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THE FORBES REINVENTION AND RESILIENCE  
2021

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# Top 50

# Welcome

## to the Forbes Reinvention and Resilience Top 50 Report

Last year, when we published this report for the first time, many companies were in the eye of the storm. They switched their business models overnight and found new ways of working, while protecting their teams, with many helping tackle the public health challenge.

The level of resilience was admirable, and many thought the world would return to normal shortly after the summer.

But, of course, we know that didn't happen. What started as a reaction to the economic crash of last year has become a long-term opportunity to reinvent business models and continue on the path of innovation.

This year's Top 50 tells the story of what happened next.

Over the next 20 pages you will read about companies performing well under pressure, taking advantage of shifting sentiment on the environment and social good, and adapting their business models for the future.

There are stories of moving into different markets, pumping huge amounts of money into online operations, and choosing new ways to expand, including franchising, store openings and industry partnerships. There are also many tales of taking on investment to fund growth.

As the business world begins to move into the next chapter, it's clear that these leaders have made some big decisions. Their companies will emerge from this period looking very different. They will be better prepared for the future and the challenges they will face.

But I also know that many people still have their sleeves rolled up. They have been working hard to shore up their operations and look after their people. To change a business once in two years is a lot, but to change again and again is unprecedented.

I'm proud of what has been achieved and I'd like to congratulate all of the companies in the list this year. But let's keep an eye out for each other and make sure we all emerge stronger as people, too.

**Oliver Burton**

Chief Executive, Forbes



# Who's inside



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Recruitment

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More than just a number.



# LOW CARBON ENERGY

## AWARENESS OF SUSTAINABILITY AND *climate has changed*

### Low Carbon Energy Renewables, Burnley

**The pandemic has shifted public consciousness about the world around us and as a result the road ahead has been transformed.**

Ged Ennis is reflecting on what happened in March 2020. As the pandemic hit UK shores, he remembers sitting in his garden, looking at the sky, which was empty of planes for the first time. Conversations about clean air, the sound of nature, and human impact on the environment have continued ever since.

At the same time, people started approaching him about renewable energy projects. They were looking for ways to save money but, combined with a new-found environmental awareness, the tide started to properly turn. Business enquiries have increased by 145% in the past 18 months and turnover will hit £5m next year.

"I think, through the process of Covid, public awareness of sustainability and climate has changed," he says. "There has also been a genuine shift towards reducing the cost of running businesses, and we're in a good place, as a result."

Ged started Low Carbon Energy in 2008, after spending his career in construction. Since then, he has ridden the wave of an industry that has struggled to find its rhythm. But alongside his wife Maura as finance director, and son Benedict in business development, everyone in the business has worked patiently to bring the plan to life.

The business relies on building long-term partnerships. In 2015 it opened in Ireland, but momentum has only started building this year. It took more than five years to sign the first order with Vital Energi in Blackburn, and more than two years with clothing giant Boohoo, and he's currently working on 1.6MW of solar projects for the NHS, alongside Vital, and a £2m solar project at Boohoo's distribution centre in Burnley.

"We build trust and that's key to partnerships and relationships," he says. "We were approached in 2018 to quote for some work with Boohoo, but it was on a different scope to what we are doing now. Our approach has always been to find the best solution, so projects often turn into collaborations. Sometimes we meet people and it's not the right time, so we keep in touch and then get an enquiry. I'm convinced that approach pays dividends."

Ged believes Low Carbon Energy could install 10MW of renewables projects through next year and into 2023. This would turn a £5m company into a £7m operation and beyond. He's also developed a partnership with Sheffield-based industry specialist Powerstar to help customers manage energy generation using battery storage.

"In 2019 we sat down and developed a programme for the next five years," he says. "We could see that something was going to happen in the industry, so we planned our approach and recruited the right people. I've been in business a long time, and you can write as many plans as you like, but this has to be the best one. From where we started three years ago, to where we are now, we are right on the button."

# Fortune favours

THE BRAVE WHEN IT COMES  
TO INVESTING IN NEW TECH

## Sales Geek

Training and Development, Blackburn

**Moving operations online and investing in new technology and franchising has set the business up for the future.**

The Sales Geek story starts in August 2016. Richard Few was working as a corporate sales director and wondering where his life was going. He was living a version of 'success' that many would applaud from the outside: he earned good money, but he wasn't happy. So, after a conversation with a friend just before his 33rd birthday, he decided to quit and go it alone.

Sales Geek was born at the end of February 2017 and, free to make his own choices, the following three years were certainly action-packed. Richard bought a web domain after someone called him a 'sales geek' and he liked it. Some questioned whether the name was professional enough, but he wasn't in the mood to listen and backed his instinct.

He started by working as a part-time sales director for small businesses, hitting the networking circuit in Blackburn, and building up a bank of clients. He wanted companies to have access to his expertise but appreciated that many couldn't afford it full-time. Along the way he met Jonathan Finch and the two joined forces, alongside Richard's wife Lucy.

The trio went on to build a team of 14 people, providing sales support and sales training, to a range of businesses. Sales Geek was doing well, but at the beginning of March 2020, it was reliant on people being in the room with clients to deliver work. When the pandemic hit, everything changed overnight.

"When the world went into lockdown, people were preserving cash, and weren't allowed to sit in rooms with people," he says. "The impending feeling was: 'we've made it to three years, we've won some awards, and without sounding overdramatic - maybe this is it.' But it actually presented us with an amazing opportunity."

*"We want to get to a point where it becomes a considered career choice. Ten years from now, I would like to walk into a local college or university and meet students that want to get into sales. That's my ambition."*

In the past 18 months, Richard and his team have built an app to provide sales training to a wider audience. One of his values is about being brave, and he felt that spending £200,000 on new technology is definitely brave. There are free and paid-for versions, and the app can also be white-labelled for companies to use themselves.

