

Veronica Hartley and 'The Good Life'

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An article by Genevieve Burnett at [Pink Rottweiler](#)

'The Good Life': how Veronica Hartley combined becoming a partner in an international law firm with motherhood and 'self-sufficiency madness'

The Good Life was a BBC sitcom from the mid-1970s starring Felicity Kendall as Barbara, one half of a couple who had decided to escape a consumer lifestyle and become totally self-sufficient in their home in south-west London.

As a child, *The Good Life* was one of my favourite television programs. This may partly explain my desire to talk to [Veronica Hartley](#) about the unorthodox road she has travelled on her way to becoming a partner in an international law firm.

Veronica, whom I'm interviewing via Skype because I live in Australia and she lives in the UK, bears an uncanny resemblance to the fictional Barbara. Maybe, it's her warmth and her bubbly optimism. Or it could be her passion for the life she's built with her husband, Jules.

In *The Good Life*, Barbara and her husband, Tom, devoted all their energy to developing a self-sufficient lifestyle on a small suburban block. It seems that the writers of the show made an executive decision that Barbara and Tom couldn't do all that while also holding down jobs and raising children.

Veronica and Jules make Barbara and Tom look like amateurs. They combine two careers and raising a family with engaging in what they describe on their [website](#) as 'self-sufficiency madness' on a 14-acre

smallholding in south Wales, just outside the hamlet of Llanddarog.

On 1 April 2017, Veronica also became a partner in the London office of international law firm [RIAA Barker Gillette](#).

Life before smallholding

Ten years ago, Veronica and Jules's life looked very different. Like many ambitious young professionals, they were living in London and were preoccupied with their ascent up the career ladder.

Veronica was pleased when she landed a position as a corporate lawyer at Barker Gillette, a boutique commercial law firm based in the West End whose culture supported a sensible work-life balance.

Meanwhile, Jules was managing a business intelligence team at a private equity firm.

Each day, the couple took their lives in their hands as they cycled to work from the flat they had purchased in Hackney. With trepidation, I imagine them weaving in and out of the London traffic, dodging the city's famous bright-red, double-decker buses.

Ideals and lifestyles: becoming interested in smallholding

After graduating with a law degree from the University of Birmingham, and before undertaking her legal traineeship, Veronica had spent a gap year working as a SCUBA diving instructor in Australia. She saw the coral bleaching that was occurring on

the Great Barrier Reef as an example of how humans weren't doing a very good job of looking after the planet.

When they met in London, Veronica and Jules, who had graduated from Cambridge with a degree in natural sciences with a major in zoology, discovered that they were both interested in environmental issues and animal welfare. They put their beliefs into practice and tried to eat organic produce as much as possible.

Increasingly, however, the couple began to question their urban lifestyle and its impact on the environment. They became interested in the concept of self-sufficiency because, as Jules pointed out, it was all very well to spout ideals but, in reality, they were living no differently from everyone else.

'I blame Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and *River Cottage* for persuading me to leave London and purchase a smallholding in Wales,' says Veronica with a laugh. 'I loved that program and it made me see that smallholding wasn't some sort of naïve dream. It was a viable way to live.'

Veronica asks me whether the program was ever shown in Australia. When I explain that not only did Fearnley-Whittingstall make it to Australia, but we've been served up four series of our very own *River Cottage Australia*. I add that I suspect the local version caused thousands of Australian couples to flee from the major cities to build their own versions of a rustic paradise.

Leaving London and taking the plunge into 'self-sufficiency madness' in Wales



While Veronica says she still had doubts about the joys of farming in the damp and often chilly British climate, Jules, who had grown up on a smallholding, wasn't daunted. 'There's no such thing as an inappropriate weather for farming in England or Wales, just inappropriate clothing,' he insisted.

At that point, the die was cast.

The first step in the journey into 'self-sufficiency madness' began with the couple taking a smallholding course in Devon. Veronica assures me that she enjoyed the course, despite having spent her childhood in Brussels and never having been an outdoorsy kind of person.

'After coming back from Australia, where I had spent a lot of time on boats and there is a sense of endless space, I felt caged-up because we lived indoors most of the time in London,' she explains. 'Even so, I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the smallholding course, which included learning handy skills like how to flip a sheep on its bum.'

The next step was for the couple to sell their flat in Hackney and purchase 14 acres of farmland in Wales with a house that needed major renovations if they were to become self-sufficient in energy.

Veronica and Jules chose Wales for their smallholding adventure because it has a high rainfall, was far enough south to have a long growing season, and is a location where they could afford to buy enough land to have a serious chance of reaching their goal of being largely self-sufficient in both food and energy.

'We did a lot of research before buying [Penybanc Farm](#) in 2010,' says Veronica. I imagine them diligently reading all sorts of books about what kind of land to select, how to grow vegetables, and how to raise ducks, geese, chickens and pigs.

From the photos on the website, I can see that Penybanc Farm is a picture-postcard kind of place.

