

# WHEN WIMPEY MET WAYNE

Last year, fashion guru Wayne Hemingway launched a very public attack on volume housing. So housebuilder Wimpey offered him a job. **Marcus Fairs** found out what happened next ... Photographs by Eva Vermandel

MEET THE HEMINGWAYS. WAYNE, 41, AND Gerardine, 40, live with their four young children in a lovely seaside house in West Sussex. Both are fashion designers who made millions when they sold Red or Dead, their influential high-street chain, in 1999. They could have retired on the profit – but instead they are designing a housing estate in Gateshead for George Wimpey.

"If we don't want to work again, we don't have to," says Wayne, perching awkwardly on a blue sofa at his office – a converted Tudor-style semi near Wembley stadium in north-west London. "I could get paid more for two days work designing a dress for Barbie dolls than my fee from Wimpey. But we want to change volume housing in this country."

The unlikely alliance of streetwise fashionistas and one of Britain's more conservative mass housebuilders came about at the start of last year when Wayne launched a scathing assault in the national press on the "Wimpeyfication" of England.

Hemingway accused the firm of ruining the countryside with hideous Identikit executive boxes. But rather than issue a writ, Wimpey invited the couple to work with them. They accepted, and got involved in a £70m brownfield development at Dunston, beside the Tyne. "I must have caught Wimpey at a moment when they thought they had to do something different," says Wayne.

Last week, the first phase of 154 homes was given full planning permission by Gateshead council. Remediation work will start this month and Wimpey expects to start building early next year. Eventually, there will be about 700 homes on the 40-acre site, which is just 15 minutes' walk from Newcastle and Gateshead city centres.

But if you're expecting a riot of punky architecture, you're in for a surprise. The designs, released exclusively to *Building*, show rows of low-rise terraces with gardens (see plans, overleaf).

"Bodies such as the Urban Task Force and ▶



► CBE say we've got to be more European," says Wayne (Gerardine is in the next room, working on the interior designs). "But I don't think it's what people want. Having a garden isn't wasting space; it isn't ruining the environment. The number one hobby in this country is gardening. You can't argue with that."

The Hemingways' design concept is based on instinct rather than any particular urban theory. They both grew up in working-class Blackburn – Wayne in a block of council flats, Gerardine in a back-to-back terrace – and their inspiration derives from childhood memories of playing in parks and gardens.

"I don't remember the flat," says Wayne. "I only remember the graffiti and the smell of piss. But what I remember most are the landscaped areas where we used to play. So the first thing we thought when we started working with Wimpey was, 'What would attract people like us?'"

The Hemingways have never designed housing before, but they have certainly done their homework. To get up to speed on the latest thinking, they made a dozen trips abroad with their children, visiting acclaimed developments in Australia, the Netherlands, the USA and Sweden. Their children's reactions were taken as seriously as their own: "Kids have a clear vision of things from a very early

age. If your kids are happy, you're happy."

For Wimpey, working with the duo has been something of a culture shock. "Construction is far more complicated than dressmaking, and the real challenge is that they're not from the industry," says Ian Laight, development director with George Wimpey City. "They've no architectural background; they've got no knowledge of the business. A lot of the things they aspire to are publicly subsidised schemes they've seen abroad. We can't do that. They don't understand things like section 106 agreements, environmental impact assessments and CDM regulations – and in some ways they're not interested."

But Laight says their naivety has been refreshing and their creative input inspirational. "I was sceptical when I first met them. They're fashion designers; I thought they were just going to be interested in surface finishes and colours. But they very genuinely

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want to improve volume housing in this country. They challenge you to ask yourself why you aren't being more forward thinking. In my career I've tried to put my head above the parapet on several occasions and I've been hammered down. They've encouraged me to start thinking more creatively again."

The Gateshead scheme – called Staithe South Bank – was already on the drawing board when Wayne and Gerardine were drafted in. Laight describes the couple's role as akin to that of a co-client, coming up with ideas and briefing the team led by architects Mark and Jane Massey (another husband-and-wife duo of Newcastle practice Ian Darby Partnership). The Hemingways have integrated well with the team, Laight says. "There could have been a bit of professional jealousy but there hasn't."

Wayne agrees. "We've always been good at working in teams – being confident but not big-headed," he says. "Jane and Mark have been really nice to work with; they shared a vision. They didn't see us as poncey London designers muscling in. The Wimpey staff – not the bosses, but the next layer down – were quite antagonistic at first, but after a while they realised we weren't telling them what to do but wanted to work with them."

The Hemingways have not been given a free rein and the designs for phase one are a somewhat watered-down version of their



Gerardine and Wayne Hemingway: Creative input to Wimpey scheme is 'inspiring and refreshing'.



