

'Why I rejected a champagne lifestyle for green living'

Julia Stephenson, 39, heiress to the Vestey beef empire, swapped her sports car for a bike and gave up glamorous parties to be a Green Party campaigner

WORDS BEVERLY KEMP PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

“Six years ago I had the good fortune (or misfortune, depending on which way you look at it) to enjoy a brief flourishing as an 'It' girl and then to write a book about the experience (and not even on recycled paper I'm ashamed to say!).

Outwardly my life appeared glitzy. My family are well connected and successful, I was dating a rich, handsome aristocrat, I wrote novels and I was pictured in gossip columns with my glamorous socialite friends, apparently having the time of my life. I bumped into an acquaintance from that time recently; 'Oh, how we *envied* you!' she gushed, 'The girl who had everything.' But inside I felt very unhappy.

My relationship wasn't very good and my socialite friends made me feel insecure. In fact, I am quite a private person and I was uncomfortable in that social whirl.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

I went off to Switzerland to write my second novel, *Pandora's Diamond* (Headline Publishing), which is based on my experiences as a hopeless 'It' girl. Writing it was hugely cathartic and I let go of my old life and focused on things closer to my heart.

I didn't have a damascene conversion to green living; it was more a gradual awareness of how our extravagant lifestyles are damaging our environment. This led to a personal desire to live more sustainably.

For several years my idea of living a green life was quite superficial and more

for my benefit than the planet's. If I wanted organic blueberries I didn't care that they'd been flown halfway across the world, my only consideration was that I knew they were packed full of health-giving antioxidants. These days I'd rather eat British food in season than exotic fruit and veg with a hefty carbon footprint.

And while I frequented farmers' markets, this was as much about pandering to my middle-class rural fantasy as it was about saving the environment. Indeed my local farmers' market was, and still is, full of corporate wives carrying trugs, which they carefully deposit into the backs of their gas-guzzling Range Rovers before whizzing off to yoga classes.

But over the years I've become much greener. I've drastically cut down on my personal rubbish mountain by recycling packaging, and keeping a worm compost bin on my roof terrace (more on this later). And I found myself replacing my interest in the social whirl with an interest in the political world by representing my local Green Party. Political parties are the parties I'm now most interested in. The imminent global devastation – unless we cut our carbon emissions – makes me keen to do as much as I can.

TAKING ACTION

So last year I sold my speedy Mazda MX5 sports car (14 per cent of our carbon emissions are created by driving) and bought a

bike. A positive side effect is that I'm saving a fortune and avoiding the hideous bureaucracy and stress that owning a car in London entails, what with parking meters and congestion charges.

I've also installed a water filter at home so I don't have to buy expensive over-packaged mineral water shipped from half way around the world. Leave Fijian water to the Fijians, I say!

My loft is currently being converted into an extra room – the greenest option would be to avoid building work completely but I really need the extra space – so as a compromise I'm doing it in the most eco-friendly way possible, using organic paints and reclaimed materials.

By employing my boyfriend to do the work (conveniently, he's a builder) I'm cutting down further on my energy costs – well, financial energy costs at least – and indoctrinating him into my green ways at the same time. It'll be cold on the roof come the winter, working on that extension, but there'll be no energy-consuming blow heater in my house – he'll have to make do with a woolly hat covered in clingfilm! I don't think he's looking forward to working for me very much – he insists my initials JS actually stand for Joseph Stalin – but I expect he'll adapt to the Siberian conditions eventually.

I'm also installing solar panels, three wind turbines, the first waterless unisex urinal in the UK, a system that will ▷

recycling



“My trusty worm bin transforms leftovers into wonderful clean, crumbly compost”