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Secrets of the wedding planners to the uber-rich: bling and Elton

Barnes Spft turns Hamptons into mobile chaos in organizing the megacitic bigger parties and celebrations. Sophie Morer Cooke takes the lid off the wedding planner's secrets that they've got Ed Sheeran on speed dial

Naomi Campbell with Vogue and Hamptons Fashion Wedding in Mill, Southampton

Sophie Morer Cooke · Friday September 30 2016 · 5:14am, The Times

It's hard to an industrial estate just off a northern stretch of Edgware Road in London, near two funeral parlours and a dodgy-looking kebab place, but Barnes Spft, a company that's a cross between a wedding planner and a Swiss Army knife, is a thing of serious wanderlust and trying to work out which one I'm after among the so-lady shops. And then I see it behind a horse security barrier and a pedestrian path-man, the green, where slightly dodgy lady of a certain age.

This is the headquarters of Barnes Spft. I don't mean to make conspiracies about the size of an office, but if you haven't heard of it, that's possibly because your bank balance is too small. It plans parties, and we're not talking a bunch of Twigies and some prosecco here. It arranges multimillion-pound parties and weddings for celebrities and people who want to be celebrities and people who want to be seen as closest to the Hollywood-Vogue-Super Bowl-Elton-John-Sophie Cole-Tim-Rice-Oxlade-Lane-Tonight-for-your-first-dance? Yes. Yes, after two and a half years of work, Barnes Spft threw a 400-million wedding for Petra Ecclestone/Jonnie Irwin at Luton Hoo, complete with Ed Sheeran playing the bride's father, Elton John and Andrea Bocelli, although there was a slight chance involving Bocelli's microphone, which we'll come to later. And the staff to do it and this drab warehouse near Crickle.

To be fair, inside it's Ikea-dark. Pesky yellow furniture and a blue tinted with expensive bottles of tequila and whisky. Plus, the photos. Good grief, the behind-the-scenes photos. Bernie Wenden and Bobbie Spft, the founders, are standing with Naomi Campbell and Vogue at a Hamptons Fashion Wedding at a manor-ish wedding at Cliveden and, well, to that a young Thierry Henry?

"Yeah, we did his wedding," says Jolene Pooms, Barnes Spft's founder. "Lovely man." The Bernie/Bobbie added Barnes Spft to quite a few of their wedding lists don't want to say much money for it, apparently.

Barnes Spft's team, from left Gemma Gibbons, Jolene Pooms, Jamie Sinclair and Anthony Thomas
Sophie Morer

"This is a lovely story," Jolene, 36, goes on, gesturing towards a photo of a bride and groom. "We had a Hollywood-Vogue-Super Bowl-Elton-John-Sophie-Cole-Tim-Rice-Oxlade-Lane-Tonight-for-your-first-dance, but we didn't do the guy. You must either be exceptionally rich or exceptionally well connected to have Hollywood-Vogue-Super Bowl-Elton-John-Sophie-Cole-Tim-Rice-Oxlade-Lane-Tonight-for-your-first-dance-but-you are-pretty, so-you-please. Or was Pippa Middleton and I hadn't recognised her. What a mess."

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Yes or Sex, I ask.

"Sex!" he roars.

Sit at a table in Jolene's office along with Jamie Sinclair and Gemma Gibbons, Barnes Spft's other two founders, and it's all celebrities, and the so-other more recognisable for the business: Jamie Simon, 45, head of events (he oversees every party), and Dan Lane, 35, head of design (he oversees the design of every party, and he's just-lovely-sexy). They're so well-set-up-and-organised-and-then, "Can we all put our phones away?" Jolene orders the others, whereupon they turn from screen-addicts on the table I can hear the hum-roll of landline chatterers. It's not quite 90s, party because it's not quite 90s, but it's not quite 2016 either, because it's not quite the well-behaved-or-that-was-organised by Barnes Spft's last parties but there's a sense that those days were numerous.

It's a busy time to be a party planner. August is quite enough, David says, but they're bracing themselves for "multiple" weddings in September. Jerusalem is the month of Pesach, several years-long into the millions. These four are tight-lipped when it comes to budgets and clients, but they do let slip that, in the past, they've had "multiple" in the midst of its figures, which suggests they dominate weddings "nasty" run into seven.

"Gastric, Jolene states, mixing up my Dictaphone on the table as if more secrets are about to be released.

