



## CRAFTING A HANDMADE BUSINESS WITH TILLY WALNES

Words: COLETTE EARLEY  
Photograph: FIONA MURRAY

ENTREPRENEUR AND SEWING PRO TILLY WALNES SHARES HOW SHE TRANSFORMED HER BLOG INTO A THRIVING BUSINESS, ONE STITCH AT A TIME

**T**illy, founder and director of the multi-award-winning sewing pattern brand Tilly and the Buttons, is a total boss. Not only has she turned her passion for making clothes into a successful business, helping budding sewists everywhere to learn the craft, she's also authored two bestselling books on dressmaking, and teaches online workshops.

After taking some beginners' courses, Tilly trained at the London College of Fashion, then began drafting her own patterns. She created the Tilly and the Buttons blog so her and her fellow stitchers could "geek out about patterns and construction techniques together." To test the waters, she had one of her designs graded into different sizes, wrote some instructions, and put together a basic cover design. "The pattern went up for sale as a digital download through my blog," she recalls. "My mum rang a couple of hours after I'd put it up to ask if I'd sold any. I can still hear her screaming, '50?' down the phone. I realised there was a market for them and started working on the next one!"

Since then, the brand has gone from strength to strength. We chatted to Tilly about her journey in the South London studio where she works with her team.

**What's a typical working day like?**  
My 18-month-old son wakes me up around 5am. The morning flies by as I get us both ready, and – toddler tantrums dependent – I get to my desk around 8am. I'm only in the office three days a week at the moment so start by planning priorities for my time with a cup of strong coffee. A lot of my day involves meetings with the team, advising on projects and editing content. And then I'll be doing anything from writing instructions, through number-crunching budgets, &



Versions of Tilly and the Buttons' Eden coat pattern in a variety of their favourite shades hang in the office



## MEET THE MAKER

doing press interviews, test sewing new patterns or planning projects. On the days he's at nursery, I run for the train at 4.45pm to do his bath-book-bed routine before collapsing on the sofa with some food, *Masterchef* or *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, and falling asleep at an embarrassingly early time. Once a week my partner looks after our son so I stay in the office until around 7pm. The other days I spend with my boy at soft play, swimming lessons and chasing ducks in the park, catching up with work during his naptime.

**Where did your passion for making clothes begin?** I started sewing 10 years ago on a whim and fell head over heels in love with the fulfilment that comes from taking a flat piece of fabric and stitching it up into a unique piece of clothing. At the time, I was looking for a hobby to reignite the creative spark I felt like I'd lost since becoming a grown up, and thought I'd give dressmaking a try as I've always loved dreaming up clothes in my head. I became instantly obsessed!

**How did your blog evolve into a business?** Readers and friends alike kept telling me that they'd love to get into sewing but they didn't know how, so I decided to break it down into easy-to-follow steps written in plain English. I really wanted more people to discover the joy of dressmaking like I had – it soon turned into a platform for sharing tips and tutorials on starting sewing.

**What do you offer sewists?** Our aim is to make dressmaking accessible and inspiring to the new wave of crafters. The main part of our business is our line of easy-to-follow sewing patterns. I've also written two books – *Love at First Stitch* is like a beginner sewing course in a book, and *Stretch!* is all about sewing wearable clothes with knit fabrics such as jersey and sweatshirting. I also teach video workshops on all things sewing.

**Is there a feeling you try to inspire with your patterns?** I hope they make people feel relaxed, happy and fulfilled



01



02

01 The Tilly Towers studio is a busy place where sewing machines hum on a daily basis.  
02 Sales and Communications Manager Louise busy at work on inspiration boards.  
03 Sewing tools in candy colours are a

must at Tilly and the Buttons.  
04 Seeing the ideas go from sketch to the first sample is such a thrill.  
05 Inspiring books published in a number of languages for sewists around the world.



03



04

05

**“Our aim is to make dressmaking accessible and inspiring to the new wave of crafters.”**

as they're sewing, putting their worries aside and focusing on cutting and stitching with pretty fabrics. And, when they put on their finished outfit, I hope they feel proud they've made themselves a handmade, one-of-a-kind garment tailored to fit their unique body shape.

**What's the best bit of your job?** I love creating a pattern and seeing how people put their own unique spin on it with the fabrics they choose, the design flourishes they add and their own personalities coming through when they wear it.

**Are there elements you don't enjoy so much?** Running any business can be stressful, particularly dealing with staffing issues, tackling unforeseen logistical problems and making sure the company is



01 Tilly and her team design sewing patterns for the modern maker, including a staple dungaree pattern.

02 "I love everything to match, including my scissors and my nails!" says Tilly. Colour is important to the brand.

is generating enough income to cover the crazy amount of costs involved. You can't clock off in the evening and weekends like you would with a regular job – it's always on your mind. Yet I find it so fulfilling to drive and grow a venture, so can't see myself going back to a regular job.

**Are you able to fit in sewing just for you?** Running a business and running after a toddler doesn't leave me with much time, but I try to fit it in where I can. Even if it's just 15 minutes before bed, it always makes me feel better. I can't sew anything without obsessively scribbling ideas for blog posts.

**Do you have a favourite make?** My latest make is always my favourite! So I'd have to say a lilac wool duffle coat with mint green lining, made with our Eden coat pattern. Plus a sweatshirt I made for my son, which has a polar bear face and ears on it. Obsessed!

**Who inspires you?** When I was a child, my mum ran a charity from home, which she later grew into quite a big organisation. I saw how she thrived on the buzz of creating something from scratch. I never thought I wanted to run my own business, but I must have subconsciously absorbed this experience as inspiration!

**"I want more people to discover the joy that comes with making things with their hands."**

Nowadays, I love following entrepreneurs working in other creative fields – it's so inspiring seeing how people are making their unique contribution to the world.

**When are you most creative?** When I'm away from my desk – I often burst back into the office from a loo break shouting about a new idea I've had!

**What's your big motivation?** I want more people to discover the joy that comes with making things with their own hands, and reconnect to the creativity and sense of play that a lot of us lost or suppressed when we became adults.

**Can you share what's coming up?** We're hard at work on two patterns that'll be released this summer, plus I'm developing two big projects for the future. I can't wait to see them out in the world! 🍷

Visit [www.tillyandthebuttons.com](http://www.tillyandthebuttons.com) to check out the latest patterns, and find Tilly sharing inspiration on Instagram as @TillyButtons.