At the same time, he has invested in developing a new franchise model for the company. People can buy into Your Sales Trainer and Your Sales Director and provide these services to clients of their own. Sales Geek provides back-office support, but Richard also wants franchisees to build their own businesses: to provide long-term opportunities and wealth.

Sales Geek bounced back from losing 75% of its monthly revenue in March 2020, delivering 100% growth in the 2020/21 financial year. There are now 10 franchises alongside the business, including one in France, and it's just about to launch in Australia and the US. Turnover is on course to hit £1.6m this year: digital revenues make up about 20%, with franchise and client revenues at 40%.

"Sales has been a dirty word, which is a shame because it's about creating empathy and solving problems for people," he says.

# THE ANSWER IS YES, WHAT'S THE *question?*



## Phillips Business Solutions Business Services, Blackburn

**A tradition of regularly moving into new markets has paid dividends – and just when the company needed it the most.**

“There is a saying in this company: ‘the answer is yes, what’s the question?’” Cecilia Phillips is describing her business with candour and humour. Phillips like many companies at the beginning of last year, suffered falling orders and months of uncertainty. But she explains that a diverse approach to the markets it serves has helped to keep things on track.

“We supply anything that’s non-core for companies, apart from water, utilities and vehicles,” she says. “It’s very difficult to describe our business because we are diverse and resourceful. If you want it, we can sort it out, and you’ll have it on time.”

This philosophy has taken Phillips from a focus on office interiors to branded products and, of course, anything else required during the lockdowns. A team of designers also supports clients with web design projects and the IT department tracks a growing network of supply chains and logistics. She doesn’t call it a ‘mini-Amazon’ but the comparison could be made, or could it?

“You’re never going to make a lot of money out of office products, traditionally our core business, because of the Amazon-type companies,” she says. “We don’t have to be the cheapest, but we have to be a keen market price, and we have to give service that Amazon can’t give. So, every part of this business is about the customer having a pleasurable purchasing experience. Because the day they don’t have that is the day they need to move on from us.”

Her clients are big names. Many are friends, some are famous, and others are high up in the local business community. She prefers not to mention a lot of them, but former DWF chief executive Andrew Leatherland worked with her on the creation of his Arch.Law website through to launch, and now on maintenance of the platform.

What comes across is her desire to put clients in the middle of her business and allow her appetite for change and really good processes to do the rest. It’s an important lesson for any business trying to diversify.

“You’ve got to be ready to offer what you can deliver,” she says. “Because people only remember when you’ve let them down. Communication has to be 100%. If there is a delay in the supply chain, then tell them before they realise it, because this allows your client to alter their project timings and ensure there is no disruption to their business.”

It’s fair to say that Cecilia was “absolutely devastated” when the pandemic hit last March. Quite quickly, she realised the demise of the stationery industry was going to be fast tracked in favour of the electronic office. Nevertheless, she’s had her head down in the business, alongside a team that has been with her for many years. Some jobs have been lost, but she believes that Phillips will come through this period better and stronger, and it will be different in the future.

“Every morning, when I drive to the building, I look at the car park and think about all those mortgages I’m responsible for,” she says. “My job is to make sure I’ve got a workplace that people want to come to, and are happy in their work, as colleagues working as a team. And with the core value that the customer comes first.”



## HOTEL OWNERS START MAKING GIN TO SURVIVE

# *and thrive*

### **Whitehall Hotel and Distillery** Hospitality and Leisure, Darwen

**Hospitality was one of the worst hit sectors during the Covid pandemic, but these brave owners decided to think very differently.**

Neil and Tracy Bullows have been running the Whitehall Hotel in Darwen since 2003. But when the doors were forced to close in March 2020, they faced some tough decisions: weddings and events were put on hold and most of the 24-strong team were placed on furlough. With their backs against the wall, it would have been easy to hide away until the storm had passed.

“At one stage, we were advised to hibernate as a business,” says Neil. “But the Whitehall is a local institution and, as custodians, we felt we had an obligation do something – to innovate and press the reset button.”

They moved back into the hotel to protect it against vandalism and answer queries from bridal couples and potential guests. Their daughter joined them, after being made redundant by Virgin Atlantic; and they retained a core team of staff to keep things ticking over. At the beginning, the phones rang constantly, with emotional brides and their families agonising over postponed weddings.

But alongside some difficult conversations, Neil and Tracy began to steady the ship, and change things for the future. They converted one of the bedrooms into a bridal pampering area and refurbished other areas of the hotel, as they sat quiet and unused during the early months of the pandemic. The Eat Out to Help Out scheme also helped them to bounce back last summer, but the uncertainty around weddings persisted through the year.

So, that’s when they decided to do something very different. They spoke to family friend Paul Sheerin, who owns Defiance Spirits in Oldham, about setting up a gin distillery. After a few conversations, he began advising them on the project, and they decided to convert an area of the restaurant. It took many months for the licences to come through, but Neil made sure the team was constantly raising awareness of the new project.

They approached Easter with 300 bottles lined up for the launch and all of them sold out just days before. They have since bought more equipment, adding another gin ‘still’ to meet demand, and recently signed a deal to supply Blackburn Rovers Football Club. Neil says he was chatting to a contact at the club one day, who told him they were looking for new suppliers. He was given just 10 days to put a bottle of gin in front of the club’s board.

At the time of writing, the team is nearly back up to full strength, with 17 staff working at the hotel. Cash flow is looking good, Christmas bookings are strong and Neil sounds excited: he believes the team could grow to 30 by the end of the year. Weddings have also started up again, and bookings have become more certain. He acknowledges that guests are more forgiving now that everyone can see a way forward.

“We’ve done this through hard work and perseverance,” he says. “Because we are a family business, we relied on ourselves to come through it and when there was no revenue coming through the door, we just tried to do our best. It gave us the opportunity to think about doing something different. And that’s exactly what we’ve done.”



