



Front row from left to right: Emma Elliott co - designer overseeing the outworkers, Unni Oluag Eidheim, Anne Marie Henderson, Hilary Heggie, Vanessa Newton. Standing: Elspeth Soutar, founder of the Wardrobe

Wardrobe magic ... town shop launches its own range of children's wear

By Katie Macleod

Wardrobes in children's tales possess all kinds of magic, acting as entryways to new worlds and keepers of secrets – think *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Famous Five*. Closer to home, however, *The Wardrobe in Stornoway* has been working some magic of its own, as it expands its selection of children's clothes to include its very own brand range of Volkswagen (VW) camper van-inspired designer children's wear.

"We wanted to create more ourselves so we can increase stock and also focus on the VW range, keeping it handmade here in the Outer Hebrides," explains *The Wardrobe's* owner, Elspeth Soutar.

The VW range of children's wear and accessories has been "the longer term aim" for Elspeth since she first opened *The Wardrobe* two years ago, and its official introduction this year coincides nicely with her 25th year as VW Campervan owner.

Inspired by Elspeth's easily recognisable VW camper van, 'Dilly', the new range is being handmade locally by a newly-recruited cast of creative outworkers who collect orders and patterns from the shop before working on them from the comfort of their own homes.

Between them, the outworkers have a broad range of experience: they range from creative artists to qualified machinists. Lead outworker Emma Elliott came on board in December to get the design stage started. "I've been able to tell her my vision, she turns it into a pattern, makes the first samples, and then the outworker team builds up the stock. She's been amazing," says Elspeth.

Elspeth wanted a work team that was operating on a flexible setting, able to work around the needs of their children, elderly parents, or the demands of their own creative work. It stems in part from the community-minded, child-centred approach of the shop as a whole, which takes into the account the needs of parents and their children.

A Victorian wardrobe – the very embodiment of the entrance to Narnia – takes pride of place

in the shop corner, offering a toy drawer and play space for little ones to explore while their parents are browsing. When needed, there are even nappy changing facilities available for parents with young children. As Elspeth explains, "the whole shopping experience is important."

For *Wardrobe* and VW fans far and wide, the shopping experience is gaining traction online, as sales of the handmade VW range are now available on the website. Elspeth and Emma are also planning to bring their unique VW designs to the masses this summer, taking them on the road with 'Dilly' to music festivals and VW shows across the country.

Operating under the motto 'The Younger Side of Vintage', *The Wardrobe* still sells boutique children's clothes and accessories which are sourced from small Scottish industries, as well as stocking the 'agency' range, where customers can recycle their new or barely used children's clothes through an agency basis; with this there is the option of donating the 50% commission made on sales to the Linda Norgrove Foundation.

Clothes from this "funky recycling initiative" are located to the right of the shop as you enter, with the boutique and handmade VW ranges to the left. Renovations have recently been completed, opening up the space and aiding the introduction of the VW collection. There is now a more functional workspace behind the counter at the rear of the room (with teasing tasters of the charming VW-printed materials hanging on the wall) and a larger office that is home to an industrial sewing machine.

All these additions mean that special orders and wedding requests are now an option. For a few pounds more, customers can place special orders from the VW range. "They know they're getting something really special," says Elspeth. "The items will always be unique because they're handmade." As well as flower girl and page boy outfits, the VW designer range for weddings can include centrepieces, favours and bunting.

Actually, in *The Wardrobe* on Cromwell Street, it's not so much fairytale magic at work, as the creativity and determination of Elspeth and her hardworking team of outworkers.