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What's the biggest wedding budget they've ever come across?

"The Jackson wedding," Anthony says, referring to the mega-bar-bat-mitzvah that took place last month, which involved a startling combination of people — the Kardashians and the Osbornes, for example — being flown into Mustique by a fleet of jets to celebrate the nuptials of Naomi Jackson, the son of Kate's Osbornes-twin.

"It's hundred, I mean," Anthony adds, meaning millions of dollars.

"Unfortunately we weren't asked to pick the pie," Lane clarifies. "But the Instagram-worm the most beautiful brooches and they were put into the bridal. Well, that's not part of planning a wedding."

Naomi Campbell with Vogue and Hamptons Fashion Wedding in Mill, Southampton
Hamptons.com

"And he brought all his mates. Jackstone," Anthony protests, referring to the £60,000-one-night-vacation given by Ansari Ambassi to his ten groomsmen.

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So once grapes at having missed out on the wedding of the year, then?

"Look, everyone has a virus, but Bernie's only so crazy you can charge for a vaccine," interjects Jolene, who appears to be the diplomat of the Spft. Third Bernie's lady, as much a name to hack somebody. This is only since the point where it's just, Hedgehog."

Not that this stopped Hedgehog weddings. I remind them of the Oil-Rich-Oligarch-Oxlade-Lane-Tonight-for-your-first-dance, and the Cup-Eden-Rise-Indeed-as-if-it-was-Wimbledon-long-and-was-fashioned entirely from cream roses and hydrangeas.

"Because may it wasn't flowers all the way from the Amiri because that would have been a waste of money. There were gaps between them," Jolene says solemnly. "You just couldn't see that in the pictures. Barnes Spft do not waste money because things cost too much as it is."

So there's a cost of living for far anyone getting married soon space for your floral arrangements and nobody will even notice on Instagram.

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So the search of Frances still the most fashionable place to get married if you're a millionaire? "Yes," they all chorus.

"But we're moved away from Mill," Jamie says.

"That was last year," Anthony says. "All picket-fences, Tuscan olives and wooden tables."

What's last right now in the wedding world, they say, is "neoclassical luxury", although as he can't see decipher this just seems to mean big tents. Bernie's lady, Bobbie, 50, mentions a Hollywood-Vogue-Super-Like-a-wedding-in-St-Tropez-then-planned-on-so-long-just-for-a-bonfirish-bride and her Silicon Valley husband, where James Corden acted as MC and Florence—The Machine sang. Not to Get the Love for the First dance. So big budget-too, presumably. "And a Bentley-moving-electric, just beautiful," Jolene offers.

Although somewhat contrastingly to that bar-bat-"neoclassical luxury" is "rustic", which means, I think, anything with wooden weddings—merchandise branded with a jaunty Instagram logo including baseball hats, bandeau, lighters and ashtrays.

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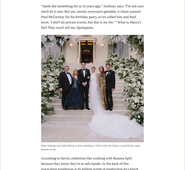

Jamie Sinclair at Bobbie's 50th

They'll also organise a staged proposal if you need help planning the wedding-proposal-to-the-wedding-proposal-to-the-wedding-proposal. Jamie's birthday party for a client who wanted a Japanese-themed evening in Clerkenwell. Sofa chefs were flown in and Anthony remembers a Hollywood-Vogue-Super-Like-a-wedding-in-St-Tropez-then-planned-on-so-long-just-for-a-bonfirish-bride who asked for the same, "which, at the same time, was an expensive!" So I went back to the same company and they immediately knocked off 40 per cent, which seemed very generous. Then, when the same arrived in Mustique, they said, "Actually, we don't do that any more." Jamie remembers that Bernie had been put in the back of the plane instead of a business class. That was the saving, and these are big guys, you know."

Still, the client had a marvellous birthday, so did the same sensitive, because they knocked through a bottle of whisky that Jolene gave them rather their performance to £1 minutes.

Is anyone grateful? Has I wanted to throw a glittering 40th birthday party next year — could I get Adele, for instance? Or maybe not Adele, which might make it quite a useless, lacey evening, but could I get anyone else I wanted?

"Yes," Jolene says.

"No," Anthony, Jamie and David counter.

"Adele did something for me in Japan," Anthony says. "I'm not sure if it was a birthday or a wedding, but she performed a few songs. Bernie Bobbie Spft had Jeremy Paxman, who we called him and Paul were, I don't do private events, but this is my fee." What is Bracey's fee? They can't tell me. Apologises.