# More stories from the *Top 50*

## YourZooki

Food Supplements, Preston

Jack Morrison and Marcus Mollinga have secured nearly £3m of funding for their business in the past 18 months, alongside rising sales and new contracts. Their food supplements brand YourZooki was founded in 2017 and has attracted backing from Metro Bank, Investec and Lancashire County Council's Rosebud Fund. The duo reported that online revenues and monthly subscriptions have more than tripled since April 2020. Recent investment from Metro Bank has been used to fuel expansion into the US and Canada in a deal with global nutrition brand GNC. In the UK, YourZooki is now on the shelves at Boots, Holland & Barrett and Selfridges, among others.

## Hotter Shoes

Retail, Skelmersdale

A digital-first strategy and investment in reskilling and training is helping Hotter Shoes recover from a difficult 2020. Having been forced to close 59 of its 82 stores, the UK's biggest shoe manufacturer is forecasting 31% growth for 2021 and has hired 40 staff at its Skelmersdale HQ, where it now employs 330 people. Hotter is focusing on leadership and technical career development among its staff to help drive online sales and instill "a culture which promotes staff engagement and motivates people to be the drivers of business change", said Operations Director Paul Harnetty.

## In The Style

Fashion Retail, Manchester

Online fashion retail has been one of the winners in the past 18 months. Multiple lockdowns have played into the hands of business models designed to be accessed from mobile phones and people's homes. Manchester-based In The Style is just one of a series of high-profile brands to come out of the city in recent years and had a record finish to 2020. Sales in the 13 weeks to the end of December grew by 169% as the company capitalised on the growing loungewear market. The past six months have been tougher, with the industry impacted by supply chain issues, but founder Adam Frisby is confident in the long-term vision. In The Style recently announced a reported £1m deal with Love Island's Liberty Poole to become an ambassador for the brand. It has also launched in Asda, with wholesale growing 200%.

## Moda Furnishings

Home Retail, Manchester

Demand for outdoor furniture has helped to fuel "exceptional revenue growth" at private equity-backed Moda Furnishings. In April the business reported that sales had jumped from £15m in 2019 to more than £24m in the year to October 2020, and it would continue to show the same pattern of growth during 2021. The company, which has been backed by investment firm Endless since 2019, has created 50 jobs in just two years and invested in its supply chains and e-commerce capabilities. Chief Executive Jonny Brierley said the last 12 months had been "incredibly busy and productive", with nearly £500,000 spent on a fleet of new delivery vehicles.

## Music Magpie

Recommerce Retail, Stockport

Steve Oliver's 'recommerce' brand floated on London's AIM earlier this year as the company continues to grow on the back of support for the circular economy. Music Magpie, which resells used phones and electronics in the UK and US, has captured widespread support for companies addressing environmental concerns. In June Music Magpie reported its first set of interim results since floating in April: half-year revenues were up slightly to £72.5m and earnings rose to £6.2m. The company was also behind the Mount Rushmore-style sculpture of G7 leaders' heads in Cornwall, which was made from discarded electronics.



## EFS Global

Logistics, Burnley

Mark Jones has continued to expand his freight forwarding and road haulage business in the face of growing demand. Since the beginning of the pandemic, numerous acquisitions have been announced by EFS Global, which now has around 18 depots across the country. In March, it completed the purchase of AFI UK, which provides freight services from its base at Manchester Airport; and in September, the company said it had bought Thomas Harwood & Son, a road haulage business based in Bolton since 1932. In recent years, EFS has acquired more than 10 companies as part of its growth strategy.

## Fulfilment Crowd

Logistics, Chorley

As online shopping continues to surge in the UK, logistics provider Fulfilment Crowd has received a £7.5m investment from BGF. The company helps e-commerce companies to deliver goods to customers via a network of distribution centres in the UK, Europe and the US. It uses a cloud-based software platform, which supports payments, the tracking of orders and deliveries. The company said it was forecasting 58% growth in revenues this year, with turnover set to hit £12m. Managing Director Lee Thompson said the business was “well positioned to respond to extraordinary levels of demand”.



## Glasgows

Events Management, Leyland

An events company that is unable to stage events has a huge problem. That was where Glasgows found itself in the spring of 2020. Clients cancelled or postponed bookings as the first Covid lockdown came into force and the diary was suddenly empty.

Virtual events were the answer. But how could Glasgows reassure clients that they could host their events virtually, especially when many had had poor experiences attending these themselves, having to use different technologies and often with little support on hand?

So early on in the pandemic, Glasgows made what now appears to be a critical decision: it invested more than £100,000 in developing its own video conferencing platform. In a matter of a few weeks the digital team within the overall staff of 26 had GEM up and running and the company was back on its feet.

GEM allows clients to access the platform easily and interact with speakers, exhibitors and other attendees in a clearly signposted way. Glasgows' virtual events contain multiple stages and main auditorium areas, exhibition stands, networking and breakout areas, delegate networking areas, well-known guest speakers – in fact everything that a traditional event would offer. Refreshments were even provided by way of goody bags sent out before the event.

The company, whose clients include Visit England, The Pensions Regulator, various government departments and the Police Federation of England and Wales, even managed to make a profit in 2020/21.

As Finance Director Bernie Gorrell says: “We always knew we had a good team at Glasgows but the support, resilience and dedication shown over the most challenging period in the company's history has been nothing short of heroic.”

## Heritage Envelopes

Manufacturing, Darwen

Heritage Envelopes is on a three-year mission to become the most “eco-friendly manufacturer in the UK”. So far it has invested in solar panels, machines that run more efficiently and reduced the use of plastics and products that can’t be recycled. Heritage has also developed wild flower gardens and, unexpectedly, five beehives. Last year the company announced plans to invest £4m in three new machines to support supermarkets switching to paper packaging. At the time, Chief Executive Mark Sears said he would recruit 20 people, including six apprentices, and confirmed the company’s market share had “held up well”.

