



# Acting for clients

22 years after forming Heathgate, her successful estate agency, Vivienne Harris is still going strong. Here, she talks candidly to Natasha Higgins about kickboxing, belly-dancing and the one alternative career choice.

Lights, camera, action. Vivienne appears. It's all furs, sunglasses, stiletto boots, tailored coat, pearls and a pair of twinkling diamante earrings complemented by a blonde mane of perfectly blow-dried hair. "I'm sorry I'm late," she gushes, "a client brought his architect to a viewing and what should have lasted half-an-hour turned into an hour-and-a-half." Cut.

Is Vivienne starring in her own estate agency flick? No, but you'd be forgiven for thinking she'd landed the part. This entrance, into her office, is typical of a morning in the life of the glamorous owner of Heathgate estate agency on Heath Street in Hampstead.

She continues: "This particular property wasn't getting any interest at first and now everyone wants to see it, it's funny how that sometimes happens. I have a viewing for it next week which I think will prove fruitful." No doubt she's right. After 34 years in the industry, she's no newbie to the game.

From starting as a junior negotiator straight out of school after finishing her A-levels, to setting up her own business 22 years ago, Vivienne has come a long way. "After my initial 12 years in the industry I didn't know if I wanted to stay in property. I knew I wanted to start my own business, but had lots of ideas. It was really the phone that began ringing off the hook with old clients asking me if I could help them sell their house or find them a home. It made me realise I should expand on what I already knew."

Vivienne chose the name 'Heathgate' for her agency because of the patches

she covers: Hampstead, the Heath and Highgate. There's also a well established road in Hampstead Garden Suburb called 'Heathgate' which carries a certain amount of heritage; something she wanted reflected in her style of business. "We like to look after our clients and we offer a bespoke and professional yet friendly service."

The office sits at the top of Heath Street and specialises in sales and lettings. The team consists of two sales negotiators, two letting negotiators, an office manager and Vivienne. They operate on the basis of always getting the best offer for their clients who receive weekly feedback and are kept

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closely informed of any movements on their property. "After so many years I still see it as real privilege to work in Hampstead," says Vivienne.

When it comes to a work/life balance, Vivienne gets away from it all when she returns home to what she calls her 'secluded cottage' in Hampstead Garden Suburb set amongst greenery. She takes tremendous pride in her surroundings and is constantly carrying out maintenance work on her property. "I've just had the garden re-landscaped," she says. In terms of interior design, she leans towards neutral shades, stone and wood flooring and collects antiques and various objects at fairs and on holiday.

Vivienne also keeps herself busy with an intense exercise regime. She trains several times a week and kickboxing is one of her strengths. "It came in handy a couple of years ago when someone attempted to mug me for my watch. I was able to perform one of my kickboxing moves which he wasn't expecting! I then gave him a good telling off before he raced off on his bike."

And her talents don't stop there. Vivienne is part of two dance groups and was invited to perform at this year's opening ceremony of the Paralympics. "We were the 'whirlers' whirling in the storm," she explains. She also belly-dances and has danced at The Cally Festival on Caledonian Road and at one of her own parties.

Talking of parties, Vivienne was at one in New Hampshire earlier this year when Hurricane Sandy hit. "Although we weren't at the centre of the action, it was still all very surreal and scary not knowing if it would make its way to where we were. What was intended to be a four day holiday turned into a ten day break and I really needed to get back to the office!"

With more than two decades gone by, what's her take on owning her own business? "There are pros and cons," she states with infirmity. "Don't get me wrong, I'd never work for anyone again and I love what I do but it does mean you take home the pressures and stresses every day."

If she were to do it all over again? "Actress," she says without hesitation. "At school I was in all the plays and won several awards but unfortunately my parents didn't have the means to send me to drama school." She sighs. The credits roll.

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