

Birmingham Business

FREE • March/April 2021

A man in a dark suit and white shirt is shown in profile, looking towards a futuristic robot. The robot has a metallic, silver body with a large, circular, camera-like eye. They are positioned in front of a blurred city skyline at night, with lights from buildings and streets visible. The overall tone is futuristic and technological.

**AI AND ITS ROLE
IN THE FUTURE**

PLUS: BUDGET REACTION

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Works

Bruntwood Works evolving workspaces

By **MATT WRIGHT**

Head of Commercial Birmingham, Bruntwood Works

For over 12 years, workspace creator Bruntwood Works has been driving forward innovative ideas and concepts to create people driven, design led and socially responsible environments which help businesses thrive.

Since the development of the first commercial space in Birmingham - McLaren, completed in 2008 - Bruntwood Works has crafted workplace settings which prioritise local populations, the local environment and local growth, following its well established process of inward investment.

Bruntwood Works operates out of five regions - Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Cheshire and Birmingham - to create the very best workspaces possible. Aiming to seamlessly facilitate the different needs of its customers, its objective is to create workspaces which enable users to thrive in a more dynamic and supportive environment.

Matt Wright, Head of Commercial in Birmingham for Bruntwood Works, said: "The future of the office - and particularly once we return to city working rather than home working - must become a hybrid space. Somewhere that blends work, retail, leisure and amenity to give a real draw to coming into the office. We understand that a workplace is where a business creates its culture, and that organisational success is pinned on getting the most out of people. You can't do that if the space doesn't align to the business needs.

"To help our customers achieve this, we work in true partnership with them, listening to their requirements and offering them a workspace which is based on their business - the number of employees and how many days of the week the whole team is within the space; how often they use meeting rooms and the amenities. From there, we can introduce them to our interior design team to help shape the space and make it their own - to create a home

away from home.

"Additionally, the British Safety Council has declared Bruntwood Works' spaces as Covid-secure following an independent audit, so as well as the added comfort our offices provide, we can also offer the reassurance that many are looking for when considering a return to safe buildings."

Bruntwood Works recently completed a transformation of the Cornwall Buildings, a period grade II-listed building in the heart of a business district, which has long been an iconic building in the city. Throughout the £1.3m refurbishment, its heritage had to be nurtured while Bruntwood Works focused on injecting new life into its outdated interiors to create the experience of a boutique hotel, a welcome alternative from the corporate workspace offering. Contemporary interiors, modern art and cutting-edge design have been used to deliver a variety of chic, serviced offices, as well as a range of flexible workspaces - including break-out areas, hot desks and a 'lounge' for freelancers, start-ups and mobile workers. A true community asset for businesses and their employees, it is also just seven minutes' walk from New Street and Snow Hill.

Meanwhile, Cornerblock - a formerly disused tower at Cornwall Street - received a £14m investment by Bruntwood Works in 2017, to reinvigorate the space and create a reputable business community. It has since received a Renaissance Award by the Birmingham Civic Society, celebrating it as one of the most successful conversion and refurbishment projects in the city. Across its 110,00 sq ft of space, there are a variety of working areas - including breakout zones, private offices, standing desks, meeting rooms and open plan community spaces - as well as a blend of retail and leisure spaces and Birmingham's largest private roof terrace, all benefitting from 5G connectivity to encourage collaboration, creativity and innovation.

Matt said: "Our buildings are a demonstration of everything we want to bring to Birmingham; when you're inside them, they feel truly special and can help you achieve your ambitions through their flexibility, quality and opportunity for collaborative working. We provide the chance to work in a unique environment and connect with organisations of all aspirations and dreams."



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Works

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Matt is the commercial lead for Birmingham, responsible for delivering Bruntwood Works' mission and values by collaborating with the wider team to create products and spaces which align with the aspirations of the customer and their business.

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By **HENRY CARPENTER**
Editor

Birmingham Business

Welcome

Leaving budget announcements aside for one moment, how are businesses going to help themselves going forwards?

Far too many commercial enterprises are on their knees through no fault of their own, and they will find looking forwards with any optimism a great deal harder than others.

But speaking to many businesses over this past dark year, the level of resilience shown by so many and their refusal to be cowed by the monster of Covid has been extraordinary.

While there has been that inner spirit – often accompanied by a wry gallows humour – there's also a remarkable willingness to innovate and embrace change; they see it as a necessity, often admitting that the pandemic has forced their hand, probably not before time.

Let's take technology, that increasingly pervasive ingredient of life, and one particular strand of it in particular – artificial intelligence.

AI is a term which has spooked many of us, largely through our own ignorance. But as our special report looking at its role in the West Midlands makes clear, it can be a massive force for good. The panellists in the webinar, which we co-hosted with Birmingham Tech, were brimming with excitement at the possibilities the careful and

disciplined use of AI could bring to business and society in general.

The last 12 months has forced even some of the most traditionally run organisations to adapt and adopt new ways of operating, as I found out from talking to the commercial director of Birmingham Museums Trust.

And before the end of the year, we will have visual evidence of Birmingham's status as a forerunner in the hydrogen revolution as it starts to operate part of its bus fleet on the gas. We will keep you posted on this because our city leaders have shown tremendous vision in this regard.

But back to the big news for business – the spring budget. The astronomical borrowing needed to keep the economy afloat meant it was inevitable there would be some punchy tax hikes and heavy-handed fiscal measures. Will they ultimately prove successful? Who will suffer and who will benefit? Was it a fair budget? Industry leaders and commentators from across the region have their say in our lead article.

We didn't need the chancellor to tell us that balancing the books would be a daunting prospect.

However, it's hard to see a future which is entirely bleak if the spirit of innovation, enterprise and adaptability is embraced by the business world as appears to be the case in the West Midlands.

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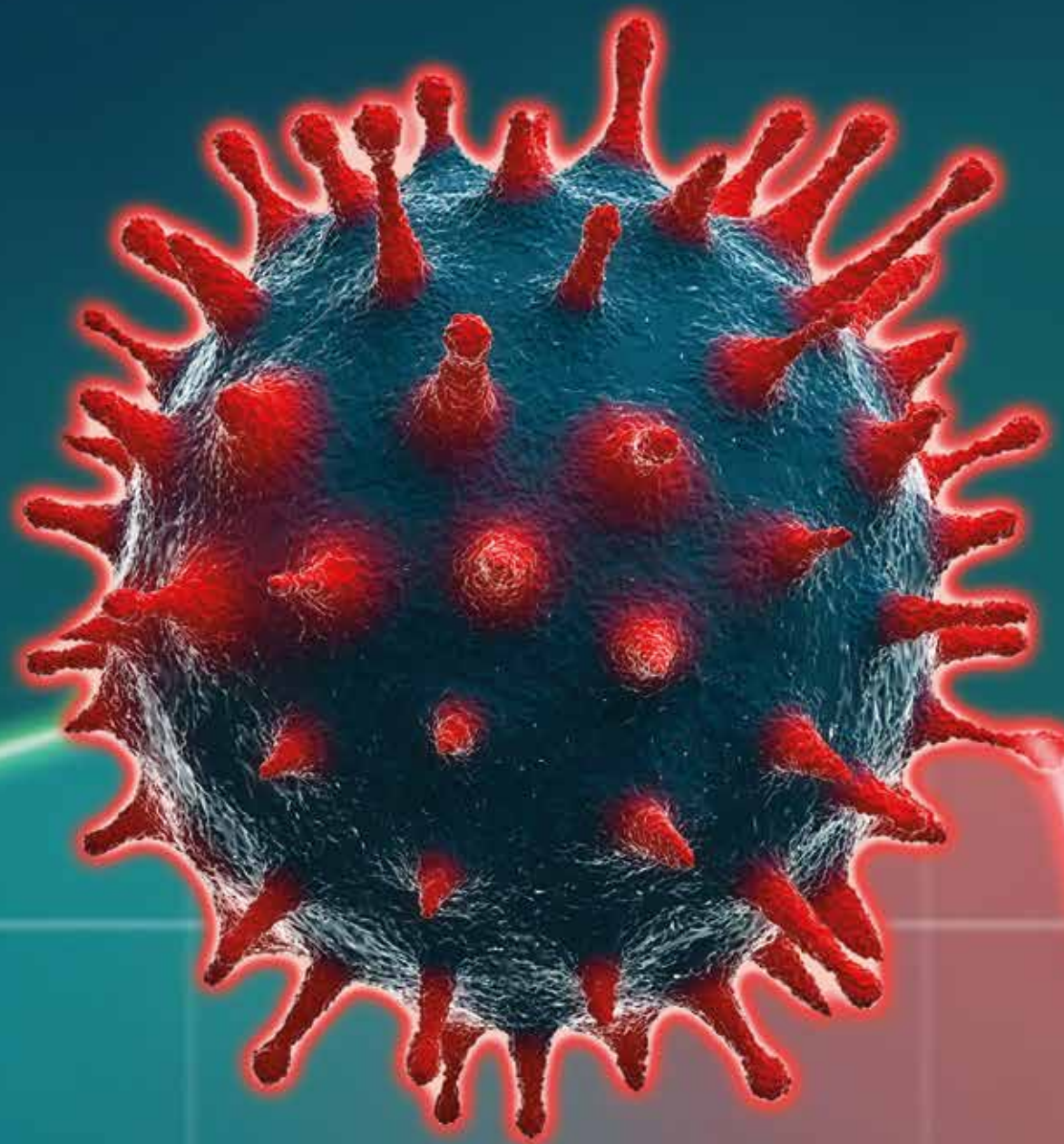


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budget special



Paying for the pandemic

It has been the question on everyone's lips since the meteoric borrowing programme started to keep the economy afloat in the face of Covid: how are we going to pay for it? In one of the most keenly anticipated budgets in years, chancellor Rishi Sunak spelled out his proposed measures. Were they too extreme? Did they go far enough? In this budget special report, business leaders across the region give their reaction.

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budget special

BUDGET SPRING 2021 AT A GLANCE

- Furlough extended until September at 80% salary. Businesses expected to contribute from July.
- Self-employed support continues until September, but fifth and final SEISS payment in May will be linked to degree Covid impact.
- Corporation tax to rise to 25% from April 2023, but firms with profits below £50,000 will continue to be taxed at 19%.
- Doubling apprenticeship payments to £3,000 for all new hires, of any age.
- Stamp duty cut on house sales up to £500,000 extended until the end of June.
- 5% reduced rate of VAT for hardest-hit sectors continues for another six months.
- Eight freeports – special economic zones with simplified and lower tax rules – to be created. The nearest to this region is East Midlands Airport.
- All alcohol duties frozen for a second year, and planned fuel tax hike also cancelled.
- Inheritance tax thresholds, pensions lifetime allowance, and annual exempt amount for capital gains tax will remain at existing levels until 2026.
- No increase in current rates of income tax, national insurance or VAT.
- Basic rate tax threshold to rise to £12,570 next year. Higher rate threshold to move up to £50,270.
- UK borrowing to be 10.3% of GDP next year at £234 billion. Economy still expected to be 3% below pre-Covid levels in five years' time.
- Universal Credit uplift of £20 a week to continue for a further six months.
- Business rates holiday for worst affected sectors extended until June, and new 'restart grants' of up to £18,000 available to hospitality, leisure and fitness industry.
- Limit for contactless card payments to more than double, to £100.
- New Recovery Loans Scheme to be introduced in place of Bounce Back and CBIL schemes
- £300 million additional funding for the Culture Recovery Fund, helping sport and the arts.

Overview

TRUSHA KACHHELA
Midlands tax leader, PwC



The nation tuning in for this much-anticipated budget was looking for safety, security, support, substance, and ultimately reassurance that the Government will do what it can to protect jobs and income.

The emergency help the chancellor announced very much mirrored the cautious approach adopted as part of the roadmap to recovery, with the support being extended for a longer period than might otherwise have been expected. While reaffirming the commitment to the tax triple-lock, he did go further than anticipated in his approach to the public finances.

The decision to increase corporation tax straight up to 25% in 2023 comes as something of a surprise when a staggered approach had appeared to be on the cards. A substantial proportion of that is returned to business in the 130% super deduction for investment which shows the chancellor's support for manufacturing.

Levelling up

The budget saw an announcement on the creation of freeports, more support for skills, a focus on the protection and creation of jobs in a post-pandemic environment and continued support for the high street – all of which will be a big boost to this agenda.

On the face of it he has given with one hand, by super-charging allowances for capital investment, and taken away with the other, by increasing the corporation tax rate. However, it is likely that the chancellor has the levelling-up agenda in mind as the super deduction capital allowances will benefit the Midlands and the

North, whereas the rate rise will be most acutely felt in London and the South East.

It will be important to ensure that much of the good work on progressing the levelling-up agenda is not at risk of being undone by the significant hike in the headline corporation tax rate which, on its own, will do little to encourage inbound investment and could hinder the creation of opportunity.

