

# Ayesha Vardag

Born 1968. Divorce lawyer for the wealthy.  
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# 1. Introduction

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from [www.thevintagemagazine.co](http://www.thevintagemagazine.co), the website of Vintage Magazine. The article was written by Charlotte Newman, journalist and publicist at Vardags.*

## **The Rise and Rise of Ayesha Vardag**

Some businesses grow slowly, some explode onto the scene and continue to grow to outstrip their competition. Vardags, the ‘Diva of Divorce’ Ayesha Vardag’s eponymous matrimonial law firm is definitely a case of the latter. Beginning life in 2005 out of the spare room in Ayesha’s Georgian townhouse in Islington, Vardags started small. Less than a decade later, it’s firmly established in London’s ‘Magic Circle’, running many of the biggest-ticket clients and hiring lawyers from top city firms, with Ayesha dubbed “Britain’s top divorce lawyer” and “the Diva of Divorce”.

A lot has changed in a relatively short space of time. When Vardags began in that Islington townhouse, all was not entirely rosy for Ayesha. Having gone through a messy divorce with the father of her two sons, she had seen a lot of change – emotional and professional – in a short space of time (something that was to become something of a theme as time wore on). On the back of her divorce, which saw her use her experience as a finance solicitor to undertake a lot of the groundwork herself, she was offered a job by her divorce lawyer. Later deciding to go it alone as a family lawyer, the fledgling business – or one-woman show – launched at the insistence of a big client in the form of a parent at her son’s school.

Becoming busier and busier, it reached the stage where she had to recruit another member of staff, which is, Ayesha says, the moment where “the fear really comes upon you. Suddenly you are responsible for someone’s rent or mortgage.” But, Ayesha’s credo has become fearlessness; or rather, feeling the fear and doing it anyway.

The rest, as they say, is history. Particularly in 2010 when Ayesha won a landmark Supreme Court victory in *Radmacher v Granatino*, a case that saw her client’s prenuptial agreement successfully upheld to protect her reported £100 million fortune, which changed the law. Prenups are now enforceable unless unfair, and the Law Commission has since recommended that this be enshrined in statute as well as case-law.

From *Radmacher* onwards, the firm really took off. The handful of employees who were around for that mammoth case morphed, over the next few years, into a 50-strong workforce, encompassing both lawyers and business professionals. Ayesha referred to that first post-*Radmacher* influx of new recruits as “the cavalry”, relieving the intense pressure of work.

Ayesha adopted an unusual human resources strategy for family law, choosing to recruit many lawyers from City backgrounds with sound knowledge of corporate and commercial law and re-train them as matrimonial lawyers. These ex-City types worked alongside newly qualified young stars and senior level lateral hires, combining forces to create a unique team: family lawyers who could really handle the cut and thrust of complex financial conundrums.



*Ayesha Vardag (left).*

The firm has gone on to win awards, including the Halsbury Award for Law Firm of the Year in 2013, a win that saw Vardags pitched against some much bigger, longer established and multi-departmental firms. Spear's Magazine named Ayesha among their Top 10 family lawyers in the country, again alongside others who have been in the industry much longer.

Not that there has been any resting-on-laurels. Earlier this year the Mail crowned Ayesha the 'Queen of Divorce'. The firm has moved out of its quirky offices in the four-storey period property 8 Bell Yard, having

outgrown it due to rapid expansion – at certain points lawyers were literally rubbing elbows – and are now ensconced in the bright, airy, decidedly modern 10 Old Bailey.



*Ayesha Vardag with her husband and colleague Stephen Bence.*

Not that the signature Vardags décor has gone; the client area is enclosed in reclaimed mahogany panelling, cut to fit by Italian artisans and the meeting rooms are comfortably glamorous, bedecked in bespoke wallpaper and dotted with antiques. It's a far cry from the corporate stereotype of the high-powered law firm, and helps put clients at ease when they come in for advice while going through some of the very worst of times that life has to throw at you. Finally pouring the entire firm into the new building has, Ayesha says, “removed the last road block” in its expansion.