## Tinbox Angel

Accessories Manufacturing, Lancaster

Tinbox Angel has ramped up production and doubled its turnover following investment in new equipment. The company, which has been backed by the Manufacturing Growth Fund, makes handcrafted leather handbags and accessories. Founder Amanda Gallagher set up the company in 2014 after inheriting her late mother’s sewing machine. She has since moved out of her workshop at home to one in the town, and is now making products for the corporate market. The money has been used to invest in a laser cutter, click presser and embosser, which has speeded up production time. “My market was there but I was losing business because people wanted items quicker,” said Amanda.

## Ribble Cycles

Manufacturing and Retail, Preston

It’s been a tough 18 months for the cycling industry, with global supply chains heavily disrupted, but that hasn’t stopped Ribble Cycles from speeding ahead with its plans. The manufacturer and retailer of the Ribble bike brand almost doubled its turnover in 2020 and has since rolled out showrooms across the country. In April it opened a 2,000 sq ft facility in Clitheroe, alongside sites in Birmingham, Nottingham and Bristol. More are planned for the next 18 months, as the company aims to connect with its customers through events, seminars and product evenings.

## Barnfield Construction

Construction and Development, Nelson

Barnfield Construction reported a resilient set of financial results for 2020, in the face of widespread delays and supply chain challenges prompted by the pandemic. The company, which is behind a raft of developments including The Globe in Accrington, Network 65 in Burnley and North Valley Retail Park in Colne, said pre-tax profits dipped slightly, to £5.54m, with turnover dropping from £85.9m to £71.2m. Barnfield said its order book stood at £80m with cash balances to support new development opportunities. It believes many of the issues in the sector will iron themselves out this year.



## Graham & Brown

Wallpaper Manufacturing, Blackburn

Graham & Brown confirmed it will be carbon neutral by the beginning of 2022 as part of wider plans to become ‘net zero’ by the end of the decade. The company, which employs around 500 people across the world, has already reduced its measured carbon by 219 tonnes from 2019 levels, and a recent move to source renewable electricity has reduced emissions by 29%, according to Chief Executive Andrew Graham. There is a “recognition that all businesses and customers need to do more if they are going to tackle climate change”, he said. Graham & Brown said it has been an industry leader in managed forest paper sourcing and using water-based inks for over 25 years.



## Hartley Botanic

Manufacturing, Greenfield

At the base of the Chew Valley in Lancashire, in the town of Greenfield, Hartley Botanic has been making aluminium greenhouses for more than 80 years. The company was founded in 1938 by brothers Vincent and Norman Hartley, who are thought to be the first people to use the material, following original wood and wrought iron designs.

The business has collected a loyal following in the horticultural world, and its products have become a common feature for the RHS, the National Trust, Kew Gardens and the Oxford Botanic Garden. In time, its profile has quietly grown in front of an international audience, too, with structures commissioned by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society.

Hartley's connection with the US has become a driving force behind the company's growth, and in April it was awarded with a Queen's Award for Enterprise in international trade.

Overseas sales have increased by 144% in the past three years and the US has now overtaken Hartley's domestic demand to become the manufacturer's dominant market.

The business continued to trade well during the pandemic lockdowns, as customers spent more time curating and designing outdoor spaces. Speaking to the media earlier this year, Chairman Martin Toogood, said: "The international growth we have experienced in the last three years is transformative. We will be looking at further locations for international expansion but will also seek to consolidate and continue our US success. In the UK we are the leader in the luxury glasshouse sector and the ambition is to extend this status internationally."

The company, which is backed by private equity house Alcuin Capital Partners, is expected to continue on the path of growth and international diversification.

## Clayton Park Bakery

Food Manufacturing, Accrington

It's been a busy 12 months for Clayton Park Bakery, which has been improving its commercial, environmental and social metrics. At the end of September 2020, it announced a partnership with Bolton manufacturer Fazila Foods to "work together, share resources and expand customer reach", starting with a range of Asian street food products. In May the company said it had invested in a fleet of low carbon vans to support growing demand for products, and in June it confirmed that 62,000 products had been donated to local food banks during 2021. Sales and Marketing Manager Paul Bradley said that "demand was even higher" than before the pandemic.

## Gilberts

Ventilation Manufacturing, Blackpool

Public awareness of ventilation in buildings is at an all-time high as a result of the pandemic, and this has put Gilberts in a strong position. The company, which was started in 1960 by Gil Haslam, designs and makes a range of equipment for the heating and ventilation industry. As the need for ventilation became apparent during the pandemic, the company was quick to highlight how its products could help. Technical Director Roy Jones said Gilberts' MFS hybrid mechanical/natural ventilation units already operated within the guidance to keep CO<sub>2</sub> levels below 1,000 parts per million, and the company also developed 'Covid-19 settings' on its standalone products. More recently, Gilberts has said that demand for its products in data centres continues to rise, alongside growth in the digital economy.

## Fagan & Whalley

Road Haulage, Burnley

This sixth-generation family business based in the heart of Lancashire weathered the initial impact of the pandemic and continued to supply goods across the UK, appearing in our 2020 Top 50 as a result. An aftershock of Covid and Brexit has been a sector-wide shortage of Class 1 and 2 HGV drivers. Determined to address this head-on, Fagan & Whalley launched its Future Bound scheme to help car drivers work towards their professional driving qualifications by learning in a small truck with the functionality of a full-size lorry. Already showing early signs of success, this firm focus on talent and training is likely to prove key to driving Fagan & Whalley's long-term success.

## Duo Packaging

Manufacturing, Manchester

Duo reported its strongest ever sales month in December 2020, following £1.85m of spending on new machinery. At the time Operations Director Dale Brimelow said the business was responding to demand for e-commerce mailing bags and packaging for personal protective equipment. But since then the team has continued to invest. In June a further £700,000 was spent on "conversion equipment" and in Duo's printing department. The company is also working closely with customers to further improve packaging sustainability ahead of new government tax plans. From April 2022, a new levy will be applied to companies using plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled content.