Tax

The chancellor announced a freeze on a number of key tax allowances until 2026 – the personal allowance at £12,570 and the higher rate band at £50,270, as well as freezing other allowances and limits in the inheritance tax and capital gains tax regimes.

In practice, as wages and asset prices increase with inflation, keeping bands and allowances in the freezer for five years means more people will pay taxes at higher rates. For example, the freezing of the tax-free personal allowance alone could mean a 40% taxpayer paying an additional £400 of tax a year by 2026 with modest wage growth of 2% a year.

The big question is what will happen to wages once the furlough scheme ends.

Higher unemployment over the course of the next few years could create a general slowdown in wage growth – and slowdown in house price inflation – meaning the chancellor might not collect as much tax as he plans through freezing allowances and bands.

Ultimately, the chancellor could eventually have to turn to other areas in the tax system – such as new consumption taxes linked to net-zero ambitions and capital gains tax – to raise the revenue he wants, or consider breaking the manifesto promised tax-rate lock.



“Overall, the chancellor has given a lot away whilst admitting that he will need to recoup the spending in taxes in due course.”



COMMERCE

TERRI HALSTEAD
Tax partner at Haines Watts

Overall, I feel it was a positive budget for business owners with a number of incentives to help them bounce back.

Funding in the form of restart grants and recovery loan schemes providing funding of between £25,000 and £10 million will be welcomed by companies hardest hit by the lockdowns.

The hospitality sector, in particular, will welcome the numerous extensions provided for their businesses in the form of business rates relief and the extension of the reduced VAT rate of 5% until the end of September, and a 12.5% rate until March 31, 2022.

On the corporation tax front, the tax rate will remain unchanged until April 1, 2023, when it will increase to 25%. A small profits rate of 19% will be introduced for companies with profits of less than £50,000 and a new marginal rate introduced for

profits that fall between £50,000 and £250,000.

In addition, a new super deduction of 130% is being made available for companies investing in plant and machinery over the next two years, which would normally qualify for 18% writing-down allowances. A first-year allowance of 50% will be available on most new plant and machinery that would ordinarily only qualify for a 6% special rate writing-down allowance.

What has gone under the radar with many commentators is a temporary extension of carry-back of trading losses from one to three years and covers the tax years 2020–2022. This will generate refunds for many business owners and companies.

Overall, the chancellor has given a lot away whilst admitting that he will need to recoup the spending in taxes in due course. One thing is certain, taxes are set to increase.



REAL ESTATE

MARTIN GUEST
CBRE Birmingham office managing director

After an appallingly turbulent long-haul flight, Rishi Sunak's aim in this budget was to bring the plane into land smoothly. Despite strong economic head and crosswinds, as far as real estate is concerned, the chancellor proved a more than capable pilot, with a further £65 billion of interventions, including welcome extensions to most of the pandemic-busting measures he had already created. These are likely to build homeowner, retailer, developer and investor confidence.

The OBR's economic growth forecast now matches CBRE's, with

an acknowledgment that the worst is now past, with strong growth forecast for the rest of this year. The big issues for real estate in 2021 now relate to the future of the office and retail sectors, tackling climate change and adapting to life outside the EU.

For Birmingham and the West Midlands, further investment in the region's transport network is a significant boost, and alongside existing infrastructure projects will help further enhance the region's attractiveness to occupiers and investors.

RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY



BEN DAVIDSON
Managing director of Davidson Estates

The chancellor has addressed two main concerns that we feel were holding back the current property market.

Although the market has been remarkably resilient during the coronavirus pandemic, there were significant concerns that the end of the current stamp duty holiday would cause thousands of sales to collapse due to lack of time to complete.

This was due to finish at the end of March, but now this has been extended to June 30, with no stamp duty to be paid on the first £500,000 of a property purchase.

The decision to continue this relief – reduced to the first £250,000 of a purchase until the end of September – is most welcome. It then reduces to its pre-pandemic level of £125,000 from the start of October.

This gives buyers and sellers, and their agents, much more time to plan and understand the mechanics and timescales of property transactions. With this kind of notice, everyone will understand what needs to be achieved and by which date.

The government guarantee means that first-time buyers can access a wider choice of mortgages that require a deposit of just 5% of the loan – available on properties up to £600,000 – and this would be another welcome boost to the market.

This two-pronged assistance will help first-time buyers and enable many more to take their first steps onto the property ladder.

We expect to see many more properties in Birmingham coming to the market, and we are particularly hopeful this will encourage many developers building in the city to complete current projects this spring and summer, and bring forward further developments in the pipeline.

“The super deduction for the next two years is a massive boost to investment in the UK, meaning businesses can claim 130% of their investment back against VAT.”



MANUFACTURING

GERALDINE BOLTON

Chief executive of the Confederation of British Metalforming

Our members wanted to avoid ‘cliff edges’ and increases in taxes following the events of the past year.

So it is pleasing that the furlough scheme has been extended until September – with the Government still paying 80% of salary – although employers will need to provide 10% and 20% from July and August respectively.

This is the Government’s most successful scheme and its impact cannot be underestimated. Not only has it protected jobs and retained skills, but given millions of people hope that they can get through this pandemic – even more so now there is a potential end in sight. Furlough has also provided our members with the flexibility to bring staff in as workload requires and an ability to plan cashflow to some extent going forward.

The super deduction for the next two years is a massive boost to investment in the UK, meaning businesses can claim 130% of their investment back against VAT. We needed a boost and we got it. I believe this will give companies a huge incentive to spend. It is exactly what we needed coming out of the

pandemic and to drive the growth of the UK economy in the wake of Brexit.

The chancellor has announced that the bonus for hiring all apprentices will be doubled to £3,000 and this will definitely be a good thing for manufacturing. However, more targeted funding to tackle the bigger skills picture would have been welcome.

Most of our members would have expected a rise in corporation tax, but the increase being delayed until April 2023 will be seen as a positive. With the majority of our members classed as SMEs, the fact it will not impact companies with profits of £50,000 or less with a tapering up to those who have profits of £250,000, is also beneficial.

It’s a bit too early to assess the impact of the eight freeports mentioned around the UK, especially as there was no timing for their introduction, but I’m sure they will be welcomed in the regions that will host them.

Another positive was that all companies can carry over short-term losses to the next financial year, so these can be offset against future corporation tax bills.



HOSPITALITY



TONY ELVIN

General manager, Touchwood Solihull

It does appear that the Government has started to listen and initial feedback on the latest budget is, overall, positive.

The calls for much-needed extensions to current schemes and additional grants have been heeded, but we have lost a significant number of viable businesses already over the past 12 months and this remains a perilous time for those still hanging on.

Firstly, the freeze on alcohol duty is welcome and essential. Costs on imported alcohol have already increased as a result of Brexit; to add further duty would be incredibly destructive. Long term though we need to see a reduction in duty for such businesses, maybe offset by an increase in off-sales duty within supermarkets.

The new grants are welcome but do not go far enough. With up to £18,000 available, the chancellor’s stated assumption of average rents sitting between £14,000 to £20,000 per annum is naive. Average rents are actually double this and far higher still in city centres and shopping centres. More could be needed this year, especially with the time bomb of the rent moratorium coming to an end.

It is fantastic to see business rates waived for the recovery period and reduced for the rest of the year, along with the 5% VAT rate for the rest of the year, but there is still a need for a significant overhaul of the business rates system. The recruitment bonus and investment relief are very welcome.

Finally, the extension of furlough until September is vital in preventing further widespread redundancies.

Commentators are questioning why furlough has been extended so far when the exit plan says life should be a lot more ‘normal’ by June 21. They’re asking if the Government actually doubts the viability of its own plan. This is a red herring. The extension of the furlough scheme, especially the evolved flexible scheme we now have in place, makes it viable for hospitality businesses to steadily reopen, initially trading on the most profitable days of the week and building back to a fully trading business as debts start to clear and businesses ease back into profitability.



CONSTRUCTION

DAVID ELLIS

Regional director for BAM Construction in the Midlands

We all knew this would be a difficult budget for the chancellor to balance. All firms in our sector will be mindful of an increase in corporation tax from 2023.

Our industry is also wrestling with IR35 and domestic VAT reverse charge implementation. These changes represent an additional burden at a point when energy needs to be focused on recovery.

But the budget also has a number of measures that might prove positive for our industry.

For a business like BAM, with a commitment to be net zero by 2030, it is pleasing to hear the chancellor speaking about the importance of the green economy.

His new UK Infrastructure Bank will be tasked with investing in projects to tackle climate change. Welcome news, although I would have liked to hear more about specific stimulus for more sustainable and net-zero carbon construction. Those are at the heart of how we now design and create buildings.

The chancellor focused on the construction sector when illustrating his super deduction tax relief measure, aimed at driving innovation and investment in the digital economy. Construction is undergoing a digital revolution – at BAM our world is



virtual as much as physical – so this is something I can see us and hundreds of our supply chain companies looking at closely. Could it unlock more of our innovative potential?

Consumer spending could be boosted by this budget and details are emerging of £155 million new town deals for the West Midlands. I’d like to hear more about specific measures to increase construction demand, in both the public and

private sectors, and encourage investment in the Midlands.

All businesses must understand that the chancellor is introducing measures which protect jobs, individual livelihoods and support the vaccination programme. The virus needs to be beaten. Our industry has been hard hit, but we have a significant role to play in driving Britain’s recovery and future employment.



INDIVIDUALS

VICTORIA WYATT-WRIGHT

Tax director at the Birmingham office of Smith & Williamson

Following weeks of speculation about the prospect of a hike in the currently (low) capital gains tax rate of 20%, investors will be heaving a collective sigh of relief after the budget, with no changes announced to rates of CGT.

For many this has been met with mild surprise, and for a number of reasons. The main reason was that the Office of Tax Simplification was asked to conduct a review of the current CGT regime last year. When it presented its recommendations in November 2020, proposed changes included closely aligning tax rates on income and capital gains, slashing the annual exempt amount from £12,300 down to between £2,000 and £5,000, and modifying the successor to Entrepreneurs’ Relief,

the new Business Asset Disposal Relief, with a new retirement-focused relief.

I suspect, however, that no news on the CGT front in this budget is not necessarily all good news. Instead of seeing a piecemeal alteration of the currently favourable CGT system for individuals, I fear that more wholesale and sweeping changes – incorporating a number of the OTS’s recommendations – could be introduced in the very near future.

With regards to income tax, the chancellor’s approach of effectively maintaining the status quo is particularly relevant to individuals, which is good news, surely?

While it is undoubtedly better than an outright increase to income tax rates, freezing the personal

allowance and higher rate income tax threshold from 2021/22 until 2025/26 will result in a higher tax ‘take’ on income.

This is because with the personal allowance being frozen, any inflationary rise in income will be exposed to income tax. This, coupled with freezing the basic rate threshold of £37,700 for the next four tax years, suggests an increasing percentage of the population will find themselves ‘tipped’ into the 40% tax bracket.

So, a double whammy for the average earner, pensioner and investor. No wonder it is called a ‘stealth tax’ approach as people will unwittingly be caught out with more tax to pay by the effect of inflation on their income and savings.



LAW PRACTICE REVEALS SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT

Birmingham law firm Anthony Collins Solicitors has revealed the scale of its social impact during 2020.

The firm released the findings as part of its annual social impact report which examines its work across various sectors including housing, local government, charities, private individuals and social care.

The key findings include: £1.4

billion raised from funding projects to build up to 7,000 new affordable homes; £28 million in compensation recovered for private individuals in clinical negligence cases; more than £1.9 million worth of publicly funded work undertaken for those financially unable to access legal representation; 384 vulnerable children supported to find better

living arrangements; 63 new charities registered; and 50 schools supported through the academy conversion process.

As well as quantifying the social impact of its work, the report also details some of the support the firm has provided to its clients.

This includes acting as pro bono advisers to the country's leading representative body for independent care services, Care England, during the Covid-19 pandemic – guiding the organisation on the legal implications of its response and managing the risks to care providers, staff and services users.

The report also charts the firm's work with the West Midlands Combined Authority's homelessness

12 news Diagnostics firm secures funding

Birmingham-based Linear Diagnostics has secured £800,000 from the Midlands Engine Investment Fund and other investors.

The finance will facilitate the ongoing development of the company's high-speed platform technology for point-of-care diagnostics.

The funding package includes backing from MEIF Equity Finance, managed by venture capital firm Midven, the University of Birmingham and the UKI2S Fund. The UK Future Fund matched the investment from the initial investors.

Linear Diagnostics was founded in 2011 by Professor Tim Dafforn and Dr Matt Hicks as a spin-out from the University of Birmingham's School of Biosciences. Its diagnostics technology is based on research in linear dichroism, patented by University of Birmingham Enterprise, which uses polarised light to detect the presence of molecules in solutions.

Initially focusing on sexually transmitted infections, Linear Diagnostics is developing a rapid test for chlamydia and gonorrhoea. The test will be capable of detecting multiple infections in the same sample in around 15 minutes by labelling each infection indicator with a different coloured dye.

