Somerville. I set up on my own on a market stall in 1990, then got a workspace in the attic of a Westminster monastery.

I might not leave work until 6.30, but if Andy's at home I can stay on if I need to. We all tend to eat together around 7, and it's often pasta, which the children love. Before I go to bed, I always write out a list of things I need to remember for tomorrow and, no doubt, many of them will be hat-related. Let's just say, hats are probably always on my mind ■ Racheltrevormorgan.com

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