And amid the whirlwind professional success, things were also going well personally. In June 2014, Ayesha married partner and colleague Dr Stephen Bence, who heads up the business strategy team at Vardags and provides the financial and commercial expertise. They wed in Winchester, where

they shared a home with their combined families in the Cathedral Close for some years. It was a lavish, glamorous affair that also managed to be warm and welcoming. Guests were treated to a musical extravaganza throughout the day: Bach, Byrd, Tallis and Purcell sung by a choir made up of their friends (Stephen was a Cambridge choral scholar) during the ceremony – held in the Cathedral quire – and Bollywood bhangra, waltzes and dance tunes provided by DJ and friend Jeffrey Louis-Reed at the reception, which was held in the quintessentially English garden of 1, The Close. There was of course, much champagne and revelry, a common feature of the Vardags social whirl, and friends, family and colleagues rubbed shoulders with QCs, judges, clients and the media.

In the wake of the wedding, business has been booming as usual. After returning from an action-packed honeymoon with dolphins and the volcano Stephen wrote his astrophysics PhD in Hawaii, Ayesha and Stephen threw themselves back into work with a renewed vigour. Through the late summer (even the usually quiet month of August) through to Autumn, the firm has signed more big clients with complex cases involving multiple jurisdictions and financial chicanery – exactly the sort of work that is the firm’s forte – leading to another hiring spree to cope with surging demand.

Much exciting work has come with the case of Malaysian beauty queen Pauline Chai, and along with it huge amounts of coverage in the national press both here and abroad. Ayesha and her team, including Managing Director Catherine Thomas and Director Georgina Hamblin, have been pulling out all the stops for a case that could result in one of the biggest divorce pay-outs in British legal history. The Vardags team won round one in October when they were awarded jurisdiction and forum in the High Court.

It’s been an extraordinary journey so far, and in many ways it seems like it’s just beginning. After all, the firm is still young, and Ayesha is never short of ideas for how it will innovate further in the future. For a start, she would like to see no-fault divorce become the rule in England, so that the culture of mudslinging that our current fault-based system necessitates can become a thing of the past. Ayesha has described fault-based divorce, characteristically, as a “system of acrimony which is the bedevilment of families.” She is also a strong advocate for children having continuing relationships with both parents post break-up and of private arbitration for high net worth cases to ensure utmost discretion and to relieve pressure on the clogged-up courts. The next wave also involves international expansion, with a presence established in Dubai and the Middle East beckoning.

Thinking big has certainly paid off. Of her drive and entrepreneurial success, Ayesha says: “You have to be able to trust your instincts and

willing to take a big leap in the dark.” Thanks to that fighting spirit and strong vision, the firm’s plum position at the cutting edge of family law ensures that it is likely to be a major player in any future reform of the current legal system. Whether it’s plans for new offices, developing overseas presences or ambitions for how to push forward to make family law work at its very best, Vardags is sure to be at the vanguard of that change.

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## 2. Marriage to Stephen Bence

### Plans for the Wedding

*Ayesha Vardag described her plans for her wedding to Stephen Bence on her blog. It was reported by Alex Aldridge in Legal Cheek at [www.legalcheek.com](http://www.legalcheek.com). The article was published in March 2014.*

“It is the most immense privilege to be able to engage in the sacrament of marriage in a place so suffused with history,” writes Vardag of Winchester Cathedral.

Yet, adds the solicitor and barrister who enjoyed spells at Linklaters, Weil Gotshal and 4 New Square before starting her own firm, a personal touch will be applied: “even though it’s in perhaps the most beautiful and grandest cathedral in England, this is going to be different. This is going to be completely ‘us’.”

Arrival of the guests will be by steam train and Rolls Royce.

“The full, sung, mass, will be by Monteverdi...” explains Vardag. “It will be sung by people who are stellar singers, some at international professional level, but all of who are our friends and guests at the wedding.”

Britain’s top divorce lawyer’s second husband-to-be Stephen Bence did some impressive CV-building before he joined Vardags, Vardag’s law firm, as director of strategy in 2012. The blog reveals that Bence “read Astrophysics at Cambridge for his PhD and did his field work up a giant mountain in Hawaii, where, after passing through six different forms of vegetative habitat to reflect the changing climate and significant hypoxia, you get to the world-leading astronomical observatory where Stephen worked out how stars throw out matter in the process of their creation.”