Brendan Farrell, chairman and CEO of Linear Diagnostics, said: "We are very grateful to our existing investors for their continued support and to the UK Future Fund for providing matched funding.

"The funds received will enable Linear Diagnostics to develop a prototype single use cartridge and reader for our duplex test for chlamydia and gonorrhoea."

Roger Wood, director at Midven, said the requirement for rapid and accurate point-of-care diagnostics had been brought into sharp focus by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"There are many other disease areas that could equally benefit from this approach and Linear Diagnostics is making excellent progress with the development of its testing platform," he said.

"This funding round will enable the company to continue its good work at pace."



Peter Hubbard, senior partner at Anthony Collins Solicitors

taskforce where it helped to establish a new legal approach for reducing evictions and offering vulnerable families across the region increased housing security.

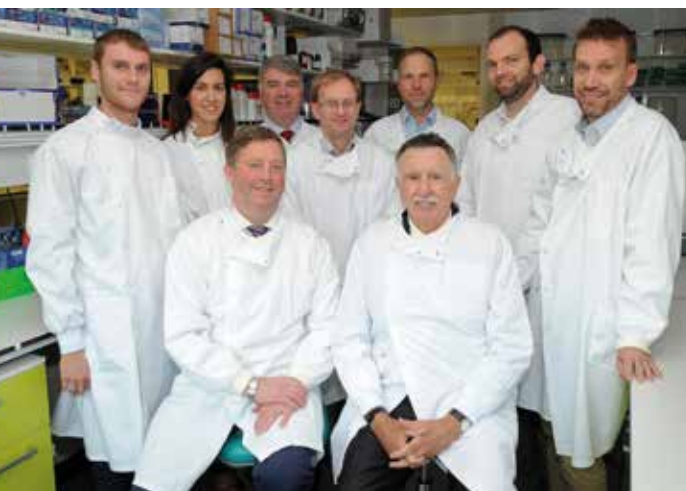
ACS senior partner Peter Hubbard said: "Publishing a social impact report enables us to show how our legal services contribute to improving lives, communities and society.

"This is our third year of publishing the report. It covers a period which has been extremely difficult, with the Covid-19 pandemic causing economic and social disruption.

"Despite this, our sector teams have remained resolute in helping our clients to pursue their different missions, whether that be continuing to offer important care services or building more affordable housing."

The purpose-led law firm is also gearing up to launch a research campaign investigating ethical business practice in the UK.

Mr Hubbard added: "We urge other legal firms and wider businesses to recognise the power of working with a clear purpose, which is a significant driver for commercial success, increasing growth and value, at the same time as delivering life-changing social impact."



The team at Linear Diagnostics with CEO Brendan Farrell seated right

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Breaking the mould

Steve Walker is one of Birmingham's most engaging and prominent financiers, with many a start-up indebted to the helping hand given by the lending organisation he has overseen for the best part of 25 years.
JON GRIFFIN reports

Steve Walker does not fit the stereotype, has an above-average degree of insight and self-awareness and is, some may say, 'weird'.

Not my words, but those of one Ian Mycroft, former director of a training company called Organisation and People Development, way back in January 1996.

Mr Mycroft added that Walker was "far from being a typical bank manager" and "well outside of the mainstream for (your) managerial level and professional group", although concluding "in my view, the advantages clearly outweigh the risks".

It is more than 25 years since those words were written – just before Walker took a life-changing decision to quit the banking sector after a marathon 27-year stint with Barclays – to help launch the-then Aston Reinvestment Trust, in tandem with no less a figure than the late Sir Adrian Cadbury.

In the quarter of a century since, Walker has become a mainstay of the Birmingham business scene, the public face of a mutual-style lender which has helped around 1,500 West Midlands businesses get off the ground or grow – from restaurants, florists and fish-and-chip shops to innovative engineering and tech companies – lending more than £30 million, whilst creating and supporting more than 8,000 jobs.

ART (since restyled ART Business Loans) initially came to the assistance

of start-ups in deprived inner-city areas which had been abandoned by the banks and has also provided a crucial financial lifeline to help swathes of small businesses fulfil their dreams of success.

It's a proud track record for this 'weird' former bank manager. Or, reflecting again on Mr Mycroft's assessments from 1996, the advantages have clearly outweighed the risks both for lender and customers. Just ask Birmingham celebrity chef Glynn Purnell, one of Walker's many examples of fledgling business owners whose visions have been vindicated thanks to ART.

Today Walker, now aged 70 but still going strong as the head of one of the UK's longest-lasting social enterprises, can reflect on a near quarter century of helping so many firms onto that vital first rung of the ladder. And whilst there have been some failures along the way – Walker estimates the bad debt figure at around 15% – they are easily outweighed by the successes.

Walker can afford a wry smile today, 25 years on from Mr Mycroft's assessment of his personal qualities. "Where he says I am weird and do not fit the bank manager's role, that came about because of the high degree of risk I was prepared to take – I was prepared to take calculated risks."

You could, of course, argue that Walker's biggest calculated risk by far was quitting the banking sector at the age of 46 with a wife and three-year-old daughter to support for an as-yet unborn vision of a lending organisation designed to meet the varied needs of potential start-ups in inner-city Birmingham.

Up to that point he had only known banking as a career, after leaving King Edward VI Camp Hill School in Kings Heath with one A Level; he had originally harboured ambitions to be a sports journalist.

Walker, an only child of working-class parents from Acocks Green – his father George had been a chauffeur, security guard and gardener while mother Gwen worked at a newsagents – had been a talented young footballer, good enough to play for the Birmingham Schools 10 to 11 year-olds team alongside future Blues star Bob Latchford and Keith Leonard, later of Aston Villa.

He was also a handy batsman and off spinner on the cricket field, playing for Warwickshire Young Amateurs and later a number of club sides. But he never pursued his dream of journalism and found himself in the banking world in a string of roles over a 27-year span with Barclays, from early spells

as junior cashier at Solihull and at a "sleepy little branch with very wealthy customers" at Knowle, before eventually graduating to more senior roles at branches in Stratford, Colmore Row, Gooch Street in Birmingham, Coventry, Snow Hill in Wolverhampton and finally Leamington.

He had learnt about banking and the business world as he went along, gaining invaluable insights into the ever-changing world of commerce which would ultimately stand Walker in good stead in his subsequent incarnation as the man at the helm of ART.

Periods of instructing on bank internal courses were also to prove valuable as he has since lectured, while at ART, at Birmingham, Aston and Birmingham City universities.

"My first manager's job was at Gooch Street. I was number three of four business managers and it was a fabulous branch – I inherited 50 Bengali-owned Indian restaurants, plus anorak and dress manufacturers and corner shops. It was the start of the Balti Belt in Balsall Heath and Moseley.

"I learnt a lot about what made some of the Asian businesses tick. It was usually purely and simply hard graft – but some of them borrowed too much money. I got involved in repossessions, having to say to some people "if you can't repay, we will have to take the property".

"The best time I had in the bank was at Snow Hill, Wolverhampton, without any shadow of a doubt – we used to play an hour and a half of snooker at lunchtime. I guess that would be called networking now."

But lunchtime snooker sessions were soon to become as extinct as traditional old-style bank managers immortalised for the public by Dad's Army's unforgettable Captain Mainwaring, as a new breed of target-driven bankers emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.

"My job disappeared and they tried to push me into personal high net worth work rather than business. I was 46, I thought sod this. I just didn't want to do it, I was more interested in business.

"You were in a selling role; you were going to be in a position where you were selling stuff you had no belief in. My expertise was in business finance, not personal finance. Business decisions even then were starting to be driven by computer rather than by you as an individual.

"It was almost like playing a game, but you were playing a game with people's money and lives. It was basically bank staff being told what to do rather than using their own

experience. I told them that if there was not a suitable role for me, I didn't want it."

Walker had reached a crossroads in his career and his life. But salvation was at hand in the shape of a new social enterprise venture called Aston Reinvestment Trust, overseen by a voluntary board chaired by the renowned industrialist Sir Adrian Cadbury.

"At the start there were just the two of us. I was on secondment, paid by the bank for two years, and the other was a student. We lent less than £200,000 in the first year. We are now lending more than £3 million a year, from £10,000 to £150,000 across the whole of the West Midlands. We still target under-served areas and communities and support jobs, but to mostly existing businesses.

"I came along in 1996. I was on £47,000 a year at the bank and they offered me £40,000. I had never heard of ART or social enterprises. It



Steve Walker with Sir Adrian Cadbury



With chef Glynn Purnell

was a fabulous deal for me. Sir Adrian and I went out to the likes of IMI, Jaguar, Severn Trent, Wesleyan and all the major banks and individuals – we were asking them to put money in with no promise of a financial return. They were buying shares in a mutual organisation which promised to support the local economy.

“Where this has taken me is unbelievable. I have served on a Government taskforce and visited key organisations in the US and Europe as well as supporting local initiatives and spreading our experience to visitors from across the world.

“I had gone from a target-driven environment to something totally different. It was a crossover between philanthropy and social investment. There was a board of directors and they were all voluntary – and they still are today.

“Sir Adrian was very, very measured. He was a lovely man; he wrote the definitive book on corporate governance. I got on very well with him, and so did the team. His passion was people, his greatest skill was that he knew where everybody’s individual expertise lay.

“He was passionate about it and we went forward. Without him, we would not be where we are now.”

Since those early days of Sir Adrian’s inspiring leadership, ART has enjoyed exponential growth, with Walker at the tiller now for the best part of a quarter of a century.

“We only lend to businesses who have been turned down by the banks. Say they need £250,000 from the bank and they are left £50,000 short, they will come to us for the shortfall. We assess the viability and the people.”



Steve Walker, back row, fourth from right, with the Warwickshire Young Amateurs in 1969

More than 50 years at the sharp end of corporate finance and amongst the cut and thrust of the business world has provided Walker with a ringside seat to the ups and downs of economic cycles, including the turmoil of Covid-19.

“Most people who do not look for help fail. The failure rate can be as high as 60% from start-up in three years. There are not many who will create large numbers of jobs and support growth. Most small businesses spend so much time working on their business they do not look up and see what is around to help them run their business better.

“Last year, up until the end of March 2020, we lent £3.6 million to more than 70 businesses, which was a record, and we were on track to

lend the same amount this year. So far, we have lent just under £2 million.

“Our bad debt rates were reducing and then the pandemic came along.

“Over the years, we can count on the fingers of one hand those businesses who have not put their whole efforts in to make the business succeed and have then done the dirty on us. There are a lot more who have tried their hardest, and not succeeded.”

But, as Walker readily concedes, Covid-19 has hit businesses with a multitude of unforeseeable circumstances. “We have been through the credit crunch, recessions and the bank crisis, but we have never been through anything like this.

“We have a portfolio of 250



A delegation from China visiting ART Business Loans

businesses with loans outstanding of more than £6.5 million. We do not know how many of those businesses are going to survive. Some are doing very well but around 10% of them are shut.

“If banks were risk averse following the credit crunch, they are going to be even more risk averse coming out of the pandemic. High Street banks will reduce their appetite to lend massively, personal banking will all be on phones, without branches.

“I do not think that the banks will serve small businesses well post the pandemic, and the demand for our services as an alternative source of finance will go up. There will not be many branches at all, and they might call them money shops, with the occasional person to talk to, to

sell you something. I believe we can benefit from that.”

Whilst the irrepressible Walker remains optimistic about the future of ART and his five-strong team based at the Innovation Birmingham campus in Aston, he recognises considerable challenges lie ahead, with or without Covid.

“We have been, and continue to be, innovative in the world of finance.”

He believes demand will increase but ART needs more capital to lend. “We have got the resources at this moment but if we want to continue to lend at the same level or more, we will need additional capital for next year and beyond. So, we have got to look at ways in which we can raise money.

“I would hope that, as in the United States, the banks can find a way to provide more wholesale funds to the responsible finance sector, of which ART is a member.”

ART’s immediate prospects notwithstanding, Walker, who received an Honorary Doctorate from Birmingham University in 2007 in recognition of his efforts, looks set to remain its public face and driving force for some time yet.

“Whilst I am still enjoying it – and I have got my health – I would like to carry on. I have still got a mortgage, which tends to concentrate the mind.”

It would seem that the former bank manager who failed to fit the standard mould back in the 1990s is still challenging the status quo all these years later.



