

Whatever happened to the yuppies?

They were the confident, ambitious types of the greed-is-good era, but revisiting these go-getters 35 years on, Katie Russell finds some have ditched more than the pinstripes

Young
Upwardly-
mobile
Professional

YUPPIE
DEFINITION

If you were around in the 1980s you couldn't miss them. They may have been swigging champagne in a bar in SW3, cutting you up in their Porsche 911, or pushing past you in a Paul Smith suit while heading to their job in advertising/design/property (delete as appropriate).

The 1980s was the decade of the yuppie – an acronym defined in the dictionary alternatively as “young urban professional” or “young, upwardly-mobile professional”. Either way, the term was coined in America in 1984 but within two years it had crossed the Atlantic to a mixed reception. “The term became synonymous with all that was greedy and grasping about the 1980s,” Tony Parsons wrote for *The Telegraph* in 1993. “They were despised on two counts: they were very nouveau and very rich.”

That seems harsh. The yuppies were loud and brash, but also confident and energetic, and while some may have despised them, for others they were aspirational. Regardless, those young individuals are now heading for retirement, and their lunch-is-for-wimps, you-snooze-you-lose, me-first attitudes seem very much at odds with the gentler, more questioning – and much less confident – times we live in.

It is now 35 years since “yuppie” was added to the Oxford English Dictionary – and since a handful were first interviewed in *The Telegraph*. So where are they now? Did these bright-eyed young professionals burn themselves out or did they continue to climb the greasy pole and make their millions? And how do their values as midlifers compare with those of their former selves? To find out, I tracked down the yuppies we interviewed between 1986 and 1989 to discover what happened next.

Nick Cross was 23 years old when he featured in a 1986 *Telegraph* article. He was working in consultancy, earning £15,000 (equivalent to £37,700 today) and was buying a flat in Shepherd's Bush. He and his colleague described themselves in the feature as “high-flying commercial commands”. Ouch.

It haunts Cross, 58, to this day. “Commercial commando was cringe-worthy at the time,” he admits. Indeed, Cross is initially reluctant to describe himself as a yuppie at all, but when I ask if he bought into the yuppie style of the time, he says: “I sort of did. No, of course I did. But did I go around calling myself a yuppie? No, I didn't.”

His friends, too, were reluctant to use the “vaguely pejorative” label. Cross has traded his “yuppie sharp formal dress” – bespoke suits from a tailor in Islington; shirts from Jermyn Street; Alan McAfee shoes – for a “quite casual” look. He wears Edwin jeans or Sunspel trousers, Merrell shoes and “eye-wateringly expensive” Margaret Howell shirts.

In terms of his professional life, his career has followed a clear trajectory: he founded a strategic brand consultancy firm, Tag-Red, in 2011. He is also a director of London restaurant chain Balans and runs his family's 1,000-acre arable farm in Suffolk. He and his wife have lived in south London's Camberwell Grove for the past 23 years and have three sons together.

Would he say he has been successful? “It depends what you mean by successful,” he says. “If that means earning billions of pounds, well, no. But if you mean having a rich, varied and interesting life, then, yeah, definitely.” He has no plans of retiring yet.

It's an attitude shared by Amanda Alexander, who was interviewed for our 1987 article “Jeeves takes a job with the yuppies” because she employed a nanny and part-time cleaner in the Shepherd's Bush home she shared with her husband.

Since then, Alexander says she has employed a “succession of nannies” but as her three children are now grown up, her staff comprises a couple of gardeners, a cleaner and somebody who cleans the swimming pool.

Alexander and her husband – who



▲ Brace yourselves: Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) was the ultimate yuppie; British versions talked to *The Telegraph* in 1986, right



▼ Reality check: Julia Hailes, with dog Ziggy, is proud of her achievements but is now 'less naive'

▲ Taking a break: Barbara Hopkin is ready to retire from the job that brought 'huge satisfaction'

have now been together for 42 years – have two homes: one “just off Baker Street” in London, which has three bedrooms and a roof garden and is where they spend their weekdays, and a nine-bedroom house in Gloucestershire, set in 1 ½ acres with the aforementioned pool, where they spend their weekends.

“Through hard graft we now have an extremely pleasant and successful lifestyle,” Alexander, now 67, tells me. She and her husband co-founded Space City Productions, a company that makes television commercials, in 1981. Alexander composes advertising jingles and signature tunes, writing the theme music for TV programmes including ITN news.

