

Going for gold



Aylesbury Bullion owner Stephen Cox hasn't quite gone from rags to riches, but the local lad finds life today in his high street jewellers a lot cosier than working the markets

When Stephen Cox first started helping his parents on their market stall, he never dreamt that one day he would be running a successful jewellery business from a prime spot on Aylesbury's High Street.

Today The Aylesbury Bullion company is a familiar face in the town's shopping centre having traded from its tiny premise for some 22 years.

Although they lived in Haddenham Stephen's parents Maria and step dad Roger were both working in London for different photocopier companies when they met and later started trading jewellery as a sideline, selling bracelets and bangles to workmates during their lunchtimes.

Their range proved popular and in 1977 the pair took the plunge, chucked in their jobs and hit the road selling jewellery full time, both on the markets and by taking their mobile stall to local businesses. Aylesbury, Thame, Wycombe, Wendover, Leighton Buzzard, St Albans, they worked hard on the markets and built up an impressive customer base.

Stephen was only ten when they started,

but he'd help out on Saturdays and in school holidays and by the time he left Stoke Mandeville School at 16, he already knew the trade inside out and was keen to join the family firm.

He also knew that he'd found his true love in school sweetheart Angela, who now helps run Aylesbury Bullion while juggling the roles of wife to Stephen and mother of their four children: David, 20, Jack, 17, Harry, 14 and Edward, 11.

"It was a pretty brave thing to do in '77," says Stephen of his parents' decision "But it had got to the stage where the jewellery was taking off and two jobs was becoming too much."

When she left college Angela, originally from Bishopstone, also joined the firm and as business boomed through the 80s the family decided to take on a permanent base. The High Street shop came up in 1989 and being relatively small offered the chance of a prime location at an affordable rate.

"We opened in a recession and we're in one again now," says Stephen. "People have cut back over the last couple of years, but when they're not buying as many new items, there's usually more repairs and refurbishments coming in. We couldn't survive on just one aspect of the business, we have to offer a variety of services and a variety of value."

"It's all about service really though," he says, "I could sell you a pair of earrings for a few pounds or make a bespoke item

to the most extravagant specification, but everyone gets the same high quality of service."

"An old boy came in the other day", he chuckles, "A real 'grumpy old man,' asking how much a watchstrap was. I said £12, he said 'that's a rip off, they're only £7 round the corner.' I said well why don't you buy one there then - he said 'I'm here now, but it's a rip off!' I said well I'm afraid I don't feel happy selling you something you consider a rip off, you'll have to go elsewhere! I want people to be pleased with their purchase and happy they've got a good deal!"

When they took on the shop Stephen

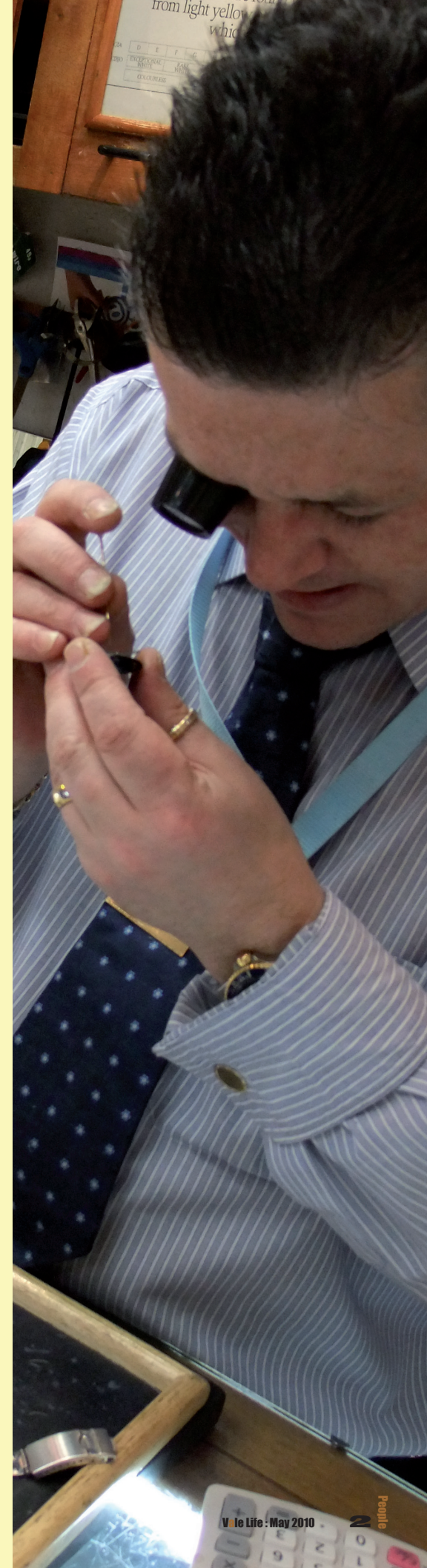
'I want people to be pleased with their purchase and happy they've got a good deal'