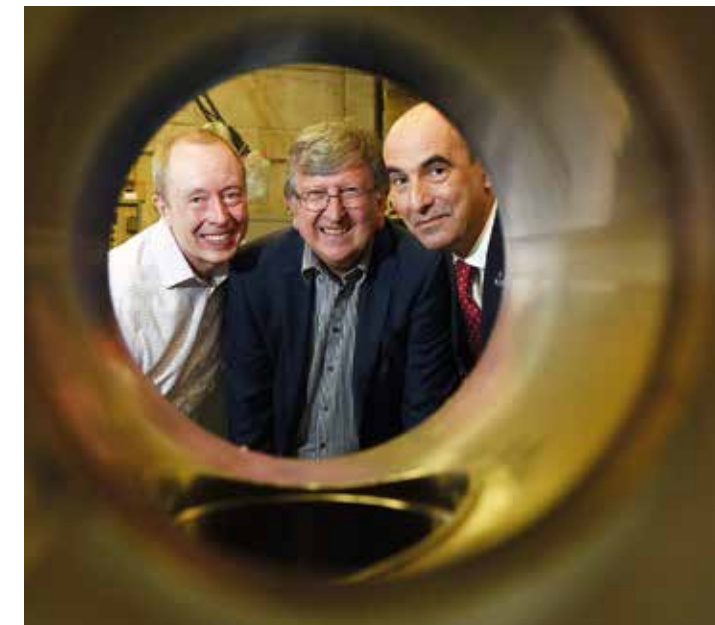
Walker with Brian Donnelly from Synapse



Birmingham schools final at Edgbaston, 1969. Walker, middle, front row, captained the team



Second from right on the front row, Walker was the instructor on a Barclays Bank senior securities course in 1977



From left, John Key, Steve Walker and Julian Morgan from KPM Marine

After the deal – what now?

Artorius Wealth's STEVE BRANDRETH provides insight into key considerations after extracting wealth from a business.

Building a business represents years of dedication, if not a lifetime's work, and so selling can be the most significant change a person will experience. Advising clients through this phase is a crucial part of what we do.

Extracting maximum value from the business is a huge factor, of course, yet achieving success in a more rounded sense brings a host of financial and non-financial considerations to the fore.

Emotional and highly sensitive issues often arise, like how wealth should be used for the wider family (if at all), or managing relationships with stakeholders in a sale. The most loaded, naturally, is what a vendor plans to do next.

For some, retirement is the well-earned prize. Others already have an eye on the next venture, or want to act as an investor accelerating others along entrepreneurial paths. Experience is often put to good use as a NED, or talents and capital are directed to a philanthropic cause, perhaps social enterprise or alongside a charity. Working with clients to unpick choices whilst leveraging networks to further those plans are core to the wraparound service we offer.

A business exit is more of a beginning than an end, with many options to consider. Naturally, everything depends on the specific circumstances, although there are common areas that many should consider.

Settling on (and into) the 'new you'

Options may be bewilderingly broad, or might be more constrained than first imagined if, for instance, there is a requirement to stay with the business for a period. While there shouldn't be a rush into the next move, experience shows that few dynamic business people want to waste time, having a thirst to explore options. From planning the perfect retirement through to upskilling for something new, we help prepare a strategy that's ready to go at the right time.



Transitioning to being a wealth holder

Holding wealth in a trading business is very different to holding it personally, and not just from a taxation point of view. With salary and/or dividend no longer regularly hitting the bank account, cashflow modelling becomes paramount – as does the question of how to secure an income from wealth in a low-yield world. It is vital to search the market for good value.

Wealth preservation and legacy

A carefully calibrated wealth plan is vital to protect – and grow – the value created from years of hard work. Choosing the right structure

to hold wealth makes significant difference from a tax perspective. This will also assist with passing wealth down the generations or to act as a philanthropist more effectively, if that is the choice.

Enjoying wealth, with sensible guardrails

Adequate liquidity should be built into the strategy, ensuring enjoyment of wealth or the pursuit of new ventures opportunistically. Although a considered wealth plan and structuring is crucial, it's equally important to include flexibility. Similarly, we understand the great joy in helping children financially, but also the danger in giving away too much (or too soon) and the fear of wealth falling outside of the family.

Artorius

Steve Brandreth FCSI, is Senior Client Partner, Artorius and heads the Midlands practice. He has over 20 years' experience advising private clients.

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Artorius Wealth Management Limited provides wealth planning and investment management services and is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. The above information seeks to give readers ideas and matters to consider; it is not advice. Always seek professional advice when considering you and your family's needs and requirements.



Taking the green route

Birmingham is one of the UK's first cities to commit to running buses on hydrogen as part of its zero-carbon energy programme. The first buses are due to arrive this spring and while it will be a few months before they are in service, the all-important fuelling depot has been installed in Tyseley and is ready for action. In the first of a two-part series looking at this potentially ground-breaking project, HENRY CARPENTER finds out more from some of its key players.

The concept of introducing hydrogen buses to the city's fleet has been slowly materialising behind the scenes for five years but the vision, financial investment and hard work should come to full fruition before the end of the year when the vehicles are rolled out.

All part of Birmingham City Council's commitment to de-carbonising the streets, the introduction of the hydrogen-fuelled double decker buses will demonstrate the city is practising what it preaches in terms of embracing cleaner technology.

The buses are on schedule to arrive in April, though it is likely to take several months before they are in active use. When they are officially launched, Birmingham will follow London and Aberdeen as the only cities in the UK to introduce hydrogen-powered buses into their fleets.

The first physical stage to be completed was the installation of a refuelling depot, and the responsibility for that fell to ITM Motive – a subsidiary of Sheffield-based ITM Power – which was set up to operate hydrogen refuelling stations across the UK.

The refuelling station has been built at Tyseley Energy Park where it will use renewable energy and tap water to generate hydrogen gas to be used as a transport fuel.

"The case for hydrogen based on de-carbonising part of the energy system is hard to oppose," said Duncan Yellen, ITM Motive's managing director.

"When you get heavy-duty vehicles, long distances and cold temperatures, hydrogen comes into its own.

"Additionally, hydrogen is brilliant at reducing air pollution. Hydrogen-

fuelled vehicles produce a limited amount of water vapour – but no more than standard engines – but apart from that, no other emissions."

BCC has bought 20 new hydrogen double decker buses as part of its Clean Air Hydrogen Bus Pilot.

The buses, made by Wrightbus and the world's first zero-emission hydrogen fuel-cell double deckers, will be introduced with National Express West Midlands.

Dr Yellen explained that these heavy-duty buses – which have been through multiple tests and trials – are much easier to convert than other vehicles because they already have the space to store the hydrogen cylinders.

He also lavished praise on both Tyseley Energy Park and the city council for their roles in the project.

"We have been very lucky to have the Tyseley park and its excellent



Duncan Yellen, ITM Motive's managing director

facilities as the site of the re-fuelling hub," said Dr Yellen.

"The team there have been superb in helping to get the project up and running, and have been a very supportive landlord.

"There is an on-site biomass energy plant and we also have a good relationship with offshore wind energy suppliers. The fact that the hydrogen is produced on site eliminates the need for any fuel deliveries.

"I have to say that Birmingham City Council have been complete visionaries and so hats off to the council for being so far ahead of the curve.

"I feel that this is the right time to be doing this, with the buying

The refuelling depot at Tyseley Energy Park



process of both the buses and the energy at pretty competitive levels."

Hydrogen buses consume four times less fuel in comparison to standard diesel buses, covering 300 miles on a single tank and with the ability to refuel within seven to 10 minutes. They emit water vapour, meaning no carbon dioxide or other harmful gases are being pumped into the air.

Birmingham City Council's cabinet member for transport and environment, Councillor Waseem Zaffar, said: "I am delighted that we will be introducing hydrogen buses to Birmingham. Fuel-cell buses offer a practical solution for cities to decarbonise public transport and immediately improve air quality.

"It has taken us two years to get to a point where we can ensure commercial viability for this type of fuel-cell technology and is great news for our city and the rest of the region.

"This pilot is a significant step towards our net-zero carbon target and will provide Birmingham with a leading role in informing debate on supportive policies for zero-emission public transport at a local and national level."

Jo Bamford, owner and chairman of Wrightbus, said: "We are incredibly proud that these buses hold the title of being the world's first zero-emission hydrogen fuel-cell double deckers, and we are delighted that Birmingham City Council has recognised the benefits that this technology can bring to the city.

"We have an opportunity with hydrogen-powered transport to make a huge difference to air quality.

"But this fleet of buses represents much more than Birmingham striving to reach a clean air, zero-carbon



"Hydrogen buses consume four times less fuel in comparison to standard diesel buses, covering 300 miles on a single tank."

future. It represents the start of what could be a world-leading UK hydrogen economy which will bring with it multi-million-pound investments and tens of thousands of jobs."

Tom Stables, National Express UK managing director, pledged that the entire regional bus fleet will be zero-emission by 2030 and the operator is already running 29 fully electric buses in Birmingham, Solihull and Coventry.

"By operating hydrogen double

deckers in service in Birmingham, we will learn which routes lend themselves to hydrogen buses and what the mix of vehicles in our fleet should be going forward," he said.

"These new buses will be fitted out in our top-spec Platinum range, so customers will also benefit from free Wi-Fi, USB chargers and extra legroom. Because there is no engine, they are super quiet. And of course, all that comes out of the exhaust is water vapour."



Councillor Waseem Zaffar, Birmingham City Council's cabinet member for transport and environment



Owner and chairman of Wrightbus, Jo Bamford

■ Employees of Birmingham-based insurance broker Gallagher have raised more than £3,000 for the city's branch of Alzheimer's Society. Throughout 2020, team members took part in a sponsored step challenge in support of the charity, inspired by Tony Christie's hit Is This the Way to Amarillo?

The challenge involved colleagues collectively walking the equivalent distance between Gallagher's

Newhall Street office and the firm's Amarillo office, before continuing the challenge to 'reach' offices in Alabama and Peru, achieving almost 45 million steps in total between them.

During periods of lockdown, colleagues were also invited to donate money towards the charity which they would have otherwise spent on lunches, coffees and travel while working in the office.

■ The February property auction held by Bond Wolfe Auctions has set a new record for the Midlands.

Not only was it the largest auction ever held in the region, offering 224 lots, it raised a record £24.6 million, with a success rate of 96%.

Gurpreet Bassi, chief executive of Bond Wolfe Auctions, said: "By any measure, it was a remarkable day, and we are delighted with the results."

22 Boosting the events industry

news

Two events specialists have joined forces in a bid to bring virtual events back to life.

Birmingham firm Mr & Mrs Grey and Leicester-based Eventologists have teamed up to help create events to remember, even when viewed through a screen.

Ben Grey, co-founder of Mr & Mrs Grey, said: "There's no doubting how tough the last 12 months have

been for the events industry, but we started to see the tide turn in the summer when we were asked to provide live entertainment for events like the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce Awards and Future Faces Awards.

"We realised the importance of still giving people that level of fun and entertainment that they'd expect at any pre-pandemic event."



Ben and Chloe Grey



Graham Carter, BWA auctioneer

ENERGY INITIATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE BIRMINGHAM

A new scheme is being launched which aims to help create a sustainable Birmingham.

The Birmingham Energy Initiative will guide organisations with a net-zero approach to tackle topical energy issues such as fuel poverty.

The initiative will also develop extracurricular activities at a grassroots level to provide information and education on energy, sustainability and renewable generation throughout the community.

Founder Tom Bailey said: "I am excited to finally announce the launch of the initiative which is an investment in the community.

"We are already in discussion with key organisations, local authorities and support networks about how we can create a sustainable Birmingham and develop positive platforms in the community to make a long-standing impact."

Birmingham Energy Initiative was a successful applicant of the European Regional Development Fund and is working closely with Birmingham City Council which has committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030.



Further education – Leading the levelling-up challenge

One of the proudest moments in my long and varied business career came when I was elected chairman of South Birmingham College (now South and City College) in 1995. Under the leadership of Professor Alan Birks CBE it established itself as a leading further education college in the West Midlands, and remains so today with principal Mike Hopkins at the helm.

Sadly, FE has always been the Cinderella of the educational world, mainly because of politicians' misplaced belief in university education for all, regardless of the minimal economic value derived from many of the courses on offer and the low job creation potential of many degrees below 2.1 level. And because governments and particularly civil servants have such little personal experience of FE, the sector has always been a low priority for education ministers. FE has also borne the brunt of successive chancellors' austerity cuts, with the UK now spending less per student on vocational education than nearly all of its overseas competitors, and with funding for those aged 19+ having been cut by more than 40% in the last decade.

However, just once in a while those in power rediscover FE and decide 'it's a good thing'. Usually this feeling goes away quickly and disappears

into the ether, but the Skills for Jobs white paper published in January might just make a difference, bizarrely because of the Covid-19 pandemic which has left the country's finances in disarray, requiring a massive injection of technological and green revolution projects to reset the economy. To do that it will need to upskill – and re-skill – our workforce at speed.

The key to that lies with FE, and the white paper openly acknowledges that reality. It will establish new college business centres to drive innovation and collaboration with employers – including, critically, 'portable' apprenticeships. It will also ensure that the education and training people receive is directly linked to the skills needed for real jobs (you might well think that is how FE works anyway . . . sadly, in many colleges, mainly through lack of resources, that isn't the case).

