



Emma Bridgewater outside her factory in Stoke-on-Trent

# Top of the POTS

This year, both *Country Living* and the Emma Bridgewater brand turn 35. We talk to the pottery entrepreneur about family, friends and the future of her iconic business

WORDS BY LAURA SILVERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

**C**link, clink, clatter, clatter. Emma Bridgewater is doing the washing-up. “I’ll stop fussing in a minute,” she calls, with team-captain jollity. Splish-splash, splish-splash. Tea must be made. Emma pulls up a chair. Behind us, shelves grin with plates and mugs

that dance with ducks and polka dots. *Country Living* is in Stoke-on-Trent to speak to Emma about our joint birthday: we both launched 35 years ago. We’re at her factory, in a meeting room, but it feels so welcoming that it could easily be her home.

Emma built her eponymous business to reflect her values, and, although she lives in Oxford, 100 miles away, the room is very her. Emma Bridgewater – the brand, maybe the person – is, as she describes it, “fun and friendly and relaxed and welcoming and informal”. They’re values she grew up with at her mother’s home (her parents divorced when she was eight), near Emma’s current house, where none of the china on the kitchen dresser matched. It was after struggling to find a cup and saucer as a present for her mum that gave Emma, then an English graduate, the idea to start the company.

The aesthetic of the designs – the cream earthenware shapes and the simple, repetitive patterns – is one reason behind the company’s success. The other is the feeling conjured up by the pottery. “Mum’s thing was very clear,” Emma says. “Nothing matters as long as everyone’s happy. If there’s not quite enough food, but there’s enough drink, everything will be alright. If there aren’t quite enough chairs and the plates don’t match, these things don’t matter. It’s all about making everyone feel

welcome and relaxed.” It was how the family lived, until 1991, when her mother had a horse-riding accident that left her with severe brain damage. Emma, now 58, was six years into the business, married and living in London. She’d always believed in the brand’s ethos; now its success became paramount. “Mum’s accident,” she says, “made it doubly important.”

She has seen her mum’s influence most clearly in her youngest sibling, Nell, who was still at school at the time of the accident. Nell, who founded Giffords Circus, died of cancer just a few months ago, aged 46. There’s a poster for one of her shows on the wall. “I can see it more objectively in her business,” says Emma, who describes her siblings (she was the eldest of eight) as her best friends. “The strength of Giffords Circus is that it runs on the same principles [of making something fun and welcoming]. Nell wanted to recreate Mum’s house and move it from one village green to another on a weekly basis... So exciting and marvellous.” Both she and Nell were entranced by a “romantic lure towards something difficult and nearly gone”, she says. “I know that, to some extent, insisting that the British ceramics industry had a great future and everything I needed was about as unlikely as saying circus isn’t dead.”

Unlikely, perhaps, but not impossible. Thanks to Emma, the British ceramics industry does have a great future. But what made Emma believe she could see that vision through? “There was definitely optimism,” she says, carefully, “but ignorance was very helpful. If you knew what you were undertaking, you might have to go and lie down. You might have the sense not to do it and that would be a pity... I think calculating the odds is something that should sometimes be done, but not often. I can’t abide the idea ▶

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If you believe in something, Emma says, you should go for it. Then you have to finish what you've started. She's passed this on to her four children, now aged between 20 and 30, when they've had doubts about university courses or art school. “Once you've leapt, you've then got to swim like hell. You can't get swept away and go, ‘Help me!’” She's serious. She's also laughing. And Emma has gone for it, even when she's been running the business and looking after her family. “More normal people would have gone, I've had enough of this; I want a change.” She narrows her eyes, grits her teeth and says in a raspy voice: “I'm holding on to this and I'm going to chase it... It becomes an obsession.”

The real challenge comes in chasing more than one thing: work and family. “In the Eighties, we thought feminism was done,” Emma says. “But I don't think we were concentrating on it enough. The structures of our world are still created by men for men. The reality of children changes everything.”

