

Businesses prove they have staying power

Some of the North West's best known companies celebrate special years in 2020. In order to thrive after 10, 15, 25 or 50 years they explain how they have evolved, what their challenges have been and what's next. **Simon Keegan** reports

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TAYLOR LYNN CORPORATION

When you can count Prince William among your clients, it's a pretty good indication that you've made it. But the path hasn't always been smooth for the Taylor Lynn Corporation which celebrates 25 years in business this year.

Founder Liz Taylor started in the corporate events industry in 1986 and co-founded Taylor Lynn in 1995.

She says: "This industry has totally changed. It was a fledgling industry then. There were very few people doing it so I was a big fish in a little pond. I had the city to myself."

Since then, it has evolved worldwide as an industry and significantly in the North West. "We offer a relatively exclusive, unique creative service that has not necessarily been price-driven historically, because there weren't a lot of options here."

She says in 1995 when she joined forces with Diane Lynn, they worked from a retail unit on Deansgate and had a corner of the upstairs. They eventually got a site on Chester Road and developed a linen hire business. She says: "We moved into a unit behind where we were based. We bought the property and built the brand."

"I have just launched a media agency. I'm very excited about it. It includes branding, public speaking and motivational speaking. I'm starting a training school, there's loads of things happening in 2020."

It hasn't been an easy few years, says



Liz Taylor



Taylor Swift and Jon Bon Jovi with Prince William

Taylor, but they have survived and thrived: "We work all over the world: New York, Marrakech, Istanbul, but with recessions and an economy that has terrified everybody, a lot of stuff is out to tender. Tenders are the kiss of death because they can never be judged on quality or creativity."

"Recently two very large catering companies went into liquidation in London and we are still here. They were peers."

The landscape of Manchester has changed literally and figuratively since the 1996 IRA bomb with increased investment in the city. Taylor says: "Investing

in facilities, and city centre living, leisure, restaurants and bars has had a very positive effect. In the early '90s there was very little.

"Nowadays we eat and drink out, go to the theatre, the arts. It's much more cultural. And you don't have to be in a specific economic bracket. It's accessible to everybody."

And of course, the change in venues in the city has changed how events are run.

Taylor says: "In 1995 the biggest thing was the Granada Studios tour, and people might have hired it for their Christmas do. Now all the venues are competing with each other."

"If I go to three venues for a gala dinner and they all pitch in with what they can offer, I still get my agency commission and my client is actually getting the most competitive of deals."

Taylor says one of her milestones was organising an event for Prince William. She says: "Working for the Duke of Cambridge was a highlight."

"I did a job for his charity. We were called in three weeks before because they were in a pickle and we did all the theming and the production and the delivery of an event that Taylor Swift and Jon Bon Jovi performed at."

Even after a right royal success story, she isn't sitting back. Taylor says: "I set myself challenges, I set myself goals. I don't sit on my laurels just because I've done a big do."

20 LANDMARK INVESTMENTS

As he founded the ground rent investing company at the age of 19, Mark Hawthorn describes Landmark Investments as "possibly the youngest 20 year old company in the region, perhaps the country."

Looking back to the year 2000, he says: "A lot has changed since I set up Landmark, penniless, in my bedroom. The main mode of communicating information was by fax, which was one of my first investments. It lived next to my bed which was next to my desk in the early days."

Hawthorn says: "In the early 2000s I needed a physical map for each region we were operating in – and we covered a large area. I must confess to often driving to the general area and then memorising the rest of the route from the maps for sale in the petrol station to save a few pounds!"

The business quickly evolved out of his bedroom and into a real office. The majority of contacts were content for young Mark to do all the running around to source an opportunity and then pay him if they acquired.

He says: "The absence of the internet and Rightmove was a blessing as the only way to access opportunities was by getting out, meeting people and forming relationships, something we are still big on today and always will be. That said, we were early adopters of the internet, acquiring hundreds of properties before the rest of the market caught up."

Landmark evolved from property finders to investors and traders themselves, using funds built up from early successes. He says: "While I didn't realise it at the time, as the previous one was when I was around seven years old, we were in a house price boom. This not only allowed for quick accumulation of equity but also



Mike Banton

"I could simply ring the bank, they would fax me a form to sign and hey presto, I had another £250,000 or so to spend."