One of Boris's big problems, once the pandemic pressures have eased, will be delivering on his promise of levelling up the country, both in economic and lifestyle terms. Providing sufficient funding to FE colleges has to be an essential part of living up to that promise. In Birmingham we are ideally placed to support and reinforce the ambitious vision of the white paper, which is endorsed by the West Midlands

Combined Authority, the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, and major local employers such as Jaguar Land Rover. There is more potential business investment in the Birmingham region than any other part of the UK outside the South East, and we have the youngest and most adaptable workforce in the country.

But as we have seen, time and time again FE has been held out as a brave new world by politicians and every time they have quietly shelved it. Now they must be held to their bargain (a bargain that Boris struck with the nation when persuading a doubting populace to give him an 80-seat majority). Levelling up starts with people, and in this country – with its increasing imbalance between rich and poor – that means young people. Levelling up means providing opportunities to rapidly learn and develop new skills – and that's the unique role and purpose of FE.

The tragedy of the last 12 months will resonate for a long time, but ironically it has created the opportunity of a lifetime to recalibrate our economy and to unite us as a country following the emotional trauma of Brexit. Some may forgive the mistakes made by government during the Covid-19 crisis, but the younger generation will never forgive us if we let them down again.

***John James was a partner of law firm Edge & Ellison in Birmingham for 20 years. He was also chairman of the West Midlands branch of the Institute of Directors, a co-founder and chief executive of Birmingham Forward, and has served on the boards of numerous public and private companies.**

By JOHN JAMES



23
column

Artificial intelligence

SPECIAL REPORT

Neither the concept nor the practice of artificial intelligence is new, dating back as it does to the 1950s.

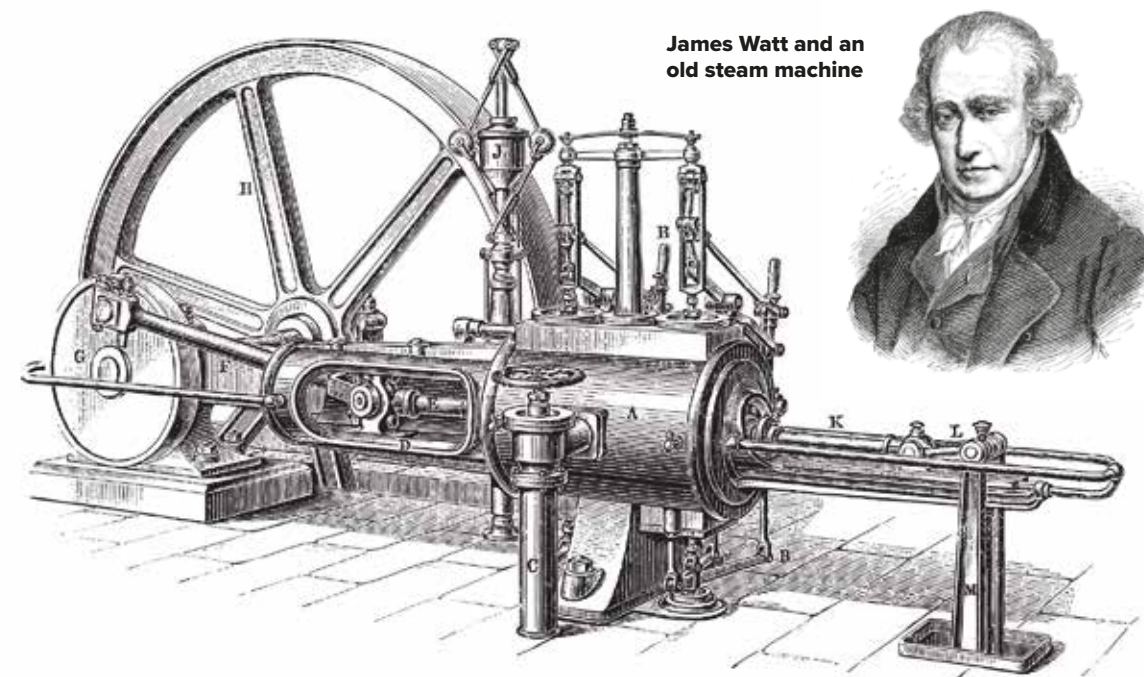
But has the true potential of AI been unlocked? Indeed, are we anywhere near fully realising what benefits it could bring to business and wider society?

We look at these issues and more in this commercially backed special report.

In association with



Science and
Technology
Facilities Council



James Watt and an old steam machine

From steam to digital

The rise of the intelligent machine and the machine aesthetic

The human condition is a most industrial and innovative condition, despite its flaws and failings – which are manifold.

From the great ancient civilisations of the world to renowned periods of industrial history, the ingenuity of innovators and their ideas, inventions and discoveries have served to underpin the very slow march of organised society and economic development that the world sees today.

From early calculating machines and the work of Charles Babbage, Douglas Hartree, Tom Kilburn and Alan Turing, to transistors and integrated circuits that paved the way for super machines that can predict the weather down to less than a few hundred square metres, the human relationship with machines is arguably the most unifying phenomena the world has seen.

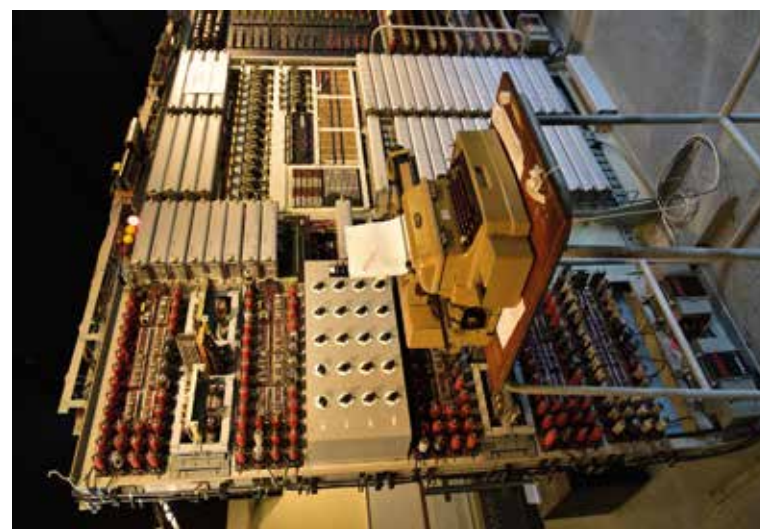
And what would the great protagonists of the UK's first industrial revolution make of industry 4.0 and the latest developments around the internet of things, supercomputers and the code that drives them to self-learn and undertake billions of calculations per second, or the

quantum computers of tomorrow?

Boulton and Watt – Birmingham-based engineers and innovators – were a tour de force of their day when it came to industrialisation via the use of machines. Watt's refinement of the existing steam technology involved removing spent steam to an additional vessel to allow condensation. This modification required less coal, reduced wasted energy and

provided more heft. This in turned created greater efficiency so that his machines could be applied to a greater array of applications.

From factories to transport, steam-driven machines became a key enabling technology that allowed significantly enhanced productivity across supply chains, interlinking different parts of the economy. They also influenced Boulton to take on the tenets of



Colossus computer as used by Alan Turing

Adam Smith's division of labour to organise labour in a machine-esque fashion, coupling the productivity of machines with machine-based organisation of labour. This set up the direction of travel for Taylor's scientific management which in time was followed with Fordism and a host of other workplace philosophies since – all striving to deliver better outcomes from a given set of inputs by the use of machines and the principles of machine aesthetic.

Steam-enabled machines – using the reciprocating piston design – powered British industry until the 20th century. They were only out paced by the onset of electric motors. Electric-driven machines offered a more eloquent solution to machine design by removing the need for the transmission of power. This meant each machine could have its own power source – a power source controllable at the point of use. Electric motors then – converting electrical energy to mechanical energy – was arguably a major watershed moment and a great leap forward in paving the way for electronics and facilitating the untested invention of Babbage's mechanical analyser or computing machine. Whilst Babbage did not realise his inventions in his own time, his son took forward his work, building models based on his father's design and allowing these models to be explored with other great machine engineers of the time, arguably influencing new and refined models such as the Harvard MK1 electromechanical computer and the Manchester MK1.

With Turing joining the Manchester computer team, the scene was set for the rapid improvement of the power of machines to undertake more and more calculations per second and to dramatically improve memory.

In Turing's seminal paper – 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' – published in the October 1950 issue of Mind (A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy) – Turing floated a number of ideas, including notions of artificial intelligence. Moreover, in this paper he predicted that "in about fifty years' time it will be possible to programme computers, with a storage capacity of about 10^9 ", a number we might now understand better as 1 gigabyte (GB) of storage.

This, and Turing's reflections on intelligent machines, were extraordinary at the time. However, with typical smart phones today having memory capacity in the gigabyte range and other 'tablet' products available with memory

“The high-performance computers available today allow for some pretty remarkable machine and digital technological developments on a hyper scale.”

in the terabyte (TB) range (10^{12}), it is easy to recognise how the UK's science and technology pedigree has set the pace for global innovation, especially digital innovation. This continues today with the state support for the next evolution of computing machines: quantum computing.

However, even before we get to quantum computing, the high-performance computers available today allow for some pretty remarkable machine and digital technological developments on a hyper scale.

The UK's national computing laboratory, The Hartree Centre, is one of a number of national assets overseen by the Science and Technology Facilities Council which undertakes cutting-edge research and collaborates with industry. National computer laboratories, globally, have played a significant role – with major corporates like IBM – in pushing the frontiers of modern-day machines with performance levels perhaps not

even imagined by Turing.

The Oak Ridge laboratory in the US has maintained a prominent position with its investment in supercomputers. A collaboration with IBM resulted in the building of its latest super machine Summit. Summit was the first machine to be able to undertake a quintillion operations per second – or, to put it another way, 10^{18} .

Whilst these numbers are pretty hard to get your head around, the most important thing isn't the outright performance but rather how you use this new machine power to improve outcomes – across all industrial sectors to support innovation and new discoveries.

In the UK, the Hartree Centre – in collaboration with IBM and the University of Birmingham – is bringing this computing power to UK plc. From smart supply chains, to healthcare, life sciences, manufacturing, financial industry and public services all sectors can benefit from the high-performance



computing and the digital technologies it facilitates.

The Hartree Centre is home to a mix of highly skilled engineers developing and applying cutting-edge disciplines including data engineering and software development. Data engineering and software engineering are the crucial components of artificial intelligence or machine learning. All machine-learning tasks start with data – whether structured or unstructured – including fusing disparate data sets together for the identification of patterns, relationships, extraction of value and reflections. And it is these insights that can go on to predict business strategy, policy and ultimately enhanced productivity.

Fusing data on a meta-scale is achievable through the use of high-performance computing, such as super machines with breath-taking processing capabilities found in national laboratories. These super machines, coupled with the tool set of data engineers, makes way for the use of sophisticated number techniques such as mathematics, statistics and algorithms to understand the relationship between what has happened and will happen.

The power to predict, then,

“By putting patient engagement at the heart of their treatment in a new and unique way, the project is providing a fresh template for the future of healthcare.”

comes from the power to curate data, the power to process data and the power to fuse data. Prediction comes from an analysis of data that has happened in the past. It means reviewing or analysing past data, or a range of data sets, within the framework of statistical practice to extrapolate and forecast outcomes at some point in the future from a given set of variables.

There are numerous advanced statistical tools and techniques that are available to data engineers for forecasting future events, including Bayesian modelling, time series analysis, central limit theorem and/or regression analysis. This is in addition to the power of high-performing computers and the latest developments in machine learning – such as layering or stacking algorithms to train a computer to detect patterns with given particular labels – and outcomes based on probability from data sets in the terabyte range.

However, whilst the rise of intelligent machines is of interest in terms of academic curiosity, its real value – as already stated – lies in the application of these super machines to real life problems faced in the real world.

In a ground-breaking

collaboration with the STFC Hartree Centre, Alder Hey Children's Hospital is harnessing the power and potential of IBM Watson cognitive computing technology to personalise healthcare and enhance the patient experience.

This particular challenge is really about cognitive computing – where systems can be “trained” to reason and draw conclusions in a similar way to humans and offers transformational outcomes. Healthcare is just one high-impact example where cognitive computing could be used to extract more value from data.

Based in Liverpool, Alder Hey Children's Hospital treats over 275,000 children and young people each year. Renowned for its commitment to clinical excellence and patient experience, the hospital is now driving to become the UK's first ‘cognitive hospital’ – where state of the art computing technology can be used to enhance the patient experience. One example would be to answer patients' questions and minimise their anxieties before they arrive for treatment. In partnership with the Hartree Centre, Alder Hey is now turning aspiration into reality. Development has begun



Cognitive computing has many benefits for healthcare



Intelligent machines can produce better outcomes for industry

to integrate cognitive computing into the hospital, in the shape of IBM Watson, the world's first commercially available cognitive computing system.

Working closely with the Alder Hey team, cognitive and data experts from the Hartree Centre are tailoring and training Watson to the hospital's needs. The first step involves the collation of new and existing data to enable Watson to understand how the hospital works, and what questions patients would usually ask about their visit, to develop its own knowledge base.