Thinking outside the box: preserving Veronica's career as a corporate lawyer

Veronica and Jules were concerned that one of the most challenging aspects of moving to Wales and embracing a self-sufficient lifestyle was preserving Veronica's career as a corporate lawyer based in a West End law firm. She had no desire to become a country solicitor, which would have required her to dabble in a bit of everything.

At this point, Veronica, who has always been technologically savvy, approached the partners at Barker Gillette with a radical proposal.

'I told them that Jules and I were moving to Wales but that I wanted to continue working for Barker Gillette. I explained I could work remotely. At that point, the firm had the technology and systems to make it work – remote desktop access, a sophisticated document management system, remote email access, and the phone could be diverted so clients wouldn't even know I wasn't in the

office. Video conferencing would mean that clients could see me when necessary. Plus, I could always get to London in four to five hours if necessary.'

The clincher to the deal came when Veronica mapped out the cost savings for the firm. She pointed out that it had invested a lot of money in turning her from a junior corporate lawyer into a senior one with a great deal of experience; that she would no longer need an office in Central London, with all the expensive overheads that entailed; and that she would salvage all the dead time she lost every day commuting to and from work.

'I will always be grateful for the firm thinking outside the box on this issue,' says Veronica. 'At the time, I saw it as a no-brainer but, as everyone knows, lawyers tend to be risk averse. The great thing about the partners at RIAA Barker Gillette is that they have always been open to new ideas.'

Working remotely begins to make sense for both partners and staff at RIAA Barker Gillette



Interestingly, Veronica's plan didn't work out only for her. The partners at RIAA Barker Gillette, seeing the benefits, gradually began to embrace the concept of working remotely themselves.

'In London, where a snow day or a strike shuts down the city and where a lot of people spend up to four hours commuting in and out of Central London, the partners began to work from home occasionally,' Veronica says. 'After all, it allows continuity of business in circumstances where it would otherwise be impossible.'

It wasn't long before most of the partners were allocating a certain number of days per month to working remotely, simply because it was more convenient, more efficient and more cost-effective.

'I also think there has been a change in the attitude to family life that has transformed attitudes to how we work,' Veronica explains. 'These days, men – and I believe this is true of most of the male partners

at RIAA Barker Gillette – want to be involved in raising their children. They want to see the school play, attend concerts or spend time watching a kids' rugby match. Working remotely makes this more possible than ever before. You no longer have to worry that you're going to miss a major event in your child's life because you're stuck in traffic or on a train that's been delayed. Plus, most women are no longer willing to sit at home with the children and allow their partners to avoid any responsibility for raising them.'

Initially, the limited number of licences RIAA Barker Gillette held allowing remote access into their servers restricted the number of partners that could work remotely at any one time. However, the firm soon decided to invest in technology that would make working from home an option not only for the partners but for the lawyers as well. Eventually, this was also extended to support staff.

'Once everything became cloud-based, it made it much easier because the firm no longer had to have servers in its basement or to buy expensive licences to enable remote access,' Veronica explains. 'Interestingly, I don't believe the firm made a conscious decision to transform the way we worked. It happened organically.'

The shift towards working remotely has also benefited women lawyers at the firm who have wanted to have families but also to maintain their careers.

'I have to say that I appreciated my colleagues keeping in touch while I was on maternity leave,' Veronica says. 'Personally, I find breastfeeding quite boring, so I was grateful to have the "adult time". This is another way in which technology has changed things for women. Women lawyers don't need to disappear when they have children. They can now work part-time or casually. You can even keep in touch and up to speed with matters while on maternity leave, if you wish. It's a matter of working out what suits you.'

Veronica admits that the result has been a slightly odd atmosphere in the West End offices of the firm now known (after a couple of mergers) as RIAA Barker Gillette, because, on some days, very few people come into work and, if they do, it's at different times. Nevertheless, the change has meant that, in a city where residential property is particularly pricey, both the lawyers and support staff have could buy homes in more affordable areas outside London without having to evaluate whether they can cope with the long daily commute into work.

'It has also changed retirement. These days, the process can take a lot longer. First, someone may cut back to a part-time role. Often, this involves working from home more often. At RIAA Barker Gillette, we have a partner who still does part-time consultancy work from Spain.'

Becoming a partner in an international law firm while juggling motherhood and smallholding

For Veronica, who is now as skilled at acting as a midwife when her pedigree Oxford Sandy & Black pigs give birth as she is at drafting a facility agreement, becoming a partner at RIAA Barker Gillette was a logical, although unplanned, step in her career.

'To be honest, I didn't think about partnership too much. I was grateful that the firm had let me have the career I wanted and that I could live in Wales while working remotely. But I was chuffed when they said they wanted to make me up. It was a testament to my legal skills, as well as to all my hard work. It also shows how RIAA Barker Gillette is still a progressive firm. Ultimately, improvements in technology have meant that it's possible for me to live a so-called alternative lifestyle and also become a partner and manage a team of four people remotely.'

These days, Veronica works full-time from home and commutes to London when necessary. Jules works three days per week as a business intelligence consultant for a large insurance company and commutes to Bristol two days a week.