**Left** The first phase of Staithe South Bank consists of 154 homes. Most are two- and three-storey houses with private gardens, clustered around communal pocket parks. It is the first new-build project in the country to benefit from the government's HomeChoice programme – a £30m fund to make housing schemes more pedestrian-friendly. Streetscapes have hard landscaping and are dotted with football pitches and children's play equipment.

**Above left** Phase one contains 28 different house types, distinguished by facade treatment. In later phases, owners will be able to customise the interior plans.

**Above right** How the completed development will look.

original vision. Their central concept – houses with gardens arranged in blocks around communal pocket parks – has survived; but many of their more daring ideas, especially Gerardine's flexible interior concepts, have been vetoed on the early phases. Laight says later stages will be bolder if the scheme sells well, but Wayne is not perturbed: the fashion business taught him the art of compromise, he says.

"With Red or Dead, we wanted to be the first fashion label that was affordable, so we had to compromise all the time. The house designs work OK; they're modern but not frightening. We could have made it look more visually exciting but it would have been bloody expensive. The worst thing that could happen is that it would sell slowly on account of the houses looking a bit weird."

Staithe South Bank is a commercial venture rather than an attempt to build a utopia on the Tyne. There are no "affordable" homes: the council didn't want any as there is a surplus in Gateshead. Mid-rise, loft-style apartment blocks line the river front, and will be sold for a premium. But most of the units are homes aimed at average-income families, with prices starting at £65,000. "A couple on the local average wage can afford a two-bed house here," says Wayne. "That's really important. It's definitely not a yuppie development."

Wayne's experience with Wimpey has convinced him that poor-quality mass housing is not entirely the fault of housebuilders. "All parties are to blame," he says – notably planners, who he claims stifle innovation. "Gateshead council is quite forward thinking. It's been great working with them. But I've seen plenty of other planning committees, and they wear brown Crimplene suits and go home at 4.30pm."

Then there's architects: "Architects have quite a bad reputation among housebuilders who feel architects come in and don't listen, don't care about cost, and won't compromise on materials." Leading architects won't dirty their hands with volume housing, he says, drawing a comparison with the fashion industry. "The famous fashion designer can only think about self-fulfilment. They are not changing anything; they're just doing a few things for exclusive shops where few people can afford to shop. The real people who make a difference are working at Top Shop."

The Hemingway's eldest son wants to be an architect, but Wayne is gently trying to persuade him otherwise. "I said OK, but don't train for it. Just be a creative person, keep your eyes open. It seems a bit strange to study one thing for seven years. We're not trained in fashion, yet we were able to change fashion. And fashion's not as important as housing."

## FROM FROCKS TO BLOCKS

### Gerardine Hemingway describes her foray into housing design

"With fashion, you push for new things all the time. You wouldn't settle for last year's fabrics – you push for the latest way of doing things. But in the building industry, everything's got to be tried and tested."

"The thing I'm doing most is asking why a certain material can't be used. People say, oh, we tried it in the seventies and it didn't work. They like the things they're used to – and they tend to be a bit stuck in their ways. But I have to say that on our programme Wimpey are being quite flexible."

"The construction industry is quite macho, but I'm feisty enough not to let that get to me. The process has been interesting, but there were a few yawns. It can get a bit boring when they're talking about deep piling and all that malarkey. I got introduced to CDM – I thought that was Cadbury's Dairy Milk!

"We've not had a free hand with this. We've had to work within constraints – floorspace, price, Wimpey's parameters. For example, the third bedroom isn't a bedroom – it's a box. It's hard to get the furniture in. Getting that changed is very hard. Every drawing I look at, I voice my opinion – but whether they take it on board is another matter."

"Still, we're not being stubborn about the specification. Compromise is about finding another way of making it look equally good. We wanted to use a denim-blue render on the facades, but it's 11 times more expensive than white render because it's made of cobalt. So we're looking at alternatives."

"A lot of the materials we're using are not perfect. We didn't want to use PVCu windows but we went to the manufacturer and persuaded them to dye them the colours we wanted and keep the cost down. We spent two days at the factory. How many architects will do that?"

"The thing I'm working on at the moment is the service boxes on the front of buildings – the plastic boxes that contain the electricity and gas meters. They're usually just plonked on the front and they're a disgrace! We're going to speak to the people who make the boxes and see if we can change them."

"There have been days when I've been at my wits' end trying to find a brick that's not your standard colour, or a downpipe in a colour that matches the render. I went to a concrete block manufacturer – it was the first time a designer had ever been there. The colours on offer were huge. There was no need for me to say I want buttercup yellow. They had so much choice that architects don't even know about."

"They promised me they'd have samples delivered in time for the design meeting. That was two weeks ago, and guess what? They didn't arrive. In fashion, they'd be there. They're letting themselves down."

"I can't understand why other people in the industry don't get out and see what's going on abroad. The Urban Task Force is all based on stuff happening in Europe, but half the people trying to do it have never been to look at it. Most housing designers are just too deskbound, plodding along with the same old drawings."