The result will be a hospital that dovetails world-renowned clinical facilities with leading-edge cognitive computing capabilities to set new standards in smarter, more streamlined healthcare delivery. By putting patient engagement at the heart of their treatment in a new and unique way, the project is providing a fresh template for the future of healthcare.

Through the cognitive hospital project, the Hartree Centre is forging a path for more personalised treatment, enhanced health outcomes, increased patient satisfaction and significant cost savings. From quicker identification of clinical trends to monitoring

admission patterns to aid planning, the potential is limitless. At Alder Hey Children's Hospital, the initial focus is on making medical treatment a less daunting prospect for children and their parents/carers. By providing information and reassurance via apps and avatars, this project is just one example of how cognitive computing is set to result in happier, healthier children.

The rise of the intelligent machines then is no longer Hollywood fantasy, but rather is here and now supporting the high-performance digital transformation delivering better outcomes for consumers, public service providers and industry. And the greatest challenge facing government, academia and industry alike is not that the technology isn't quite there but rather how we can support industry with the adoption of high-performance digital technologies whilst, crucially, at the same time addressing the digital technologies knowledge and skills gap that exists within senior and middle leadership teams across all industrial domains.

Looking ahead, the University of Birmingham is working with the Hartree Centre and IBM to address these challenges full on. Later this year we hope to be in a position to

offer a digital transformation service that will support skills development and the adoption of digital technologies for businesses within Birmingham and the wider Midlands geography.

Building on the regional STFC Centre currently based at the university, we will be providing solutions to digital challenges or innovations faced by micro, small, medium and large businesses. Recently the national Artificial Intelligence (AI) Council of the UK noted that AI could potentially increase GDP by 10% by 2030. Given that Covid has created a reduction in GDP not seen since the end of World War II, it is in all our interests to reflect on how the digital machines of our time can now transform our society and economy and let the better traits and character of our collective human condition march forward with a renewed spirit of innovation to support the inclusive economic growth we urgently need.

Perhaps the new philosophicalism of our age is 'dataism' and the new battle ground for organisations is how they can leverage data leadership, data discipline and data understanding to stay alive in an ever-increasing digital age.

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AI webinar

Is artificial intelligence a force for good?

Birmingham Business teamed up with Birmingham Tech to host a webinar in which the power – and potential pitfalls – of AI are discussed by panellists across the worlds of enterprise, industry and academia. Yiannis Maos, founder of Birmingham Tech, chaired the discussion.



Yiannis Maos,
Birmingham Tech CEO
and host of the webinar



Paul Cornick
Industrial engagement lead,
Science 2 Industry,
University of Birmingham



Sarb Rana
Founder of fintech firm,
Mooply



Kari Lawler
Founder of Youth4AI &
Youth4Code. WMYCA digital
& skills portfolio co-lead



Bjoern Hirtenjohann
UK public sector CTO,
Microsoft

THE PANEL

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AI webinar

Yiannis Maos: How can the West Midlands use artificial intelligence to create a region that is innovative, sustainable and, most importantly, benefits everyone?

Kari Lawler: We are at a point where data is everywhere. Everyone has data but it's just how we utilise that data in the region. I think we could be doing more, but there are a couple of examples of where it has been used.

I am involved with West Midlands 5G and sit on its board. You see them using data for transport applications which are really improving people's lives within the region. There's also the new space hub where we're looking at really innovative satellite data and seeing how that can be used to improve lives.

From a youth perspective, not only is this going to benefit people in the region, but it's also good to inspire young people to explore this sort of thing.

Then obviously, at the forefront of everyone's mind at the moment, healthcare applications are a big thing. We've had the Covid-19 pandemic and we've seen the response to that, but how do we use AI? How do we use the data that we're obtaining through healthcare

means to really come out of this pandemic stronger?

Although we have the technology and the applications, we also need to look at how we're getting everyone involved. It isn't just about creating applications that people can use, but it's also ensuring that everyone knows about data and everyone knows about AI.

All the time we are seeing issues like data ethics, scandals that happen with social media and problems where people maybe don't have enough knowledge. So making sure that we have good regional awareness of this is really important.

There are also companies which have got all this data and could be doing great things with AI and machine learning, but they just don't really see a use for it.

Then you get businesses which think AI sounds really cool, machine learning sounds really cool, and they want to do it. But then they have zero data – and that's the other side of the coin.

How we grow talent is so important. We are not going to be able to build a region that can create more artificial intelligence solutions if we don't have people able to build

them. We really need to build those skills, that talent base.

We see examples as well of companies that are doing really well with creating and retaining talent in the region.

We really need to stand up and prioritise innovative approaches and find niches where maybe things haven't been done before. We need to build that skills base, provide the technical support for young people who want to go into AI, and we can then really start to achieve these goals and see the benefits.

Paul Cornick: As you may be aware, there's a national AI council, and I think it would be really sensible for the West Midlands to have a council that can bring together the weights of academia, industry and the public sector.

Some of the work that we'll be doing at the university going forward is really taking what the state has had for many, many years – some top-flight, high-performance computing power, world-class research, data engineering technologies, software engineering and HPC – but we need to find a way of engaging with industry, so they can draw on that resource.

“I think it would be really sensible for the West Midlands to have a council that can bring together the weights of academia, industry and the public sector.”

Yes, we need prescribed learning and more students getting involved, but we also need to think about the existing workforce.

So, for example, it's going to take at least another 10 to 15 years to start seeing the benefits of undergraduate study. Now, as they move through the system and get into the workplace, they get into roles, whether it's middle or senior leadership, to really drive forward our AI strategies.

We've been exploring a programme which is going to sit outside of what you'd call regulated learning. We want to create a very simple three-level programme to fill the gap we think is there in terms of middle managers or middle leaders, and indeed senior leaders.

And we have to unpack what we mean by data science. We talk about data science frequently. But the truth is, we're talking about engineering the data, curating the data, and getting data sets that sit side by side, because what we're looking for is the value of insights that will shape some form of strategy.

It comes back to this idea of having a regional AI council and you can start formulating a hymn sheet.

The opportunities are vast because

AI doesn't lend itself to one particular industry or one particular type of practice. It's going to be everywhere.

YM: I think that idea of a regional AI council is such a great one. Bjoern, I'm keen to understand how businesses can start to use AI to enhance their current operations.

Bjoern Hirtenjohann: I want to start with an example around the local government and healthcare. This is a typical scenario. An older citizen has an accident and is admitted to hospital. It is then deemed necessary that they go into a care home permanently or temporarily.

It's the council's responsibility to find a place in the care home. Hospitals, with their demand, have an urgency to release the patient. Councils are being fined if they can't admit somebody into a care home within a certain timeline. If somebody is in hospital and has a certain medical condition, we must be able to use AI to predict and determine how long they will be in hospital with the historic data available. At the same time, through the data they have from the care homes, councils should have the opportunity to build a data model and an AI model to

predict when a free space is likely to become available. It's not just about prediction, it's also about real-time data and real-time analytics.

This end-to-end process would benefit everybody – the councils will pay less fines, the hospitals have a better bed utilisation and more free beds, and a person can have the necessary care in the most appropriate place.

YM: Have you seen that more open-source data is available?

BH: Absolutely. More data being made publicly available which is a great thing because it's a commodity and it's worth sharing, but we just need to be mindful. We are talking about trained machines, and we are training the machines and the AI models with data. We need to be mindful that we're not ending with a bias-trained AI model.

YM: Sarb, you're embarking on a fintech proposition and you're keen to put AI at the centre of everything you do. Tell us more.

Sarb Rana: We were in the unique position of building a start-up from the ground up. So we are able to tailor our proposition directly to



the problems that customers are currently facing, or what I as a customer would want out of our service.

We are currently looking at virtual assistants. We're all familiar with Alexa, but we can use virtual assistants for our own customer services, and they can provide real-time support to customers in need, particularly where there are human or budget constraints.

They can help you almost prioritise which customers need the most urgent help. And that ultimately leads to an improvement in the customer journey and improving customer retention rates which is a big thing, certainly for us in the financial industry.

The aspect of predictive behaviour is quite big, analysing customers' behaviours online and then catering your business products or your services directly to that customer.

The analysis of data means we interpret and collate data very quickly and efficiently, and provide unique insights for our business, our staff and our customers.

Also, our AI models help us with loan applications with the use of open banking and property data. If our models think that it's not good enough to be lent on or matched against, the lender will revert straight back to the client and say, look, at this moment in time it's not quite good enough. You should improve points X, Y and Z, and once you've done that, come back to us and then we'll look to help you.

The marketing aspect is also intriguing and we've seen that done very well with online clothes retailers. They've managed to almost monetise this data by pitching it to their customers and having a positive effect on their scaling ability.

YM: The most important thing is thinking about what your end goal is and how you remove certain barriers by using AI. Paul, what's your advice to organisations which are starting to explore AI?

PC: I think you've got to look for trusted sources in terms of information. AI is very, very good at doing heavy lifting. There's no two ways about that. It can deal eloquently with heavy loads. You

“It's got the potential to break down barriers and have a positive effect on everyone's lives, from improving the mundane, such as grocery shopping, all the way through to medical advancements, speeding up mortgage applications and space exploration.”

could use AI for the volume of a task, or for quality assurance or quality control.

It wasn't too long ago that the pensions industry used actuaries. I genuinely believe AI will transform the finance industry.

What I would ask government is, where's our national infrastructure for AI? Where does it sit? Where's that coherent picture where businesses can go to? And that's something I'll be working on later this year, where the university can really engage with industry and answer some of these questions.

YM: Bjoern, how do we create those networks and collaborations of trusted sources that can take that information and deliver value?

BH: The big cloud providers obviously offer the underlying services and the infrastructure, but then it will take partners to go out to customers.

Picking up on Paul's point, education is so important. Nobody should shy away from embracing the technology. It's not just because I work in technology, but I find it amazing that we still use paper-based processes, both in the NHS and in local government.

For me, it goes back to the central government or the top tier within the NHS. We should have a top-down approach on what architecture and what system should be used so that patient data can seamlessly flow in real time wherever it needs to be made available. In doing so, we would open up a whole raft of other capabilities – that heavy lifting that we talked about.

I am not saying we need to disclose every patient's data, just key aspects of a person's health. If we look at that and overlay it with geographical and other data, we could get insights we can't even imagine today.

It needs organisations to implement the technology to help customers overcome this knowledge gap, but ultimately it needs organisations to be willing to adopt that tech.

YM: Why should people feel excited about AI? And what excites you most about AI?

SR: It's the way that technology evolves as time goes on. And just touching on one of Bjoern's points, we've had the same problem that healthcare had in that the banks are sitting on all this data, but how do the start-ups actually get access to that?

The way that was facilitated was by way of regulation – governments literally stepping in and regulating the market and opening up those markets to start-ups and other companies like us. So we can have access to that data, and we can begin analysing it for the betterment of the sector itself or for the customers.

But I think people should be excited about this. At Mooply we're using AI and big data to speed up the whole process of arranging finance for properties, from automated ID checks to enriching applications with open banking and property data, so we can match those applications to lenders with significantly improved success rates. That's just one example of the way we're utilising it.

But embracing AI is something that I think everyone should do, definitely for the future. It's got the potential to break down barriers and have a positive effect on everyone's lives, from improving the mundane, such as grocery shopping, all the way through to medical advancements, speeding up mortgage applications and space exploration.

I've read previously that AI has been used to detect cancers more accurately at earliest stages and it can detect breast cancer 30 times quicker than humans with almost 99% accuracy. We find it increasingly in use embedded in consumer wearables such as fitness watches. Doctors can detect early-stage heart disease which allows a window of opportunity to treat the disease and save lives as opposed to not doing anything.

And, with space exploration I know that the International Space Station is testing an aptly named robotic AI called Simon to help astronauts.

The possibilities of AI are endless. The limitations are probably the ones that we place on AI and maybe that comes out of a human fragility.

I hope it's a catalyst to improve life throughout the world in terms of how we interact with each other, how we

interact with the planet and ultimately combat climate change. AI can help us create a sustainable future through its adoption in sectors such as energy, agriculture, sustainable supply chain, enhanced weather and disaster predictions.

YM: Kari, Sarb's touched on two things there that you're passionate about. One is youth engagement and what AI can do for the next generation, but the other is space travel, so I would love to hear what excites you most about AI, both within the West Midlands and further afield.

KL: I always say that what excites me about AI is not what we're doing now.

With all my students, I tell them to go to the past and look at what people were saying back in the 1950s. I love showing people Alan Turing's initial papers about cognitive intelligence, what he was thinking about back then, what they were talking about at the 1956 Dartmouth conference. [The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence was a 1956 workshop widely considered to be the founding event of AI as a field.]

We have so much improved technology, but looking at the visionaries can be so exciting. It really inspires me to achieve those goals and to try to do more with what we've got at the moment.

I think science fiction can sometimes be a nemesis for me teaching AI, just because it gives people the wrong impression, but can also be really helpful for people to understand and want to do more with it in the future.

