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## The dandiest banker in town

Vernon Hill built a banking empire in America based on friendly service and long opening hours. But can he repeat his winning formula over here?

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Like many driven men, Vernon Hill doesn't do introspection. "Hey," he laughs, midway through our interview, "you're making me tell you things I haven't told anyone before." I'd only asked why any American entrepreneur who sold his last venture for £5.7 billion, and was knee-deep in launching Britain's first new high street bank for 100 years, would also be running 40 Burger Kings in Philadelphia as a sideline.

He looks stumped. Vernon, it's you. "I guess it's because I don't want a simple life, I like it more complicated," he agrees finally.

And that's Hill in a nutshell. His Metro Bank concept launches in London next month, closely modelled on his highly successful Commerce Bank, which he sold in America at the top of the market three years ago.

He pocketed 5% of that £5.7 billion, but also has his fingers in other pies — property development, pet insurance, a golf course, another bank, those burger bars — a trait which might make some of his investors rather anxious.

But relax, he says. At 64, he just can't stop working. "And I love banking," he smiles. "I love the Metro business model."

He certainly likes to do things in a particular way. This morning, his



Vernon Hill, with Duffy the Yorkie. His banks resemble glitzy Las Vegas hotels (Pal Hansen)

team includes Shirley, his wife, who designs his bank branches, and Duffy, his Yorkshire terrier, who pads round looking cute.

Shirley is in a pastel trouser-suit, Duffy is wearing a neat kerchief while Hill is sporting blue blazer and tie, topped with gold collar pin and blond comb-over. "They're back," he laughs, referring to the collar pin.

Hill also has an occasional stutter, an easy good humour and the biggest private residence in New Jersey — a 46,000 sq ft mansion designed by Shirley in homage to Palladio, the Renaissance architectural maestro. It's called Villa Collina, a neat joke on Hill House. Tony Soprano, eat your heart out.

In short, Hill is unlike most retail bankers we've seen in Britain.

And he is happy with that, because his banks are different, and he sees himself as a retailer, not a banker, anyway.

"Did you know," he asks, "that in America, every bank has to publish its deposits by branch? In Britain, they don't even know the deposits in greater London, let alone by branch. It's incomprehensible to me. It's like running a retail business without knowing your sales per store."

He shakes his head. And then he walks me round his first Metro branch, at the corner of High Holborn and Southampton Row, due to open on July 29.