

Below: Liz Finan



# Hair help with extra hugs

Venerable wig maker Raoul has been given a fresh lease of life by its new owner. One thing that hasn't changed, though, is the compassion and support it offers to clients, many of whom are cancer sufferers

BY MARIE-CLAIRE CHAPPET

**R**AOUL wig makers is a small, unimposing presence on Craven Road. You probably walk past it most days without giving it much thought. After all, how many of us wear wigs, buy wigs or get wigs adjusted? It's a niche area, associated by most of the population with balding men or costume parties.

Yet for so many people wigs are of vital importance. If you are one of the numerous sufferers of alopecia in the UK (that's 50% of the over-50s, by the way), or one of the estimated 2.5 million people in the UK living with cancer, then a wig is not a niche item at all. It's a lifeline.

Liz Finan, the new owner of Raoul, is keen to stress this. "We're so much more than just a wig shop" is practically emblazoned on her chest. And she's right – Raoul is not just a wig shop. For a start, it's the oldest wig shop in London, founded by the two Raoul brothers in Great Portland Street in 1899. The business moved to its current Paddington home in 1945. Four years later the shop would get its defining endorsement as the first ever wigmakers to the newly formed NHS. It's a partnership that has continued to this day.

Testaments to Raoul's long history are housed on the

premises. There are ledgers written in quill and ink, and Victorian horsehair hairpieces. But the most telling inheritance is the relationship with the health service. Raoul sends out 6,000 wigs a year to the NHS, dealing with 30-40 hospitals across the country. It has agents who have been working for Raoul's for over 40 years.

The shop also makes wigs for theatre, film and television shows, and even made one for singer Adele when she wanted to dress up as George Michael for a party. One member of the company's staff, working in a previous freelance capacity, had the honour of making the wig that Hugh Jackman wore in the film of *Les Misérables*.

Finan herself wears a wig and, in a move of solidarity with her clients, shaved her head. "When I bought this place, I was so shocked how stressed women are when they lose their hair," she says. "When they have to have their head shaved I can whip my wig off and show them: I've joined you!"

She is not, perhaps, the most likely owner of a wig shop. Although she wears a wig, it's not because of cancer, alopecia or any ties with hairdressing. Finan's background is a successful career in the City – as the first female executive of the Skipton Building Society, MD at financial services company Alexander Forbes and a wealth of experience as a professional coach, not to mention a degree in counselling. It was when she left the City and became a consultant for start-ups that she became involved in the wig industry.

"I set up a business about the wholesale side of the business. I looked at ethically sourced hair: I travelled in China to find out about working conditions. I went to one place where they slept where they worked, the windows were broken, the mattresses were filthy. It was horrendous. I paid for quality controllers myself, translators all of it," she informs me.

It was one of her buyers, an alopecia sufferer herself, who told her about Raoul's. "She'd been coming here for 50 years and she had heard that the business was going to fold. I came and had a look at it and totally fell in love with it. I fell in love with that art deco window. It was so quaint you have no idea. But it was the whole feeling of





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being able to make a difference to so many people.”

Finan tells me moving stories about her clients, including that of a four-year-old girl, an alopecia sufferer who had lost her hair at two. Raoul made her a wig identical to her original hair. On her first day at school she stood up in front of the class and told them: “I’m wearing a wig and I don’t want anyone to take it off.”

Raoul is a real passion project for those who work here. There are 12 in total, consultants, wigmakers, seamstresses, stylists and office workers. “We’re a really tight team,” Finan says, as she explains the pride they take in the personal service they provide. This is not just about the artistry and accuracy of the wigs, but the support they give their clients, most of whom are cancer sufferers.

Her team have a nuanced understanding of the situations and heightened emotions that hair loss, whether from cancer or otherwise, can cause. “We have such a wealth of knowledge, we can help them with some of the things they will have forgotten to ask in the hospital. But it can be so upsetting – family members will burst into tears. They have to stay so strong for them. Because of course the person who has come doesn’t want the wig, they don’t want to be there. Some of them are angry as heck. By the time they leave they’ve had a hug, a laugh, a cry. They always say ‘you made it so much fun, and special!’”

This attention to care extends to the décor. Finan took



the quaint store and made it chic and, she’s proud to say, “glamorous”. It now looks more like a top-tier salon, with sleek surfaces, white walls, flowers and mirrors. All of this is done in an effort to make the customers feel safe and a difficult experience more enjoyable.

Of course, Finan is keen to highlight the fact that Raoul is also a hairdresser’s, albeit one that specialises in wigs. “I would love the local community to use us more,” she says. “We have the best stylists: cutting a wig has to be so precise because it won’t grow back! We especially do the best men’s cuts around but no one knows!”

Yet the community does take note. Harley Street refers private patients, local hotels utilise Raoul’s services for events and Muslim women come from across London to take advantage of hair appointments in the private consultation rooms. And how does Finan feel about the area? “What I love about Paddington in particular is the trade community. They’re so kind and supportive.”

Raoul is booming. Besides its work with hospitals, it provides wigs for theatre, film and TV. Once it even supplied wigs for an elaborate Disney *Frozen* party in Dubai. But it’s clear that the team’s commitment to cancer and hair loss sufferers is the beating heart of the operation. “Fifty per cent of the people who walk through this door will not survive,” Finan tells me. “It is our job to make sure that whatever time they’ve got is the best time we can make it. We can’t fix their problems, but we can get them really good hair.”