Emma seems to have had the ideal set-up, sharing work and prime parenting duties with her then-husband and business partner Matthew Rice. The couple, who recently separated, alternated roles while the children were growing up. In the early Nineties, Matthew stayed at home to look after them, while Emma was on the road, driving between the family house in Norfolk, the factory in Stoke and the office in London. It was, she says, incredibly lonely. “There's some crazy thing that means you don't think, ‘Yippee, freedom!’ You worry about everything else. When you're at work, you feel guilty that you're not spending enough time at home. When you're at home, you feel guilty that you're not spending enough time at work.”

In 2006, Emma was forced to step back from the business for a couple of years after suffering from exhaustion and developing rheumatoid arthritis. She learnt that she couldn't take on quite as much again. Not that she could step away completely. After all, she's the founder – and she shares the company name. “What I've learnt about running the business is that when the buck stops with you, it's very different from being one of the team,” she says.

Even washing up mugs in the sink today suggests Emma never really stops. She might not need to swim as frantically as she once did, but there are no mega-yachts for her. (She likes sailing, but more the sort of day trip where she can supply the picnic.) She's currently planning to move to London. “I'll try to find some old shed probably – a bit of an old factory to do up,” she says. It will be big enough to have the children over for Sunday lunch, and a room for them to stay. Meanwhile, her week is spent between

Oxford, Stoke and London, with long weekends near Blakeney in Norfolk, where she has a cottage.

The business, she says, is growing: “There's a real power surge going on in terms of what we can do.” And yet, she adds: “I've also been thinking, ‘What happens to the business beyond my involvement?’” None of the children have plans to join: “Matthew and I did a very, very English thing of saying, ‘Darlings, you must do your own thing.’” And they did. Elizabeth, the eldest, is a performer at Giffords Circus, Kitty is a fabric designer, while Margaret and Michael are still at university: “It's difficult for them to come in now, given that it's quite big.”

Emma Bridgewater, Emma says, is a collaboration – of people, of ideas, of a philosophy. Does she connect the success of the brand with personal success? “I was thinking about Nell last night and talking about this,” she says. “I could see that she knew that the success of her circus was quite colossal, and it could make her quite fierce at times... But otherwise she was completely, totally, still the same person, just as unsure about her judgment as I am. I don't think you turn into a monster. You just have the conviction that you're doing something right.” As for the future of the business, “The brand isn't me any more, it's the team. It's no longer a child, it's left university. It's got its own strength and independence.”

Where does that leave Emma? She's still, she says, “heavily emotionally involved in the business – if I had let someone else do the manufacturing, I think I'd have lost interest by now.” But there is a suggestion of projects to come. “I don't think I ever had a clear plan for my own life,” she says. “I've had lots and lots of family demands and I never really shaped a plan for myself, other than to make this work – and I don't think that is enough, actually.”

One hint about future activities comes from her recent thoughts about her mother's family, who were Quakers in Norfolk. “My granny seeded a lot of ideas about what good we were going to do,” says Emma, who counts social reformer Elizabeth Fry as an ancestor. “She'd say, ‘You are going to be useful, aren't you? You are going to make the world a better place.’” There's a moment of reflection. “The business has been incredibly interesting – a lot of it very difficult and a lot of it really, really good fun and, it turns out, it gives one a useful chunk of experience that might go to inform this next chapter, whatever that might be,” she says. “In lots of ways, this feels like a nice, empowered return to my twenties.” Only now, Emma has a bit more china.

**TO WATCH** Emma Bridgewater talk about her favourite designs, head to [countryliving.com/uk](http://countryliving.com/uk).

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USING NARS AND BUMBLE AND BUMBLE



EMMA BRIDGEWATER  
*a potted history*

**1985** Emma launches her pottery business, after struggling to find a cup and saucer for her mum

**1987** An Emma Bridgewater x *Country Living* mug is produced in a duck and wave pattern

**1990** The first Emma Bridgewater shop opens in Fulham, London

**1992** The Toast & Marmalade pattern is launched

**1996** Production starts at the current factory, in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent

**2002** The Polka Dot pattern goes into production

**2012** The Diamond Jubilee range includes a teapot, decorative plate – and crown-shaped jar

**2015** The Duchess of Cambridge visits the factory as part of a charity partnership with children's hospice EACH

**2020** About 1.7m pottery pieces are made a year – 33,000 per week