The pair still work a seven-day week, but Alexander says she allows herself “more free time to enjoy pursuits other than working” and no longer works in the evenings. She and her husband go out for nice meals, socialise with friends and go on more holidays now than they did when they were younger. “It's nice to be able to enjoy what we built for ourselves,” she tells me on the phone from the French countryside, where she is “working from holiday”.

On the whole, she feels she has been successful and wants for nothing. “I certainly feel happy that I've got everything that I wanted,” she says. She does not feel she has achieved all she set out to as a composer, however. “In terms of creativity, I would like to write something that is way more fulfilling than writing for television, but I'm not sure when I'll have the opportunity to do that.”

As time has passed, her priorities have changed. Losing her son, Alex, to leukaemia changed what she values most. “The only thing I would put over and above working to create wealth and happiness is when you have a domestic tragedy, like we did, and then I did sort of put different things into perspective. Now I've got a family and a husband and I'm getting older, the most important thing to me is family.”

She is in no rush to retire, however. “I shall work until I can no longer work.” In contrast, Barbara Hopkin is looking forward to retiring in September from the law firm she founded in 1987. “I feel really good about it,” she says. “I find the stress more difficult to cope with as I get older – because it is very stressful work.”

When Hopkin was interviewed in 1986, she was a 30-year-old solicitor working in a small firm, mostly on legal aid cases. But she had much bigger plans. “I am ambitious and I want to become a partner,” she said at the time.

A year later, she started her own firm, which has continued to grow as Hopkin Murray Beskine, where she still works as a consultant. She specialises in representing children in court proceedings and still mainly takes on legal aid cases.

“I could have now been a partner earning £1million a year or something like that, but what I wanted to do was to try and contribute towards making people's lives slightly less rubbish, and that gives me huge satisfaction,” she says.

While Hopkin was described in the 1986 feature as being in the “yuppie fast lane”, she never identified as such. “I don't see myself as a yuppie because I haven't really moved from where I was in terms of position in society,” she says. Even so, her lifestyle has changed. In 1986, she lived “frugally” as she was saving to decorate her new home on Highbury Corner in north London. Now, living in Hertford having been divorced and widowed, and with her two grown-up children having flown the nest, she

has no need to save. “I don't live frugally any more,” she says. “I don't need to save for a house, I've paid off my mortgage and I'm just about to retire.”

She spends her money on trips to the theatre and cinema, while her love of American musicals inspired her to take up jazz singing and she now performs in a group in Hertford.

Someone else starting to slow down is Julia Hailes, who, as the then 27-year-old co-founder of environmental consultancy SustainAbility, was dubbed a



Have I earned billions? Well, no. But I have had a rich, varied and interesting life

“green yuppie” – or “guppy” – in a 1989 article. In the feature, journalist Nicola Tyrer described her and her colleagues as: “Unrepentantly Thatcher's children – ambitious, conformist, with a well-developed respect for success and the cash it brings.” Hailes herself said in the piece: “The fundies say we are only interested in making money. That's not true. I want to save the Earth and make money.”

It's a statement Hailes stands by now. “If you don't [make money] you can't be a business,” she points out.

Hailes is proud of what she has achieved and sees herself as a “sustainability pioneer”. After launching SustainAbility and co-authoring *The Green Consumer Guide*, which went on to sell more than 1 million copies, she went freelance in 1995, coinciding with the birth of her first child (she now has three sons, aged 26, 24 and 22). She advises corporations on environmental issues, does public speaking and has written nine books. She was granted the UN Global 500 award for outstanding environmental achievement, as well as an MBE.

Over the past decade, Hailes has also spent time renovating her home in Dorset and rewilding its nine acres of land. She used to roller-skate to her office in Holland Park, but those days are behind her: she now uses her electric bike or Tesla car to get around.

While environmental issues are still important to Hailes – her focus these days is on education, biodiversity and climate change – her attitude has changed since the 1980s. She feels “less naive” than when she was younger and says that she is more realistic about what she can actually achieve as she has “a lot less energy” now.

In her 20s, she was “firing on all cylinders, doing everything” at her environmental consultancy firm, and would happily work until lam or 2am when writing her books.

“My life isn't like that now,” she says. “I have my home life and I have my social life and I'm not completely consumed by my working life.”

The Telegraph

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