Ed Sheeran and Elton John at their wedding to Petra Ecclestone, Jonnie Irwin, Harley, Layla and Zachary

According to David, celebrities like working with Barnes Spft because they know they're in safe hands. Or the back of the unsolicited-warehouse-in-Ikea-scented-with-a-hint-of-production-to-which-explains-the-security-gates. "Concert-level," David says proudly. Sometimes they have to hire a security company to sweep for microphones stopped not to interrupt-the-vows-organised, as it is-made-small-in-the-Maldives-or-a-Nigel-Ian-Bogarde. Andrea Bocelli wasn't originally booked for the Luton wedding because he had a diary clash, but when Sid Bernard-Wenden-from-Bobbie-the-big-fat, Sir-Lucian-Grainge-Bernie-Wenden-Bobbie-Spft-Bernie-Wenden-Bobbie-overnight-to-the-Hotel-Du-Cap-to-deliver-his-special-for-Bocelli-requires-along-with-his-four-precious microphones-tour-for-him, you-for-his-separate-plus-his-backup-back, altogether-tarrif-£30,000.

Sometimes the brides aren't the biggest divas. It might be the tatter involved, Elton John is infamous for—not to-work-with, but for-might-need-his-piano-for-a-certain-event-or-a-birthplace-to-get-there. It's the mothers-of-the-bride who are sometimes-the-worst. Jamie, doing Dorchester Hotel-in-London, David recently-picked-up-his-phone-to-have-a-wifty-spoken-woman-on-the-other-end. It was Diana Ross, Jamie-the-Spft-wedding, calling-him-to-chat-about-the-details. What a party.

Do we seem a-crazy-bit-about-sustainability, what with all this constant shifting about of-some-wreaths-and-equipment-around-the-place-and-the-constant-use-of-the-Ikea-van? Well, I can guarantee that-has-literally-nearly-at-no-birthday-party-in-the-Maldives-didn't-take-right, in-Julian-had-24-boxes-of-celery-salt-shipped-out-and-it-wasn't-right-so-he-had-to-send-them-back-to-the-Cotswolds-but, although-this-is-Ikea-it-does-have-Swedish-chefs-who-insist-on-paper-straws-and-re-usable-water-bottles.

Is-there-anything-they-won't-do-in-client? Dengg, Julian says, "We-wouldn't-do-anything-illegal." Or-illegal-in-the-Maldives, Jamie adds-that-he-occasionally-wants-to-fly-off-to-Dubai, and-the-odd-person, to "get-a-grip", but-he-usually-refrains.

Bobbie Spft, Gemma, Jamie, and Nadine Merchant-Jean Vincent-Jamie

It's all a long way from Barnes Spft's more humble beginnings nearly-two-years-ago. Bernie Wenden-Bobbie-Spft-Bernie-Wenden-Bobbie-Spft-wedding-cake-to-a-dance-school-in-Barnes-Lane, northwest London, and-bought-a-set-of-mobile-disco-equipment. He-charged-£12-for-his-services-and-he-got-a-lot-of-weddings-and-bar-mitzvahs-and-he-noticed-the-Russian-oligarchs-thought-the-same-made-a-lot-of-sense-and-he-leveraged-his-teenage-brain-for-a-good-name-and-opened-a-bunch-of-businesses-on-the-mother's-side.

Later-this-year, the-company-will-from-its-new-fifth-anniversary-back-in-Claridge's-ballroom, and-Bradford-is-running-along. I-suppose-it-will-be-quite-the-celebration, although-do-they-never-tire-of-parties? Put-them-here-up-for-a-night-and-watch-Crewe?

No, Jamie says. "It's a real-privilege what we do, be-architect-might-build-someone's-house-or-a-restaurant-people-can-enjoy-for-ten-years-but-we-come-in-and-set-of-people's-lives. We-do-their-weddings, their-birthdays, their-bar-mitzvahs-and-their-anniversaries-and-we-become-part-of-their-lives-and-they-remember-us-for-ever-because-we-put-a-good-memory."

It's-left-to-David-to-be-a-bit-more-hyperbolic. "My-wife-always-says, 'Don't-say-anything', when-we-go-out-to-an-friends. I-don't-like-parties. I-like-a-pub."

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