Mark Hawthorn
[Landmark Investments](#)

easy access to finance which is key for an investment business. I was in my mid-20s and could simply ring the bank, they would fax me a form to sign and hey presto, I had another £250,000 or so to spend. As soon as it was gone I repeated the process again... until late 2007 when things changed very, very quickly."

He managed to ride out the crash which "was actually an investor's dream if you had the nerve and the funding".

Looking to the 2020s he says: "While we still own a large number of properties, our focus shifted to ground rent investments many years ago. We now have a portfolio approaching 20,000 residential and commercial tenants nationwide as well as various other service businesses."

"The portfolio is fast approaching £100m and we are targeted to break through this milestone later in 2020 which is quite the result considering we had absolutely no capital to begin with."

Landmark continues to be big advocates of technology and is starting to implement robotics into its systems to improve the efficiency of operations, which Hawthorn says is a first for the industry.

10 ARTEZ

Artez, founded by managing director Mike Banton, was established to help design, manage and construct projects and in particular bridge the gap between developers, consultants and contractors.

Banton says Artez initially did a mixture of consultancy and contracting work and worked all over the country, "primarily doing the crap projects nobody else wanted to do".

But the approach paid off. Banton says: "Within two years we were turning over £2m from my back bedroom."

By 2013, regional developers were recovering from the financial crash and were looking for contractors to help deliver design-led schemes in and around Manchester.

Banton says: "We had a small team with bags of experience who went on to deliver several award-winning projects such as Bunker for Capital & Centric, Stubbs Mill for Urban Splash and The Alchemist building at Media City UK for Peel. We firmly established ourselves as a boutique main contractor that was passionately regional and consistently delivering outstanding projects in the small to medium category."

Turnover in 2019 was around £20m and Artez already has an order book of £28m for 2020.

Banton says: "We do very little tendering and negotiate over 90 per cent of projects. All of our work is interesting. We don't do bland, boring, white boxes in city centres."

Artez is expanding into other regions with projects in the pipeline in West Yorkshire, the Midlands and on the outskirts of London.

He says: "Establishing core teams in other regions and developing the supply chain have been big challenges. We are always looking for great project managers and quantity surveyors who have a passion for working on cool projects."

One of the challenges is skills. Banton says: "Artez is a management contractor so can scale up relatively quickly, however, there is an industry-wide skill shortage and the boom in development activity means that quality tradesmen are difficult to find."

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BUSINESSWISE SOLUTIONS

Frazer Durriss is managing director of energy procurement and management services provider Businesswise. He says the energy sector has seen some really big changes over the years, saying: "While we've been in the industry we've seen digitisation and technology transform how businesses access the information they need to provide the insight to make smart business decisions."

This evolution has seen the sector move from traditional ways of serving customers to creating end-to-end energy solutions that add value. The current climate has also changed how businesses purchase and use energy.

Durriss says: "The shift to becoming sustainable has had a real impact on businesses, driving many to implement sustainability policies to reduce their energy waste and purchase renewable energy sources."

And even in ten years, Businesswise has itself evolved. Durriss says: "We saw how technology was transforming other industries. A good example is the health and fitness industry where Fitbit created a complete fitness tool, tracking every part of your day by combining wearable technology and an intuitive dashboard."

"We believed we could bring these advantages to our clients and really enhance the customer experience, so we made the decision to create solutions which customers would need in the future. These enable clients to take control of their

their carbon footprint and energy waste."

He says the greatest achievement has been building the team: "Our people are heavily involved in the development and growth of the business and this has created a great work culture. And because we have the right people we're able to shape what we believe to be the best service offering for our clients. We're achieving this by enhancing our solutions by building our own bespoke technology platform that will provide the data and insights needed to provide real value, all supported by our talented people."

45 TOGETHER

Manchester-based specialist finance company Together has undergone a major evolution in its 45-year history. From its first loan, it's now an organisation of more than 750 staff with a loan book of nearly £4bn. The company offers personal and

"We've built a business lending to customers who don't always fit the tight criteria of mainstream lenders."

Pete Ball
Together

bridging and auction finance.

However, back in 1974, things were very different. The company started as a car sales business operating from a textile mill in Ancoats and started providing finance when a vicar asked for a £1,000 loan so he could buy a £2,000 car.

Soon after, the business branched out into providing loans for holidays and other secured loans. The car-selling business gave way to this nascent company, offering loans secured against property.

Marc Goldberg, commercial chief executive at Together, joined 30 years ago.