'I work pretty unconventional hours,' says Veronica. 'My team know that they usually shouldn't call me between 5.30 and 7.30 pm if they want my undivided attention, as these are the witching hours with the kids. I usually work some more after they go to bed.'

While Veronica admits she has undertaken some unorthodox activities while talking to clients on the telephone, and has worn some interesting outfits on Skype while guiding them through key issues in corporate documents, her working days seem normal.

'Yes, I've talked to clients via Skype wearing a suit jacket so that I look respectable, but I've been covered in mud from the waist down. I've also spoken to clients on the phone while picking apples because, technically, it was my day off. It doesn't seem to bother them. Instead, my clients seem to appreciate that I'm pretty much available 24/7. In the end, I think they get a better service because I'm available to help them whenever they need it. No client can ask for more than that.'

Building teams: how the culture of law firms is changing

As a partner, Veronica has a team of four fee earners and two support staff.

She is also about to take advantage of the legal apprenticeship scheme that has been introduced in the UK to increase diversity in the legal profession. It turns out that the legal profession in Britain, like in Australia, is still dominated by white, middle-class men. Law school is expensive and the magic circle firms in the UK continue to recruit largely from Oxford and Cambridge, which perpetuates the narrow demographic of people entering the profession.

'I was pleased when my fellow partners were so supportive of my idea to take on an apprentice solicitor. A couple of them mentioned that they had thought of putting forward a similar proposal but hadn't got around to it. The important thing is to promote diversity in the profession. The tendency for people to recruit people who are similar to them is well known, but this isn't the way to build strong and cohesive teams. I think women are slowly helping to change the culture in law firms. Men are also benefiting from these changes. The next step will be to embrace diversity in the law from both from an ethnic and a class perspective.'

Partnership, motherhood and smallholding is a good life but a busy one



There is no doubt that the past seven years have involved a lot of hard work for both Veronica and Jules. They have renovated their house, undertaken a huge amount of work on a smallholding that had been neglected for many years, and dealt with all sorts of animal dramas, including foxes eating chickens, a sow contracting metritis after giving birth, and the disappointment of watching Dimple, their Jersey cow, give birth to a still-born calf.

Somehow, they have also found time to start a family of their own. Melinka is now four-and-a-half and Orlin is eighteen months. There is no doubt that the arrival of the children has filled Penybanc Farm with additional squeaks, squawks and giggles.

The couple share the parenting responsibilities for their two children, as well as having the assistance of a nanny who works three days a week.

Both children like to play games where they pretend they are on the phone or typing at a computer. Apparently, this comes from observing their parents working from home.

'I have to say that it is humbling to have the mannerisms and facial expressions you use in your professional life mimicked by your children, even the toddler,' says Veronica, with mixture of both delight and horror.

The reality is that Veronica and Jules live a busy life.

The commitment of a smallholding also means that it is difficult to get away whenever they want a break from the responsibility associated with owning a smallholding. The couple can't just grab the kids and drive off, leaving the animals, vegetables and orchard to take care of themselves.

However, Veronica doesn't seem to have any regrets about this.

'We don't travel much these days,' she says. 'Penybanc has made me realise that we don't need to go away to see things. There is so much to see here. There is so much life in our garden. The bird population is incredible. We see red kites all the time. We've set up bat boxes, and Melinka's dream is to have a pet bat that lives in the house with us. The kids adore pottering around with the animals.'

Personally, I can't imagine any child who wouldn't enjoy growing up on a smallholding with Dusk the Border Collie, a gaggle of geese, a pen filled with piglets, and an orchard of fruit trees to climb.

'In the end, a healthy lifestyle is a big priority for us,' Veronica says. We are wrapping up our chat because she needs to take over looking after the kids from Jules, who is about to start work for the day.

'I don't like exercise for exercise's sake,' she adds. 'I would much prefer to get fit from doing chores. These days I only eat meat if it's our meat, because I don't want to eat a pig whose mother couldn't even lie down when giving birth. With our pigs, they have a good life, eat well and are killed humanely. We also allow them to graze, which is something most people don't know pigs like to do. It's a fair deal and our pork is delicious.'

I'm somewhat taken aback to learn that Veronica's favourite sow is named Barbara, but I'm pleased to hear she is very much a part of the family. Over the past seven years, Barbara has given the Hartleys many litters of Oxford Sandy & Black piglets and some of her offspring have won prizes at agricultural shows. Sadly, she is now getting on and has a limp. Veronica admits that she will be sad when the time comes to turn Barbara into pork sausages. (Neither she nor Jules would dream of wasting the meat.) The good news is that Jules has made a model of Barbara to create a bronze cast that will sit on Veronica's desk long after Barbara has left Penybanc.



Is the name 'Barbara' a spooky coincidence?

I suspect not.

It seems that I'm not the only fan of Felicity Kendall's Barbara and *The Good Life*. The only thing I regret, thinking back to the show 40 years later, is that Barbara wasn't also a mother and a lawyer.

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