and Angela went into partnership with his parents: "It's a real family business," laughs Stephen, "My brother has worked with us too and my son Jack, works Saturdays."

Business went well in the town centre and eventually in 2006 Stephen's parents retired leaving him at the helm:

"It was always my baby really," he smiles, "Things haven't changed much, we do a good spectrum of goods, a variety of price ranges and give the same high level of service. Fashions and styles change and you get different trends, but we've continued to be successful."

Unlike most jewellers though who can attract customers with impressive window displays, most of Stephen's stock is hidden away inside the shop as it's got the smallest ever front window. "We've been here such



a long time,” he says, “People know we offer value for money and they keep coming back in.”

With the price of gold at an all time high Stephen is buying in a fair bit of the precious metal at the moment: “I’m sure I’ve had old customers come in with items I sold them ten years ago and I’m buying the gold back now for more than they paid me for their jewellery in the first place!”

You can tell Stephen loves his job though, he likes dealing with people (‘well most of them’) and has developed what for Aylesbury Bullion is a winning formula. They haven’t jumped on the Troll beads/Pandora/Lovelinke trend, (‘nicely packaged, but not great value’) and they don’t trade on the internet (‘I like people to come in and try the jewellery’) but he

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says some things have changed: jewellery selling on television and via the internet has definitely taken sales away from the high

street and with seven day shopping Saturdays are no longer the busiest day of the week.

Jewellery used to be all silver or yellow gold, now there’s white gold, platinum and even a newly recognised precious metal in palladium.

The town has changed over the years too and Stephen thinks that compared to many Aylesbury’s got a lot to offer and a good variety of shops in the centre.

“I think it’s a pleasant place to walk around day or evening,” he says. “The new Waterside development has got to be good, but the retail parks fragment the shopping and car parking charges drive people away from the centre.

“The best thing the council could do is

to have two or three hours free parking in the centre, like they do in Thame”.

Stephen and Angela still live in Haddenham, they’ve a lot of family and friends there and reckon it’s a great place to bring up a family.

With a business to run and family to look after, there’s not much time left for relaxing, but Stephen enjoys an occasional pint in the Green Dragon at Haddenham, or a meal out with Angela - The Plough at Cadsden is a favourite for food, as is The Woolpack at Stoke Mandeville and The Thatch at Thame holds special memories - they stayed there on their wedding night back in the days when it was Thatchers.

He also enjoys a trip to the cinema, rating recent releases Avatar as ‘brilliant’, Sherlock Holmes as really good and Valentine’s Day as one to avoid: “Even the wife didn’t like it,” he says, “too disjointed, no real plot”.

When in Aylesbury he recommends a mint tea at The Malibar café on Kingsbury Square and the Harrow as ‘a friendly pub with a nice atmosphere.’

There’s still a touch of the chirpy barrow boy about Stephen, even though he’s come a long way from his days working the markets: “I enjoy working for myself,” he says, “I like the satisfaction of seeing a job through and the look on a customer’s face when they open a box to see a piece we’ve made up for them - that’s what’s really precious in this job.”

● **Aylesbury Bullion: 11A High Street, Aylesbury: jewellery for all budgets, watch batteries and straps, repairs and antique restorations to bespoke hand made pieces. Telephone: 0808 180 9812 / 01296 708821.**

Stephen Cox and wife Angela