## Gray Dawes Travel

Business Travel, Manchester

Gray Dawes Travel has tackled a whole host of challenges in its 150-year history, but business travel post-pandemic is one of the sternest. The Essex-headquartered company, with a regional office in Manchester, has unveiled three new products designed to encourage businesses back into the air. "Podium", produced in collaboration with Loughborough University, targets the health and wellbeing of the business traveller. Working in partnership with Forest Carbon, Gray Dawes has created "Legacy", which offers a choice of projects for investing carbon credits. And "Passkey" helps travellers remain compliant in the post-Covid and post-Brexit world. Safe and sustainable business travel is the goal and Gray Dawes is doing everything it can to bring it about.

# ADDISON

## Addison Project

Engineering Services, Blackpool

The family-owned Lancashire company, with its reputation for innovative engineering solutions, was perfectly positioned to respond to the government's call for emergency ventilators at the start of the Covid pandemic. Addison Precision already held an ISO 13485 accreditation, vouching for the safety and efficacy of its medical devices, so it was able to work closely with Rolls-Royce to deliver components for the national project. Staffing now tops 200 across the group's four divisions - Project, Precision, Engineering and Academy - and Addison Project opened a North East office in November 2020 to extend its operations still further.



## Prevayl

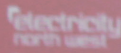
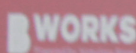
Intelligent Sports Fashion, Manchester

Prevayl is a 'connected clothing' brand using technology to collect health data straight from the human body. In many ways it's the next generation of wearable health technology companies, incorporating sensors in the design of clothing. The company has already secured pre-revenue investment of £7.5m from Stonebridge and it plans to launch to the market later this year. Chief Executive Adam Crofts is joined by Chairman David Newns, who sold tobacco replacement start-ups CN Creative and Nerudia, to British American Tobacco and Imperial Brands, respectively.

# Resilience

## THROUGH DIVERSITY

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**After a very challenging 18 months, Sam Booth, chief executive of pro-manchester, explores how the city's businesses are planning for the future – and why environmental and social change is coming.**

Last year was extremely tough: I wasn't alone working 16-hour days at my laptop, connecting with our members and leaders across the city. At one point, we had several task forces that met weekly to support businesses and provide immediate support and encouragement.

If something needed to be done, or equipment had to be sourced, there were people willing to help. This ranged from sourcing and supplying personal protective equipment, technology companies helping hospitality providers to reach customers, or companies donating time and expertise to support charities.

As we begin to emerge from this very difficult period, I believe that relationships across the city have been strengthened by the crisis. Manchester came together when it needed to most, and many companies showed they could innovate and support each other in tough circumstances.

But alongside this collaboration and innovation, I also believe trends that were emerging before the pandemic, have been accelerated. Business leaders still bear their financial and emotional wounds, of course, but they are actively taking steps to change their companies for the future.

The pandemic has taught us all how connected we are, and the 'responsible business' agenda has come to the fore, as a result.

Last year, companies were forced to reduce their carbon footprint, and awareness of environmental issues began to influence their decision making more heavily. Working at home and reducing travel prompted many

of them to think about their impact. As many explore new ways of working, they will have a close eye on the environment too.

*“The ‘responsible business’ agenda has come to the fore”*

People are also talking to me with strong conviction about their social agendas again. As the jobs market begins to grow, many are turning to recruitment practices that greater reflect the communities they work in. As pro-manchester brings back live events, we also have an opportunity to recruit younger people, from places we haven't before.

At the moment, I believe the equality and diversity agenda is the strongest it's ever been. People are making choices about where they work based on the values and ethics of organisations. The environmental and social credentials of employers are very important in the minds of people starting work. And the benefits of both are clear to see.

There is a fear, of course, that we will all revert to type, because these are still hard problems to solve. But I don't think we are meant to experience the past 18 months and go back to the way things were before. It's almost like the universe is telling us something, right?

I believe we can be stronger when we work together and focus on building inclusive businesses with strong social and environmental agendas. Yes, we'll need courage, clear thinking, and bold decision making. But this approach will help all of us to navigate the road ahead and become more resilient in the future.



## Advocacy Focus

### Charity, Accrington

Advocacy is about championing people's right to health and social care and helping them to make decisions about their lives. With the arrival of the first lockdown in March 2020, a lot of people suddenly had their basic freedoms taken away.

Care homes were closed to visitors, there was new legislation around healthcare and treatment, changes to existing laws around things such as 'do not resuscitate' and sectioning people on mental health wards.

"The changes were mind-blowing," says Justine Hodgkinson, CEO of Advocacy Focus, the Lancashire-based charity that operates hubs in Trafford, Rochdale, Bradford and St Helens. "They affected every service we offered at a time we were physically unable to support people. We had to think on our feet."

So free toolkits were quickly prepared, initiatives such as 'pen-demic pals' for isolated people were introduced, and technology was embraced, helping care home residents and deaf, blind and disabled users engage with services and loved ones. Free 'mental health in the workplace' webinars were also delivered to North West businesses, in partnership with local organisations such as Forbes, Serium IT and Cube HR.

Crucially, many of the changes remain as core parts of Advocacy Focus' service delivery model. "We are definitely stronger, and what's more, due to the success of our training portfolio we now have an additional stream of revenue for our charity," says Justine.

All its hard work was rewarded when Advocacy Focus came second nationally out of 114 organisations in Mind's 2021 Wellbeing Index. A full 100% of staff members said they knew about its wellbeing procedures and the support in place.

## Nybble

### IT Support, Blackburn

Nybble has always seen itself as a charitable organisation as well as a leading IT services provider. The Lancashire firm is patron of the Blackburn Youth Zone, founder of the Saffron Group and sponsor of East Lancashire Hospice. It took this a stage further in 2020/21. Not only did MD Ram Gupta choose not to furlough any staff, the company tried to support as many local clients as possible without seeking to profit from the situation. Nybble loaned equipment so clients could work from home and introduced products such as touch-free digital sanitisers and facial recognition entry systems to cut the spread of Covid-19.