“My ring,” discloses Vardag, “is a Harry Winston peridot and diamond affair, not designed to be an engagement ring at all. Peridots are among the most ancient of precious stones, and match both Stephen’s and my eyes. The side shoulders are diamond and have a very Great Gatsby feel to them. The ring caught my eye amid the fields of diamond rings and the peridot spoke to me as peridots spoke to Cleopatra thousands of years ago.”

“My hair,” confides Vardag, “will have been done by Tom at Nicky Clark, who has cut my hair since I was 22 years old; my makeup by the artist who styled me for my first glossy magazine feature in Easy Living and the photographer will be from the same shoot. My dress, and our daughters’

bridesmaids' dresses, will be painstakingly made by my mother, who has extraordinary creativity and sartorial training now rare."

"We have said for years," imparts Vardag, "that if we married we would go to Hawaii on honeymoon, and indeed so we shall. We'll probably go via San Francisco on the way out and LA on the way back. If you wish to give us a wedding gift, therefore, please buy us a piece of that trip."

### **The Wedding Day**

*This description of the wedding was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Hampshire Chronicle at [www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk](http://www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk).*



A small crowd braved last Saturday's rain showers to watch wealthy divorce lawyer Ayesha Vardag leave Winchester Cathedral having just tied the knot for the second time.



With brollies at the ready, they were rewarded by a possession of a bride in a flame-coloured frock and gold be-jewelled tiara, a groom sporting a large red rose in the button hole of his morning suit, plus a stream of well-heeled guests.

Vardag, who is now honeymooning with new husband Stephen Bence in the United States, has lived in the Cathedral Close for the past four years.

Her London-based family law firm Vardags handles the break-ups of some of the country's richest couples, while she is acclaimed for helping to make pre-nup agreements binding under English law.

The 46-year-old eschewed traditional white for her second wedding dress which, like her first, was sewn for her by her mother Barbara.

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### 3. Interview

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of The Edition Magazine. It was published in March 2015.*



#### **Interview with ‘The Diva of Divorce’ Ayesha Vardag**

Ayesha Vardag is internationally recognised as ‘Britain’s Top Divorce Lawyer’. Her unrivaled success, no-nonsense style and gritty life experience make her a force to be reckoned with when it comes to resolving family disputes. Negotiating divorce settlements is just one of the many strings to Ayesha’s bow. She is a pioneer of both prenuptial and post-nuptial agreements, the latter of which she hopes to introduce to the world as ‘the modern way to mend a marriage’. Ayesha has acted for and against heirs and heiresses, tycoons, international sports stars, celebrities and royalty. H Edition speaks to Ayesha Vardag about her inspiring career.

*10 years ago, you launched Vardags; how did it all begin?*

It all began out of the spare bedroom of my house. I’d worked on my own divorce case and the divorce lawyer was so impressed that he hired me. I then had a third child and left the firm. Surviving on my teaching pay, from my work leading the family law course at Queen Mary, and having my house overrun with lodgers to keep myself afloat, I decided I needed to get some more work. So, I turned to what I knew, and decided to start operating a one-woman practice from my Islington home. It grew quickly through word of mouth and within a short space of time I had a flourishing practice with several employees helping me run the show.

*What is the best and worst business decision you’ve ever made?*

The best was to trust my instincts and go it alone in the world of family law. It’s traditionally been a very small, established circle – frankly a bit of a closed shop – and it took some guts to say “I’m new on the scene and I’m

serious” as well as to apply City know-how to the equation and revamp matrimonial law as a more rigorous legal discipline. People were quick to be dismissive at the time but now I have the largest high net worth family law firm in the country, having taken many risks along the way.

In business terms, the worst decision has to be the mortgage switch I made back in 2005. In theory, I should have been able to convert the mortgage debt I had for a couple of properties into another currency then reap the rewards when it was changed back into sterling; this was unfortunately scuppered by the 2008 crash so I ended up losing around £300,000.

*What is your number one business goal you plan to accomplish within 2015?*

We have big plans up our sleeves for this year and we’re constantly on the lookout for ways we can expand and keep breaking the mould. Number one though is our exciting new collaborative venture in the UAE. This is still in its developmental stages but it will bring new challenges and the chance to provide a comprehensive international service where it is truly needed.