With state space exploration, if you had mentioned that to people

10 years ago, they would have thought you were crazy. But we are literally building a space hub in the West Midlands, not necessarily for exploration, more for satellite data uses. We are getting more people involved with space, along with AI in healthcare and other areas, and that's really exciting.

Generation Z is so big on trying to improve world social issues like climate change. It's about thinking how we can use AI, or the theory of AI, to try to tackle these big questions, these big challenges for the future.

It's really inspirational for young people to be thinking about it like that, to be looking back at the history, looking at what people were saying, and then trying to do the same things themselves.

YM: That's really interesting, to excite people first by looking back. I'm now going to turn this round and ask what are the pitfalls and what worries you about AI?

PC: There isn't much that's regulated, and we know the horrors of bias. If we're not really disciplined, in terms of how we apply the underpinning AI tech, it's fair to say that it can cause an awful lot of harm.

Music playlists are really innocent and they come up with recommendations, but if you're putting forward mortgage applications, or if you're the police and you're moving into the realms of predictive and preventative placing using this kind of tech, it's really critical that you reflect and test what it is you're doing because it's so easy to get the maths wrong.

You asked what excites us. The power of AI to discover is

phenomenal. At the university we teach and we create knowledge, but there isn't an academic that can compete with AI.

The power to discover is breath taking, but the flip side is the power to do enormous harm through poor practice.

YM: A quick, final comment or piece of insight from you all please.

SR: My message to businesses is this: there is an aspect of AI and machine learning which can definitely help you. It is about analysing your business first and foremost, and seeing where you are getting stuck and think how you can build in processes that help you. You need to have an open mind.

KL: There needs to be more done to push AI if we are to become front runners. Now is the time to really focus on ensuring we have the best talent, we have the best skills, we can attract companies to the region and start building those AI opportunities. It is so exciting what can be done with it; we just need to be making sure we're taking advantage of it.

BH: AI obviously has already helped a great deal to overcome the barriers of accessibility, with all the speech-to-text and text-to-speech functionality, and that's due to the advances in AI. And every organisation who wants to embark on AI should remember that they are not the first to do this. It can be done and it's not an impossible task.

PN: It's all about the outcomes, the change. What's the change that we're chasing here? And then following on from that, of course, it's about the data. Taking Kari's point, it's about the talent. And I do think there's an opportunity now to really push out the inspiration behind computer science. And then we have to remember that we need people using it at all levels and across different disciplines.

YM: That's our trump card as a region – we're one of the youngest, most diverse regions in the country, and so let's take advantage of all that talent, let's inspire and provide the necessary skills. And at the same time we need to upskill the existing workforce. If we do both then the world's our oyster.



36 Pioneering project powering AI

research

Aston University scientists are leading a multinational programme exploring the use of human brain stem cells on microchips to push the boundaries of artificial intelligence. HENRY CARPENTER reports

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research



Scientists at a Birmingham university are behind a project that, if successful, will see human brain stem cells used to power artificial intelligence devices and bring about a revolution in computing.

The Neu-ChiP project is an international collaboration led by researchers at Aston University to show how neurons – the brain’s information processors – can be harnessed to supercharge computers’ ability to learn while dramatically cutting energy use.

The project – which has been awarded more than £3 million by the European Commission’s Future and Emerging Technologies programme – will aim to demonstrate how human brain stem cells grown on a microchip can be taught to solve problems from data, laying the foundations for a “paradigm shift” in machine-learning technology.

“Use of AI is becoming ever more prevalent in areas as diverse as healthcare, finance, autonomous

“There’s a question about whether machines work the same way that a human brain does – some think they do, some think they don’t.”

vehicles and speech recognition, right through to recommending films through on-demand services like Netflix,” said a spokesman from Aston University.

“The ‘big four’ tech companies – Apple, Google, Amazon and Facebook – and many others are investing heavily in machine learning to tailor their products and better understand their customers.

“But current electronic approaches to machine learning have limits, requiring ever-growing computing power and high energy demands. The recent trend towards ‘neuromorphic computing’, which aims to mimic human neural activity electronically, is hampered by the inherent limitations of conventional electronics.

“In contrast, human brain cells

effortlessly combine these functions and have extremely low power demands, requiring only a small volume of a nutrient-rich solution to operate.”

In the Neu-ChiP project, the team will layer networks of stem cells resembling the human cortex onto microchips.

They will then stimulate the cells by firing changing patterns of light beams at them. Sophisticated 3D computer modelling will allow them to observe any changes the cells undergo, to see how adaptable they are. This imitates the ‘plasticity’ of the human brain, which can rapidly adapt to new information.

The project co-ordinator is Dr Rhein Parri, a neuroscientist at Aston University who describes his specialism as “understanding how

cells communicate to each other in the brain”.

He explained: “I’ve been collaborating with Dr Eric Hill – the stem cell expert at Aston – for a number of years on how human neurons obtained from skin samples can essentially be re-programmed.

“We then started talking with mathematics professor David Saad who is an expert in machine learning.

“There’s a question about whether machines work the same way that a human brain does – some think they do, some think they don’t. The beauty about these networks is that they develop in the same way that human neurons would, and they also seem to link up in that way as well.

“The European Future Emerging Technologies funding stream is targeted towards a programme which is embryonic and has a lot of potential.

“We contacted people we knew in Europe to form a consortium; the FETS projects that required a multinational consortium from the EU where everyone makes a specific contribution.”

Dr Parri said the Neu-ChiP project now involves partner institutions in the UK, France, Spain, Switzerland and Israel. It is also expected to produce new knowledge about the functioning of the brain which could be used to develop novel stem cell-based treatments.

“We are very excited to have won support from the European Commission for the project,” he said. “Our international team will combine their expertise and work together to develop technology that we expect to provide great future benefits for science and society.”

Two people will be employed to work at Aston University, one developing networks and determining their functionality, the other working with Dr Saad to find out ways of extracting and analysing information.

“Elsewhere in the consortium, there will be a statistical mathematician who will try to simulate within a computer what we’re actually seeing, and we have physics collaborators in Barcelona,” said Dr Parri.

“In Israel a group builds electronic circuits which resemble human cells to try to exploit the way the human brain works, we have bioengineers in Loughborough making the housings for these cells to enable us to input and output, and then we’ve got a company in Switzerland who will make chips which will detect the electrical activity in the networks.

“There’s no guarantee that we will succeed, but it’s about pushing all these aspects forward and aiming for something big.

“If we are successful we will get to the stage where we will have these networks which we can input, extract information from and to a certain extent understand that information.”

Professor David Saad, professor of mathematics at Aston University, said: “Our aim is to harness the unrivalled computing power of the human brain to dramatically increase the ability of computers to help us solve complex problems. We believe this project has the potential to break through current limitations of processing power and energy consumption to bring about a paradigm shift in machine learning technology.”

Dr Eric Hill, senior lecturer in stem cell biology at Aston University, said: “Our ability to turn human stem cells into brain cells has revolutionised the study of the human brain. This exciting interdisciplinary project will bring international scientists from diverse backgrounds together to develop new technologies that will provide huge insight into the development of human neuronal networks.”



Dr Eric Hill

Dr Alessandro Maccione, co-founder and chief scientific officer of 3Brain AG, said: “The Neu-ChiP project has the ambitious plan to overcome current machine learning approaches through the study of complex human-brain-based circuits. We are proud to put our technology at the service of this pioneering and exciting challenge.”

Drs Jordi Soriano, associate professor in physics, and Daniel Tornero, tenure track professor in biology, both at the University of Barcelona, said: “Our ability to engineer neuronal circuits in a dish and train them to conduct data analysis will provide new insights on how the brain computes information and finds solutions. The developed technology may even help to design unique and exciting human-machine interfaces.”

Dr Shahar Kvatinsky, associate professor of electrical engineering, and Daniel Ramez, assistant professor of biomedical engineering, both at Technion Israel, said: “We are seeking to build neuromorphic circuits and combine emerging electronic devices with biological neurons, and this project is a major step towards this target. In the context of synthetic biology, it is impressive to see how computation in living cells is evolving from digital through analogue and moving towards a neuromorphic computing paradigm.”

Dr Paul Roach, senior lecturer in biomaterials and interface science at Loughborough University, said: “This work really brings together an exciting interdisciplinary team of researchers to build on our individual strengths and interests. The focus of this project is on revolutionising the way we analyse information using specifically designed complex living neuronal circuits.”

Introducing SuperTech

The UK’s first technology-focused supercluster has been launched in the West Midlands to help professional services to integrate AI and advanced technology into their everyday activities.

SuperTech is open to firms across the country and aims to increase technology-led productivity gains within business and professional services organisations.

Business leaders from Shoosmiths, Wesleyan, Bruntwood, CBRE and Birmingham Law Society are taking part in the scheme.

Eight industry leaders from finance, law, property and technology have been chosen to head up SuperTech.

These include David Stewart, group chief operating officer at Wesleyan, Tony Randle, partner at Shoosmiths, Simon Davis CEO of Nimbus Maps, along with Inez Brown, president of Birmingham Law Society.

Mr Stewart, who is co-lead for the finance cluster within SuperTech, said: “Proftech, like fintech, is an emerging sector with enormous potential to scale. Having undertaken a number of studies into fintech, which in just a few short years is now worth £411.7 million per annum to the West Midlands economy, we’ve identified three ways in which we can facilitate growth – access to businesses, access to technology and access to talented people.

“SuperTech combines all three by connecting technology firms with the major professional services businesses we have across the region.

“For established organisations like ourselves, involvement in SuperTech gives us access to the region’s emerging tech talent and latest developments, while tech firms, whether focused on finance, property, law or insurance, can find new ways to solve business issues and gain direct access to a sector that is worth almost £28 billion – 26.5% of the total regional economy.”

SuperTech will also encourage those who have developed solutions for finance and other sectors to consider how they might be able to adapt and open up markets in property, law and insurance with direct access to West Midlands businesses in all fields.

Mr Davis said: “The SuperTech collaboration is unique in taking this integrated approach which reflects the group’s fundamental beliefs that there is much to be gained in sharing intelligence and practice between professional silos.”

Inez Brown, of Shoosmiths, said: “Birmingham has a deep-rooted heritage in legal and professional services, which if leveraged successfully through tech, gives the UK a major competitive advantage in emerging industries of tomorrow.

“Being part of SuperTech allows us to ensure that it is not just the largest legal businesses that are able to integrate tech into their operation, but all firms.”

Mr Randle added: “If you look at where the investment is going in

law, it is centred towards ‘new law’ businesses that are able to leverage technology to improve and automate processes.

“Massive change is coming, and tech is going to play a crucial role in determining whether law firms thrive or fail. At Shoosmiths we are very firmly standing behind SuperTech in supporting its goal of promoting much greater integration of technology in law and the wider professional services community.”

In a further move to support the growth of professional services technology in the region, a partnership between the Investment Association and Wesleyan has established Europe’s largest asset management fintech hub, The Engine Room, in Birmingham.



David Stewart



Inez Brown

Grant is perfect anniversary gift

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news

A Birmingham social enterprise celebrated its 10th birthday in style with the news it has secured a £150,000 grant from the John Lewis Partnership's Community Investment Fund.

Miss Macaroon – which has made 2.5 million macaroons for global brands, royalty and a host of celebrities – is now one of the city's most prominent employability programmes and a destination food venue for locals and visitors.

Formed by pastry chef Rosie

Ginday MBE, the business has received a perfect birthday present, with the news of the grant.

The financial boost will be used to pay the wages of the recent MacsMAD – or Macaroons that make a Difference – graduates and support a further 20 graduates as they continue to overcome barriers, including anxiety and learning disabilities, to access paid employment and mainstream jobs.

It means that 82 young people aged between 18 and 35 will have been helped by Miss Macaroon, developing cooking, administrative, sales and marketing skills, and experience along the way.

"A lot has happened since I set up the business with £500 and a bit of kitchen space donated by University College Birmingham," said Miss Ginday.

"In the last 10 years we have made more than 2.5 million macaroons in 50 different flavours, opened our own macaroon and prosecco bar in Great Western Arcade and had our products enjoyed by celebrity chef James Martin, TV and radio presenter Jeremy Vine and Prince Harry and Meghan Markle as part of their engagement tour.

"We've even built a complete wall of macaroons for Instagram and had Glynn Purnell from Purnells and Saturday Kitchen, the Wilderness's Alex Claridge and Bake Off's Daryl Collins support our MacsMAD trainees through mentoring sessions and work experience placements.

"Like many businesses, Covid-19

has caused us many issues and things have been very tough, but we have been able to keep the MacsMAD course going during the lockdowns. This latest funding boost from John Lewis allows us to extend the level of support we can offer our most recent graduates and some of the 60 young people we expect to support over the next two years.

"They are the people we set the business up for and they remain our main priority. The shop and our sales just go into funding the programme and the assistance we can give them once they're graduating. They're the real heart of our social enterprise."