## Voicescape

### SaaS, Salford

Voicescape's innovation has been led by the challenges faced by social housing and local authority sectors, exacerbated by Covid-19, and it has pivoted its business model from commodity to adding value. Voicescape allows its customers to develop better engagement with their own customers. An example of this is South Tyneside Homes (STH) which carries out daily welfare checks on its vulnerable tenants – a significant challenge as the housing association looks after 18,000 council homes. That task became a whole lot easier when STH began using Voicescape's Wellbeing solution. As a result, STH saw a 26% increase in service participation.



## Recycle IT

### IT Recycling and Disposal, Burnley

“Reuse, refurbish, recycle” is the IT company’s motto and, not surprisingly, 2020 was its busiest year to date. As companies and organisations everywhere scrambled to enable their staff and users to work remotely, Recycle IT was able to equip schools and key workers while cutting down on waste and pollution associated with ageing IT. “We have been providing an average of 5,000 laptops a month during the pandemic to our amazing front line workers such as schools, NHS and people working through the pandemic,” said Business Development Manager Carl Greenwood. With a staff of 25, and plans to recruit more, its aim of a circular economy for IT assets is taking shape.

## Elite Group

Technology and Communications, Chorley

The acquisitive communications group worked quickly last year to make sure its systems could support customers moving to remote environments. It has also struck up a series of technology partnerships in the past 18 months to improve service levels and expand its capability as a provider. In July last year IT Director Matt Kingsley-Williams said the firm had started using ServiceNow to help customers manage remote working. And in August the company said it was working with Content Guru’s Storm platform, which is designed to improve customer engagement. Technology companies have played a vital role in assisting firms during the pandemic, and Elite has quietly been adding capability to helping companies manage new ways of working. It remains on the lookout for acquisitions, too.

## Viddyoze

Animation Technology, Preston

Viddyoze has enjoyed strong support since it was launched in 2015 by David Chamberlain, Jamie Garside and Joey Xoto. The company’s technology allows users to create their own video animations and it has attracted thousands of customers around the world. At the start of the pandemic, demand spiked as people switched on to making videos at home, and the company quickly grew from 37 to 57 people. In June the team also announced it was forecasting a further £5m in sales after agreeing to white label its products for agencies. Some staff switched to hybrid working in July, because of concern for their mental health, after a year at home.

## Digital Urban

Digital Modelling, Warrington

A North West start-up is using space technology to develop 3D urban models for towns and cities. Digital Urban, founded by Simon Mabey, is aiming to make the planning process more accessible, efficient and collaborative. It is the latest company to join the European Space Agency’s incubator at Daresbury Laboratory in Cheshire. It is using data and optical imagery generated by ESA’s Sentinel satellite to develop a cloud-based platform, which develops and manages interactive models, alongside local authorities. Companies are increasingly using space technology to develop new products and services and innovate existing models.

## Swift Builder

Online Website Building Platform, Preston

Web design company Swift has decided that building websites can be a vehicle for reducing carbon emissions. In April the team announced that for every website developed on its platform, they would plant trees around the world in partnership with climate action platform Ecologi. At the time of writing, Swift had 2,047 trees “in its forest” with a carbon reduction of 37.9 tonnes, according to Ecologi website. Managing Director Daniel Fisher said: “Our vision is to connect you to your potential customers and make sure you feel good about doing your bit for climate change.”



# Forbes

## Reinvention reinvigorates corporate deals

**It's understandable to think the economic uncertainty of the past year would have quashed any real appetite for corporate deal-making. Pauline Rigby, Head of Corporate at Forbes Solicitors, looks at why this hasn't been the case and the trend of reinvention that's driving mergers and acquisitions (M&As).**

Economic slumps and declining corporate deals often go hand-in-hand. As market confidence evaporates, so too does the general willingness to buy and sell. Buyers want to mitigate investment risk and focus on protecting existing going concerns. Sellers want to avoid plummeting values, something which is more prevalent amongst SMEs who've invested years of hard work and passion in building their businesses.

Not surprisingly, such conditions were rife in the North West during the second quarter of 2020. KPMG reported a strong start for deal activity at the beginning of last year, which declined sharply in the second quarter, as the disruption of Covid hit home.

Deal activity started to pick up towards the end of 2020 – a trend that continued into this year. Experian data shows the volume of North West M&A transactions in the first quarter of 2021 was up by 5.43% on the same period in 2020. The value of these deals was £4.2bn, representing growth of 110%.

### There's more to growth

It seems logical that there's two key reasons driving growth in corporate deals. The first being that the pandemic suppressed M&As and we've since witnessed a backlog of transactions being agreed. The second factor is distress purchases.

Unfortunately, businesses, and especially SMEs, didn't have the liquidity to survive the pandemic and, in some cases, reached something of a tipping point. Some company owners and leaders realised that attempting to borrow their way out of trouble, even with emergency coronavirus loans, isn't a sustainable long-term solution. Instead, they've pursued exit strategies that maximise value and protect jobs.

There is no doubt these two factors have been in play. However, we've also seen a theme of deals adapting to the so-called 'unprecedented times' of Covid, with the pandemic reinventing how SMEs approach M&As. This is creating a new appetite for deal-making.

### Rethinking and reinvention

New deal-making perspectives amongst the region's SMEs have been partly fuelled by the general trend of reflection that coronavirus caused. The threat to people's health and wellbeing has influenced business owners to rethink their priorities.

Many SME founders and senior leaders will have toiled for many years, working long hours and often putting their businesses first. In many cases, they will have had an eye on the future and some form of exit that will reward them with leisure time and disposable income to enjoy themselves. Covid has accelerated these exit ambitions.

The pandemic provided a stark reminder that there's no guarantee about what happens in the future, crystallising the old adage 'life's too short'. Whereas SME owners may have been planning an exit in the next three to five years, we've seen them bring this forward to create opportunity for enjoyment and satisfaction beyond work.