He said: "One day, someone called and asked whether we did mortgages. He was looking to buy a £35,000 house but only had £15,000. We agreed to provide the loan he needed and, soon after, expanded to provide mortgages." Within six years, the businesses had outgrown its premises and moved to Bracken House in Charles Street, Manchester.

Goldberg says: "We ended up taking over the whole building and then we outgrew that building, and moved to our current headquarters at Cheadle Royal Business Park. In my time, we've expanded from a dozen staff to more than 750."

During its history, Together has weathered three recessions when many other lenders went to the wall.

In its latest results, Together revealed its loan book grew to £3.9bn, lending an average of £176.2m per month over the three-month period. It also announced

Pete Ball



Pete Ball, personal finance CEO at Together, described the company's "common sense" philosophy as key to its success. He said: "We've built a business lending to customers who don't always fit the tight criteria of mainstream lenders."

Meanwhile, the commercial side of the business may be called on to provide a £2million bridging loan for a property developer to seize an opportunity. Together has provided such short-term finance in days, often in much quicker timescales than traditional banks.

Goldberg says: "We focus on the best outcomes for customers and this is pivotal to our success. When a customer doesn't fit the lending criteria of the banks, we can bring in experienced people to work with them to try to find a solution."

Many of Together's lasting relationships have sprung from adversity. Goldberg said: "We've weathered recessions in the past and were one of the last specialist lenders standing after the financial crash.

"We have remained true to the values set down more than 45 years ago. We're about long-term sustainability and growing the company steadily by lending prudently – and we do this very, very well."

50 LGH

The year 2020 promises to be big for Manchester-based global lifting company, LGH, as it celebrates 50 years. And with a new look and logo, launched last year, and bold expansion plans, they are poised for even greater success in the next half century.

Chairman Ian Parkinson says: "We've spent 50 years understanding what works and what doesn't, on the two continents we operate in. With our modernised brand and new logo, we feel we're all set to continue our growth to a new location each year."

Formerly known as Lifting Gear Hire, LGH was founded in Manchester in 1970 by Bill Parkinson who saw a gap in the market for a niche company specialising in the hire of lifting gear. Building on their UK success, the company soon spread overseas, having created centres in Chicago, USA, and Ridderkerk, in the Netherlands, in the early 1990s providing a springboard for growth across North America and Europe.



"Despite the complexities, this was a scheme we were determined to deliver and after years of planning, we've done just that."

Alex Russell
Property Alliance Group

The journey wasn't always smooth. Revenues stalled in the early 2000s, and the UK business was sold to Speedy Hire.

Meanwhile, the US business, which was growing on the back of shutdown work in coal power station maintenance, saw their profits threatened overnight due to government policies to close 'dirty' power stations. Nonetheless, LGH powered through.

In 2016 following successes in Europe and North America, the UK business was re-established, with the acquisition of the rights to use the LGH brand in the UK ten years after the owners, the Parkinson family, sold it. Remarkably, the new business began its second incarnation, not just in the same town it began, but in the same offices and workshop it had previously occupied since 1986.

30 PROPERTY ALLIANCE GROUP

Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2020, Property Alliance Group was founded by David Russell and has grown into one of Manchester's largest and most successful property businesses. The company is

bringing forward schemes with a gross development value (GDV) of £400m and works across all sectors including industrial, commercial, retail, residential and leisure.

Managing director Alex Russell says: "Alliance launched as an industrial developer with a focus on creating well-designed spaces for our tenants. Our approach was to work in partnership with businesses to source and develop units that not only met their specific needs in terms of functionality, but ensured their staff could work in an appealing working environment with high-quality office space and facilities."

Property Alliance found that as tenants grew and evolved, so did the company, leading to acquisitions and lettings at large retail parks and then its first step into the offices sector.

Russell says: "The launch of Pinnacle in King Street was our first major offices development and held the record rent for Manchester for over a decade."

Speaking about challenges along the way, especially the recession, Russell says: "On the development side of the business, we had to make some difficult decisions including stopping the construction of an office building that we felt would no longer be viable.

"This led to us completely overhauling the scheme several years later and launching Axis, an iconic residential development comprising 170 luxury apartments over 28 storeys.

"Despite the complexities on a site spanning just 761 sq m, this was a scheme we were determined to deliver and after years of planning and preparation, we've done just that." ■