

MY FIRST LONDON HOME

Judy Craymer

The theatre producer of *Mamma Mia!* talks to **Jane Slade** about why, despite owning homes in New York and Warwickshire, she will always consider London home

I grew up in leafy Mill Hill, which I thought was the countryside. Our house was in the grounds of Mill Hill school so I had the run of a swimming pool and tennis courts in the holidays – and a horse which I kept nearby.

I won a place at the Guildhall School of Music to study stage management. That's when I really fell in love with London.

I camped on the floor of friends' flats in Elephant and Castle. I would wake up to find my Mini had no wheels, but I didn't care – I loved being near to the action.

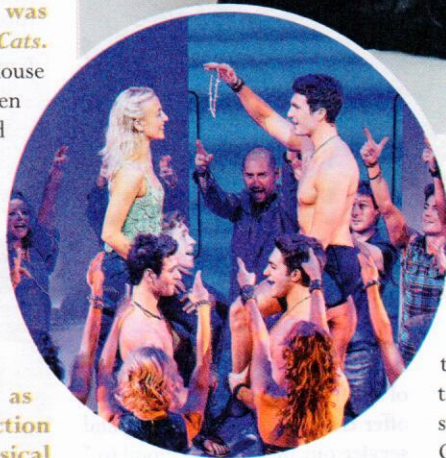
My first London job was working on the musical *Cats*.

I camped in a huge shared house in South Kensington. When the show finished I would head down to Joe Allen in Covent Garden and order a plate of chips and a Harvey Wallbanger, unless Wayne Sleep, who played Mr Mistoffelees, treated me to supper, which he often did.

I then went to work as Tim Rice's production assistant on the musical *Chess*. That is when I met Björn and Benny. It was then that I became quite obsessed by ABBA's fabulous songs.

Around this time I bought my first home, a tiny flat, in St Ann's Villas in Holland Park for £28,000. It really bordered Shepherd's Bush. It was there that I started to develop the idea of *Mamma Mia!* the musical and drove the neighbours mad playing ABBA songs 24/7.

The flat was covered in Post-It notes of ideas for the musical. Tina Turner lived close by. I'd had an idea that she could



play one of the leads and posted a note through her door. I got a stern note from her manager asking me never to do that again!

I loved that flat. It was close to Notting Hill, there was a great buzz in the area and it holds many happy memories. I had to sell the flat to give up my job and concentrate on the making of the musical.

After *Mamma Mia!* opened in London in 1999, then in Toronto and finally Broadway, I moved to SW3. I never imagined the stage show

would be so successful, and get me back on the property ladder so soon.

My parents loved *Mamma Mia!* Happily, my mother lived to see some of its success around the world. I had showed her the shiny brochure of this beautiful Georgian house in Egerton Crescent that I wanted to buy; and told her not to tell anyone how much it cost.

At my mother's funeral her friends said to me "We hear you've bought a house for £5 million". That made me smile and the first thing I did was throw a garden party for them.

***Mamma Mia!* has now been seen by over 60 million people worldwide.** With productions in over 440 cities, lugging suitcases up and down five storeys got to me in the end so just before we filmed *Mamma Mia! The Movie* on Skopelos in 2007 I moved to an



STREET GUIDE "We currently have a two-bedroom flat on St Ann's Villas on the market for £1.1m," says William Vaughan of Faron Sutaria

apartment in Belgravia. It is ten minutes from my office. I know the local shop owners and they know me and I can walk everywhere.

I have houses in New York and Warwickshire, but London will always be home.

I still love going to the theatre and eating out late. I love The Delaunay, and Colbert in Sloane Square is one of my favourite cafés.

The failure of *VIVA FOREVER!* [the Spice Girls' musical] did hit me hard when it closed three years ago. But without it closing I would not have rediscovered my passion for horses and become an ambassador for British show jumping.

Of all the ABBA songs, *The Winner Takes It All* was my inspiration for *Mamma Mia!* After all these years I still love dancing round the kitchen to *Dancing Queen*, often at 2am! **■**

For tickets to *Mamma Mia!* visit mamma-mia.com

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