In addition to earlier exits fuelling M&As, we've also seen a growing trend of SMEs taking a more considered view of private equity (PE). Previously, there has been some concern amongst SME owners that there's too much of a clinical focus on the numbers amongst PE partners. This number-crunching doesn't always align with the ethos of family-run businesses or the risk-embracing, creative flair of entrepreneurs.

The widespread challenges of Covid have started to erode this concern. Companies have had to find answers to problems they've not faced before. Seeking these answers has created a realisation that PE houses are home to a wealth of knowledge and experience, and valuable networks. This is promoting new attitudes that PE can create opportunity for investment, which can enhance businesses processes to improve productivity and profitability.

Brexit is further underpinning an appreciation of the value – beyond financials – that PE can present. SMEs can leverage far-reaching PE networks to scale international growth beyond the EU.

The volume and value of deals certainly seems to be heading in the right direction. SMEs rethinking and reinventing their approaches to their business goals could sustain this momentum in the long term.



## Blackburn Youth Zone

Charity, Blackburn

Supporting young people became even more of a challenge during the pandemic but Blackburn Youth Zone somehow found new ways to do just that. BYZ's Internet Youth Club reached more than 300 members and more than 500 engaged with the Youth Zone at Home programme. The most vulnerable young people received one-to-one digital mentoring too. Fund-raising also became more difficult. One innovative solution is 'Paint the Town Orange', BYZ's first corporate challenge. Fifteen local businesses will compete against each other to see who can raise the most money. A Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in June was a fitting reward for all the hard work.

## Inglenook

Leisure and Hospitality, Darwen

In June Inglenook Inns & Taverns completed the acquisition of 20 freehold pubs, and an investment deal to fund further growth. In a show of strength for the hospitality sector, Chief Executive James Waddington said pubs remained at the heart of the community and would play an integral part in the recovery. "Our business is based on family values – hard work, integrity, flexibility and fun, with an eye to the future," he said. "This acquisition is complementary to our core business and will enable us to realise the true value of the neighbourhood pub." He added that Inglenook had also secured a "multimillion-pound" investment from a London-based "strategic investor" to fund further deals.

## St Catherine's Hospice

End-of-life Support Charity, Preston

"It goes without saying that there are challenges ahead," said Lynn Kelly in September 2020 when she took over as Chief Executive of St Catherine's Hospice – "but also exciting opportunities too", she added. The challenges have been formidable: the pandemic meant switching many of the palliative care and support services offered by the charity online, and it cut revenue as charity shops closed and fundraising events were cancelled. But under Lynn's leadership, St Catherine's has responded in truly innovative ways. New trustees with backgrounds in finance have brought commercial expertise; a new position of director of people and organisational development will support colleagues' wellbeing and professional development; while a new e-commerce manager is enhancing online business.

## Crow Wood

Leisure and Hospitality, Burnley

Andrew Brown has been running the Crow Wood hotel and leisure complex with his family for 20 years. But when the pandemic hit the UK hospitality industry, he faced an ongoing struggle to keep the place afloat. Speaking to the media at the beginning of 2021, he said that Crow Wood was losing about £250,000 a month, but confirmed the business had the "full support" of its bankers, and was still able to host Premier League football teams. Andrew has been a vocal campaigner for the sector and an honest voice in the storm. As the sector begins to reopen, there are many recognising his work during the crisis. Crow Wood has been nominated in the 'Employer of the Year' category at the Red Rose Awards.



## Lakes Distillery

Drinks Manufacturing, Cumbria

The past 12 months have been exceptionally tough for the hospitality industry, but the Lakes Distillery has experienced strong demand online, both in the UK and overseas. At the beginning of the pandemic the business secured a £3.5m banking facility from Secure Trust; it said the money would be used to help triple production and support the ageing process for whisky. In September this year the company said it had completed the "major expansion" at its site on the banks of the River Derwent. Whisky Director Dhavall Gandhi said: "In our business, you need to plan ahead. Whisky requires a minimum of three years of maturation, so we need to increase production now to manage the anticipated demand."

## LEYLAND TRUCKS

A PACCAR COMPANY



### Leyland Trucks

Vehicle Manufacturer, Leyland

Leyland Trucks began production of a new 'zero emission' electric truck in May at its plant south of Preston. The new 19-tonne DAF Electric, which is being developed to support the UK logistics industry, is designed to travel 175 miles on one charge. The company says the batteries can be charged from 20 to 80% in one hour using specialist equipment, or in 6.5 hours on the regular electricity network. In July Leyland was also selected to take part in a government initiative encouraging commercial operators to switch to electric vehicles. It is currently working with the Department for Transport, NHS and local authorities to generate usage data from its vehicles: to inform buying decisions and to stimulate demand.

### Create Homes

Construction and Development, Blackpool

It's been a busy year for housebuilder Create Homes, which is growing under the careful stewardship of Chief Executive Paul Mathison. After the initial shock of Covid on the construction industry, Create is one of many smaller housebuilders forging ahead. In June it received planning permission for 50 new homes in Elswick, Fylde, and in August received a £4m loan from Paragon Bank for a 23-home development in Pilling. Andrew Booth has been appointed Managing Director, bringing experience from Taylor Wimpey and Manchester City Council, and Create is investing heavily in digital technology to help customers visualise their new homes.

### Collinson Construction

Construction and Development, Preston

In September 2020 Collinson shuffled the pack in its leadership team, appointing Robert Duxbury as Managing Director, and Sam Collinson as Chairman. The company said it was focused on winning more work as a main contractor and building its modular construction business. Well, the plan seems to have worked. In August this year the company was appointed to the government's £1.6bn framework for modular buildings, which means Collinson can bid directly with clients like the NHS, universities and hospitals. Modular construction, which is a growing feature of the UK market, means buildings are made off site and then constructed in modules. Robert said the division was "going from strength to strength".