*How did you land your first big client?*

In a great bit of serendipity: it was a mother at my son’s school. This was very early on, when I was considering practicing out of my home but hadn’t quite got all the necessary clearances in place to do so. I attended my son’s PTA quiz night in the City of London one evening and met a lovely mother there who was going through a divorce and very unhappy with her legal representation. Her encouragement pushed me to get everything ready so I could take on her case. It was a great success: I was able to get my client a fantastic award in a case that was published in the law reports. From then onwards I turned my hand to other big money cases, representing heirs and heiresses, international royalty, tycoons and sports stars.

*Any observations about the challenges women face that are specific to law firms?*

Law involves a lot of negotiation, and I think there’s still a lingering perception that negotiation – which is really an art – is something that involves a tough, typically masculine approach, bordering on aggression. There are times when being tough to get the job done is necessary, but there’s a bit more light and shade to it than that. Women still have to show that emotional intelligence is crucial to the work too, and it can be difficult to get that taken seriously. The type of work I do is emotional by default, and it requires real empathy as well as excellent legal knowledge and intellect. Otherwise, women in law face similar challenges to women in other professions, particularly those that involve ambition and long working hours: being able to balance having a family with a career, being

the one who has to make sacrifices and adapt rather than their male counterparts.

*What do you feel are your biggest achievements?*

High on the list of professional wins has to be my Supreme Court victory in the 2010 case of Radmacher, which changed the law on prenups and made them enforceable in England and Wales. It was a momentous moment for me personally, the small firm – as it then was – that I'd built up from nothing, and for family law. It was a big strike out for autonomy in modern marriages and a moment where we really felt we'd understood the momentum for change that was happening at that time and pushed it through to fruition.

*What keeps you awake at night?*

Running a business, though wonderful, involves all sorts of dilemmas and pressures that have insomniac effects. Keeping clients coming through the doors, keeping them happy and pushing the boat out to get them the best possible outcome for their cases involves constant planning and rethinking. It's exhilarating, but far from relaxing!



## 4. A Palazzo in Florence

*The following chapter comprises brief excerpts archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Financial Times at [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com). The article was written by Hannah Roberts, and was published in October 2021.*



The go-to solicitor for billionaires and footballers is surrounded by drama — in her work and in the decor of her Medici-style villa in Florence

Ayesha Vardag knows the secret to a long marriage: separate bedrooms. As one of the UK's leading divorce lawyers, and married twice, she is something of an authority. Her new home, a seven-bedroom Renaissance villa in a 13-acre park outside Florence, certainly affords the space for her and her husband to maintain the aristocratic tradition of individual chambers.

She tends to take on only cases where the assets in dispute are £100m-plus. When both sides seek Vardags' representation, it's first come first served. She and her husband Stephen Bence, the chief executive of her firm and chairman and co-founder of data provider Beauhurst, have operated

remotely for much of the past six or seven years from Dubai, between in person trips to London.

Earlier this year, the couple decided to shift their permanent base to Florence, renting the 15th-century villa (previously an events venue renting for £7,500 a day) and a city-centre apartment from a “discreet” aristocratic family. “The world has become such a small place and Florence is so commutable,” says Vardag.

Vardag’s own hounds — Acapella, Shah-Namah and Sarab, three Salukis she adopted in Dubai — are willing models for the stately home photo shoot, trailing us upstairs to a series of rooms with canopied beds, some with tell-tale paw imprints. “They won’t lie on the floor, I suppose because they are very bony,” explains Vardag.

A traditional Tuscan kitchen has a fireplace large enough to spit-roast a local wild boar. Vardag admits she hasn’t cooked for years, the family being looked after by a crew of housekeepers, cleaners, cooks, a full-time nanny, drivers and office staff.

It is a lifestyle that is a long way from her childhood in Oxford, where her mother was a senior administrator at New College and Vardag washed dishes in a café to help out her “completely broke” family.

As her favourite thing, Vardag picks a mat from Laos made by a collective of women in hill tribes and sold through an artisan social enterprise called Ock Pop Tok. Vardag puts them “everywhere” in her houses: “I use them as bath mats and stick them on sofas to protect them from dogs.” She feels strongly about buying from small collectives rather than a mass producer. “This is keeping traditions alive, enabling people making crafts to have jobs and communities to survive and continue their way of life.”

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