



BARBOUR

a remarkable family story

Margaret Barbour tells Victoria Young how she was a newly married young teacher when her husband's sudden death made her the head of one of Britain's most successful firms

I met John in London when we were in our early twenties and I was teaching. We fell in love very quickly and got married, and it was a great joy. We went back north to Newcastle for four years then, in 1968, when he was only 29, John died very suddenly after a brain haemorrhage. I was utterly devastated. My daughter Helen was not quite two and it was the worst moment of my life.

Suddenly, I found myself the majority shareholder of this company that had been going for nearly 75 years. Until then, the idea that I'd get involved in the business had simply never occurred to me. But John was so proud of the business, and of the fact he was fourth-generation Barbour, I knew that I had to.

So I took a month off and then I started work. My mother had managed a little group of retail grocery stores, so it wasn't an alien concept to me. But all my clothes were suited to the life of a young mother so I had to go out and buy suits. My new role was all-consuming and was also a way to cope with the grief. I completely changed my way of life. My parents were very helpful looking after Helen and I got a full-time nanny.

I had lots and lots of adrenalin, which helped enormously, and I also drew on the skills that I'd learned from teaching, which is a very difficult job. I'd taught at a huge comprehensive and you have to project yourself to people and make them believe what

you tell them – whether it's teaching or selling a jacket.

I didn't go along saying "I'm the new director". I made sure that I learned everything I jolly well could – from making the garment to how it was sold, from working in the store room to being on reception to working in accounts. I used to travel overseas to trade shows in half-terms and take Helen with me. I learned an awful lot by doing that and Helen was steeped in the business.

Market research was an absolute priority so then I went out into the field going round with the agents we used, visiting our customers. I found out what people thought of us, our trading methods, our products. I listened and then I made radical changes to the business, bringing in new recruits dedicated to my vision of transforming the company into an international brand. My biggest challenge was finding the



When I went to Buckingham Palace to get my CBE and DBE the Queen said to me, "I'm very proud, Dame Margaret, to present this to you – surely every closet in Britain must have a Barbour jacket in it." I think I filled with tears – I was very proud

and I saw all sorts of interesting little jackets. It made me realise that we could expand the Barbour range, and instead of making just sporting or industrial garments, we started making lifestyle coats – the Bedale jackets, and the Beaufort jacket, and made these in navy as well as in green. And we started making some quilted jackets in all sorts of colours – they took off tremendously, and even though there was a recession in the 80s, we did very well.

I've always insisted on the company being cash-rich. I think that is why we are successful – we always make sure that we put our profit back in to the company, so we have working capital. We lead a fairly modest life; women don't need the toys and

right people who were loyal to the family and prioritised the business.

John's mother, Granny Barbour, was extremely supportive. She had a tragic life. The year after she married, her husband went straight to war and was then captured in Singapore and became a prisoner of war. Granny worked to keep the business going while he was away and her husband had only been home about 11 years when he suddenly died.

Something changed when I worked on a trade stand in France in the 70s,

treasures that men need to feel important when they are successful.

To be taken seriously as a woman heading up a company was a challenge at times, but most people were extremely supportive. The Barbour name meant people took me seriously, particularly in the early days. That was very useful. And people were terribly grateful that I'd taken the company on and was keeping the fourth generation going.

I have never put pressure on Helen to come into the business. But she has made her own way, and now heads up the Sporting portfolio at Barbour. I'm pleased, because she is in touch with what's happening in the world in a way that I am not, which is great for the business.

People get very attached to their Barbours – even the Queen. Before her Silver Jubilee I noticed her Barbour was looking a bit scruffy so I wrote to her secretary to see if I could present her with a new one. The Queen graciously accepted the new jacket but also requested that her old one be re-conditioned and sent back, which we did.

I was the first lady member of the Royal Warrant Holders' Council. And the company has three royal warrants, which meant that I got round the country and met lots of wonderful trade people, and that was extremely interesting. It does also mean that I've met the Queen many times.

Manufacturing in Britain as much as we can is important to us. More than 400 of our employees are based in the North East, and we are about to launch a Barbour Academy, teaching skills in machining to unemployed people.

I remarried at 51 – to David, who is an architect. He designed our new warehouse and HQ and factory shop. I won't retire. In fact I'm terrified of retiring and I go into the office at least three times a week – at sociable hours. Granny Barbour was chairman until her mid-70s and I'm not there yet. I have an awful lot of knowledge – my MD would be devastated if I retired. >>



Daughter Helen at the Barbour factory in South Shields, which employs 150



'I almost grew up in the factory with Mum'

The next generation

HELEN BARBOUR is vice chairman of Barbour. She lives in Newcastle with her children John, 15, Danny, 13, and Stella, nine.

Mum was 28 when dad died and she didn't have any business experience. But she's very single-minded, very tough and she rose to the occasion. Mum has a real can-do attitude, but then I'm the same and so was my Granny Barbour. My daughter is too – she is already talking about taking over the business and she's nine!

I grew up going to the factory with Mum. I would spend most of the school holidays there. I used to love visiting the lady in the cutting room, who had these enormous dress-making scissors, or at least they seemed enormous to me because I was tiny. I used to go to game fairs and horse trials all over the country, which was great.

I have no memories of my father and not many photos. It was upsetting for mum, so she didn't talk about him very much, but I've gleaned bits about him over the years. I look very much like him and apparently he was lovely; kind, sweet and just a nice bloke. There was never any question that I would name my son after him.

I felt it was inevitable I would join the business but I wanted to explore other things first. I went to art college, worked for Battersea police, auditioned – badly – for drama school, worked on the shop

floor in Harrods and then did a post-graduate degree in marketing. Then I went to work in advertising and as a TV researcher, which I loved.

My mother never pressured me to join Barbour – she encouraged me to explore other things because I was so young. But when I was 24 I did do a year's stint, working my way around the warehouse, customer accounts, finance and sales.

When I was pregnant with John, my mum asked me to come on board as vice chairman. The MD had left and Mum decided it was time to regenerate the company. She pulled together a board for the first time, and also created a marketing and a design department. I just came in as moral support, as a sounding block for her.

For the Diamond Jubilee, I'll be getting together with my neighbours for a huge street party, and I have a Union Jack Barbour jacket that I'll be wearing. I do have the odd coat that isn't Barbour – but not many

After I had John, I set up a website for pregnancy and parenting – the first one – called UK Mums, which went on for eight years. I set up an online shop selling children's clothing, which led to me setting up eight real shops. That gave me the retail experience for my role at Barbour.

Last April I closed the last shop to concentrate on being at Barbour. I went to a game fair and realised that our shooting range, especially for women, needed to be developed and expanded, and that is how I became Head of Sporting.

I think the secret to Barbour's success is function over form. Our backbone is still the countryside and even our most fashionable coats, like the International jacket, still have their roots in the company's tradition. And all the waxed cotton is still made in South Shields.

My relationship with my mum hasn't changed since working directly together – because I don't work with her; there would be fireworks because we're just too alike and both very opinionated. **w&h**

Barbour: the celebrity connection

We've never courted celebrities. But the whole Sloane Ranger thing came about because Lady Diana wore a Barbour in town one day. And when Helen Mirren wore a Barbour in *The Queen*, sales went through the roof in America. Then things like Lily Allen wearing hers for her whole Glastonbury set when it was raining, and the Arctic Monkeys wearing Barbour, also caused a surge in sales.