### John Turner Construction

Construction and Development, Preston

John Turner has been operating since 1907 and works across a range of projects, including education, health, sports and leisure. It is working on the new Digital Innovation Facility at the University of Liverpool, set to open this year, and completed Valette Square in Salford at the beginning of 2021: the English Cities Fund scheme includes 33 houses, a private communal courtyard and a new avenue connecting Adelphi Street to Timekeepers Square. In February the company was also named as the replacement for construction giant Kier on a £5.7m project at Burnley College. Meanwhile, it has been supporting the armed forces with training and preparation for a career in construction through Project RECCE.

### Peel Land and Property

Construction and Development, Trafford

One of the largest developers and landowners in the region started the pandemic by providing support for key services. It worked with Public Health England to explore the use of its sites for vaccination centres, the NHS used its digital advertising hoardings, and all key workers accessed free parking. Peel provided 100 families with meals every week through its local food bank in Salford, and volunteers were given rent-free space to work. But it has also spent the past year taking care of its own business. In the 12 months to March, Peel said it generated 6.5 million kilowatt hours of electricity, invested £234m in joint ventures and properties, and built 910 homes ready for sale. Chief Executive Steven Underwood said: "I knew that if we worked together, in a supportive and empathetic way, we would get through this."

## Lakeland Verandahs

### Home Retail, Preston

In April decking and fencing manufacturer Lakeland said it was launching a franchise offer to help the business expand across the UK and Ireland. The company said orders had grown by £1m to £4m in the past 12 months, which prompted founder Russell Milburn to consider the company's growth strategy. "The fastest way we can do this is through a franchise model, which gives potential entrepreneurs all the tools and support they need to go from a start-up to a £1.2m business, in just three years," he said. "In total, we're looking for 35 to 40 different operations." At the time four were up and running with seven more close to completion.

## TXM Group

### Recruitment, Wilmslow

In June TXM launched a 'specialist energy division' in Cheshire to provide the renewable energy market with people and project management skills. The new team, which has started life with six people in the UK, is expected to "expand on a global basis", according to Group Managing Director Andrew Midgley. It's being led by Stephen Martin, who has spent his career working in recruitment and sales roles across the manufacturing, automotive and energy markets. The business, which is headquartered in Milton Keynes, has recently opened an office in Wilmslow, where the team will be based.



## Four Recruitment

### Recruitment, Bolton

Claire Sofield remembers sitting in the garden in March last year with her daughter and having a "mini meltdown". The recruitment market had dried up and her business faced a huge amount of uncertainty. How do you sell when no one is buying?

In the following months, alongside her brother and Co-Director Phil, she decided to be as "noisy as possible" in the market. If they were unsure about what lay ahead, then others must be too. They set up webinars for business leaders, but tried not to sell. The events were about building a community, learning and surviving.

During one of the sessions, a speaker explored purpose and values. The team had done some branding, but Claire and Phil began asking themselves if they were consistent, and could be better. 'We Stand Four finding life changing futures' now sits on their website. But it's more than a tagline, she explains.

"The second placement I ever made was on the 21st of January 2008," says Claire. "That person is still in the business and he's now a director and shareholder. In our industry, that is not seen enough. I think every recruiter probably needs to step back and think about the fact we are finding somebody a job and career - and that's a huge part of their life."

Claire has also stepped up into the role of Managing Director. The time had come for one of them to steer the ship, so they sat down and had the conversation. New divisions have been launched - in outsourcing, for example - and they have bolstered marketing and business development talent. Four is also on the lookout to make acquisitions. "Last year wasn't abysmal; we even turned a profit," she says. "But this year we are 77.6% up on where we were in August 2019; and August 2019 was a normal year for us. So that shows quite a lot."



## Spiroflow

Industrial Machine Manufacturing, Clitheroe

The adoption of digital technology in manufacturing is signalling a step change for the industry and the Made Smarter initiative, which has been piloted in the North West, is helping companies to improve their productivity with investment and new ways of working. In February the powder and solids equipment manufacturer Spiroflow said it had developed a remote monitoring system to measure the performance of its machines. At the time Technical Development Manager Craig Hollings said it was the company's "vision to transform the powder handling industry through the adoption of digital technology". The system monitors customers' equipment remotely, predicting when maintenance is needed, reducing travel and increasing the time a machine can be in use.

## Fairport Engineering

Engineering Services, Chorley

Fairport Engineering struck a deal in June to buy part of Japanese multinational Komatsu. Fairport has been in business since 1982, providing engineering services for mines, quarries and power stations. The new company, which will be called SE-TEK, adds tunnelling and conveying capabilities to Fairport's portfolio. In August SE-TEK put plans in place to boost staff numbers and expand. Chief Executive Giles Richell said at the time: "The conveyor operation is well-established and has an international reputation, which provides SE-TEK with a platform to grow our already strong client base in new and existing markets."

## Ten Locks

Drinks Distributor, Irlam

A new sales and marketing company in the UK spirits industry was launched in September 2020. Ten Locks, which is part of the wider Kingsland Drinks group, immediately added new brands to its portfolio, including Nusa Cana rum, Applewood gin and West Cork Irish whiskey. In April the business also named Langley's gin as part of its growing list of products, and in July had recruited three more people. Head of Commercial Becky Davies said that "in less than a year, we have built an incredible portfolio of compelling global brands which are making strides nationwide".

## Birchall Foodservice

Wholesaler, Burnley

In May the fifth-generation family business Birchall Foodservice launched OrderMate, an e-commerce ordering platform, for chefs and caterers. The company said it recognised the many challenges faced by the sector and wanted to help its customers to save time and better manage stock levels. The technology, which is available as an app, also provides access to instant chat, alongside dietary and allergen information on its products. Two months later, in July, Birchall said it had purchased a further seven HGV vans and five smaller vehicles to support the growth of the business.

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