Miss Macaroon's MacsMAD programme is run over 10 weeks, five spent training and five covering on-the-job experience, with individuals able to choose between catering and retail.

Every new starter receives wellbeing at work sessions and access to a psychotherapist, who will support them to overcome barriers that have prevented them from working in the past.

Corporate partners, including Hotel du Vin, Marriott Hotels, McDonald's Restaurants and Resorts World, provide 'welcome to work' tours and mentor talks to inspire trainees to reach for a career in hospitality.

The idea is to give them transferrable skills, self-confidence and the chance to gain valuable experience that will hopefully lead to full-time employment with the business or other mainstream employers.



Rosie Ginday MBE

CAREERS PROGRAMME GETS A REVAMP

Birmingham PR agency East Village has strengthened its commitment to driving diversity in PR with a newly revamped careers programme.

Partnering with independent training provider Creative Alliance, East Village's 'Grow Your Own' scheme will create jobs for unemployed youngsters, ensure paid internships are offered to students, and see its team of professionals work alongside schools and careers advisers.

New creative roles will be created by the agency under the Government's Kickstart programme.

Delivered alongside Creative Alliance, these roles will include a minimum six-month contract with

East Village, as well as at least 60 hours' training, a laptop, professional mentor, and its company-wide 'team perks' which include flexible working and mental health support.

East Village managing director Tara Tomes said: "I have always had such incredible experiences and opportunities throughout my career so when I started East Village seven years ago, I was determined to offer the same to other young professionals coming through the ranks.

"We started Grow Your Own as a way to do just that and, in the four years since launching it, over half of our full-time team members have joined following their internships."



Tara Tomes

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Museum treasure

HENRY CARPENTER chats to the commercial director of Birmingham Museums Trust and discovers she has been busier than ever over the last 12 months

Alex Nicholson-Evans is in full flow. "This morning I've had conversations about hires of our spaces for NHS rollout of testing and vaccinations," she tells me over Zoom from her home in the Jewellery Quarter.

"I've also had a briefing on the rewiring taking place at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and I've had a panic call from one of my managers because a squirrel has broken into one of the historic properties!"

And it's still only 11am. But such is the life of the commercial director of Birmingham Museums Trust – each day brings new challenges by the bucketload, even when semi-furloughed, as Nicholson-Evans is.

Her remit is so wide that it's hard to pigeonhole her role. Her employer is the largest independent charitable trust in the UK, running nine

museums across Greater Birmingham and bringing in well over one million visitors each (normal) year.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in Chamberlain Square is the most prominent and enjoys the highest profile, but Thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum, Aston Hall, Sarehole Mill and the Museum of the Jewellery Quarter also comprise part of the rich and diverse portfolio of attractions under the trust's control.

Nicholson-Evans joined the trust in 2014 and became commercial director after a spell overseeing the voluntary side of the operation.

She came from a sales background – managing a team selling medical equipment – and her commercial nous and experience held her in good stead for the post.

"The core to my role is to take us on a journey to be as self-sustaining

as we possibly can," she says.

"I started to see different ways to make more money, making us more sustainable and able to engage with a wider audience."

She suspects her remit is much broader than that of other commercial directors. Looking after the trading company – leadership of conferences, weddings, retail team, and food and beverages – is the "bread and butter of my job", but she also looks after the trust's historic properties.

So it's a good job she's a 'doer'. It's worth mentioning that what spare time her day job allows is spent running her own company; she is the figure behind Birmingham Cocktail Weekend and Birmingham Wine Weekend, and is also on the board of the Jewellery Quarter Development Trust.

Passion seems to run through all she does and Nicholson-Evans speaks with such enthusiasm about Birmingham's museums – and her role in particular – that it's easy to forget that we are coming towards the end of what has been a particularly harrowing year for almost all industries, but the hospitality and entertainments perhaps chief among them.

What made the advent of the pandemic all the more galling for the trust team was that it swept in just as the museums were recording record visitor numbers. Also, the Paradise Circus development was clearing which meant the adjacent Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery was visibly open and altogether looking more welcoming again.

"We had just had Dippy the

dinosaur come to visit Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, delivering record-breaking numbers to the venue and we were on record-breaking trade figures as a result. Everything was looking positive.

"The Duchess of Cambridge had launched MiniBrum. Again, visitor numbers were going up and Thinktank was on track for the best year since opening . . . and then the pandemic hit just when the stars were aligning, and that made it all the more heartbreaking.

"The furlough scheme has been a blessing in that we would not have survived without it. But having members of the team that have not worked more than a few weeks over a year is a difficult situation to manage.

"We were very lucky to get cultural recovery funding of £1.8 million from the Government and that's the reason the trust will survive this.

"But we've got some big decisions to take moving forward and have applied for more funding to ride us through what will still be a very turbulent year.

"Museums are critical and at the heart of society. They have a role to play in this next part of the city's regeneration, particularly if there's a slow return to the offices. Museums are at the heart of the city centre community."

Yes, the trust has benefited from the Cultural Recovery Fund and also made good use of the furlough scheme. But it has also innovated extensively – and its commercial director has very much been at the heart of new schemes

"The pandemic hit just when the stars were aligning, and that made it all the more heartbreaking."

brought in over the last 12 months.

"We are very proud of how we worked to continue trading and doing all we could to keep the trust afloat," says Nicholson-Evans.

"The pandemic has pushed us to be creative and to work fast, and I am incredibly proud of the different initiatives we have brought in. We were one of the first museums to bring recipe boxes to market, and we set up a community shop at Sarehole Mill which is still operating now.

"We've also developed a virtual tool with ScanTech Digital so that people can go on a virtual tour of Birmingham Museum and Art

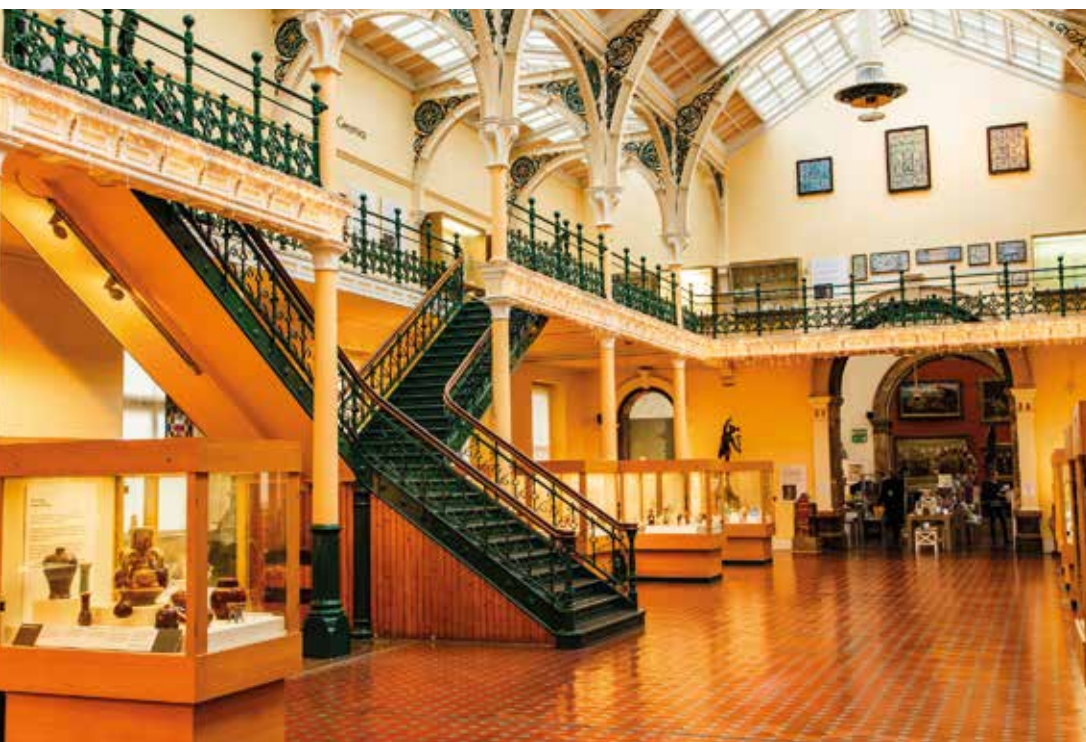
Gallery, and we developed as many 360-degree visits to our historic properties to enable people to still pop in and see their favourite room.

"But probably our most interesting development is our online lecture series, which has just led to the launch of a new scheme called Birmingham Museums on Demand. It works like Now TV where you buy a pass and then you have access to a set amount of content. We are looking to extend that into a subscription service, along the lines of Netflix.

"What's really cool about that is some of the national museums are



Picture: AK Suggi



Picture: Jack Spicer-Adams



Picture: Jack Spicer-Adams



The Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is the most prominent of the nine museums run by Birmingham Museums Trust



The Round Room at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

“There’s certainly a role we play in boosting international awareness of Birmingham and of its extraordinary past.”

really interested in what we are doing, and I think it’s wonderful to have brought some really innovative things to the table first in Birmingham.”

I am interested to find out what the overriding aim of Birmingham Museum’s Trust is – for instance, does it see itself as an educator, a custodian of treasures, or simply an operator of venues?

“Our mission statement is to reflect the world to Birmingham and Birmingham to the world,” explains Nicholson-Evans.

“There is definitely a role that we

play in facilitating entertainment, inspiration and education. We are set up as an educational charitable trust for the people of Birmingham so that hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren can come through Thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the historic properties in a normal year.

“The education is not just for children, of course, and we also run adult education programmes as well; for instance, we have introduced the online lecture series.

“The museum’s collection belongs

to the people of Birmingham and we are the custodians. The people of Birmingham are absolutely at the heart of what we do, and our community engagement team does a lot of work reaching out to different communities with our collections.

“There’s also a responsibility to put Birmingham on the world stage. Our renowned collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings is the biggest in the world. A lot of those are on tour in America so we are putting Birmingham in front of people in the Frick Collection or Yale Museum. There’s certainly a role we play in boosting international awareness of Birmingham and of its extraordinary past.”

At the time of writing we are still in limbo, with no clear idea when lockdown restrictions are likely to be lifted or if tourist and visitor habits will have been altered by this tumultuous period. But Birmingham Museums Trust is ready and waiting, Nicholson-Evans assures us. Part of the CRF funding is being used to adapt and reopen Thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum later this year, and this includes a new entrance and new gallery.

With Birmingham Museums Trust’s driven, innovative, visionary and downright energetic approach, all epitomised by Nicholson-Evans, you get the feeling that it really could not be in a better position to emerge from this most bruising of times.



Museum of the Jewellery Quarter



Two of the Trust’s historic properties overseen by Nicholson-Evans – Blakesley Hall, left, and Sarehole Mill



Picture: Verity Milligan

By KIM LEARY
CEO Squibble

Digital & Creative Business of the Year 2017



Three easy ways...

to get more leads for your service-led company

It could be through social media, digital PR, podcasts, email, online adverts, blog posts and of course your website.

Looking at a typical customer journey though, your website might be one of the last interactions someone has with your company before they decide to purchase, not the first. This might come as a surprise, but there are a number of steps a user will take before they even consider purchasing.

If we look at a cyber-security company, the customer is probably blissfully unaware that they need such a service. It might be that they read a post on LinkedIn talking about the security threats that are becoming more prominent, especially with most of our nation working from home.

This sets the wheels in motion and the reader starts to consider what impact it could have on their business. Typically, we don’t land on a website and make an enquiry straight away. We research. We want to understand the problem in more detail before we commit any time or money to the issue. The reader will probably look at blog posts, news articles and search results to gather their intel.

So when a potential client lands on your website, they probably have a rough idea of what they need. The question is, can they find it on your website and does your solution address their problem? This leads us to our first easy fix.

Easy fix #1: **Be clear**

If the homepage starts with something vague like “Welcome to our website, we are cyber-security specialists” then it’s not really very useful or engaging. Especially because it doesn’t address the user’s

problem. Those first few seconds have been wasted along with the chance to engage the user.

The reader is currently trying to home in on a heading or a piece of copy that resonates with their problem. Something that demonstrates that they’re in the right place. They’re scanning copy quickly before going back to the search results and moving on to the next website. Yes, unfortunately we are that fickle!

At this point though, you haven’t earned their trust and in our example the opportunity has been lost.

So how can you be more clear? It takes a bit of research, but can easily be achieved by listening to what your customers say during the first sales call. Are there any common phrases customers use that could be incorporated into your copy to help address their problem?

Staying with our fictional cyber company, I know that phishing email scams are causing company owners a lot of problems at the moment. Especially if such an email is opened and responded to on an unprotected home wifi connection. So with this in mind, the main heading could be “Worried about your employees opening a phishing email?”. It’s straight to the point and immediately engages with the user’s problem.

Easy fix #2: **Be helpful**

Ultimately the end goal is to encourage the customer to call you. A few well-placed articles or downloadable guides can support the user during their ‘research’ phase. If they like the advice you’ve given, they’re more likely to reach out. This is fairly common practice now.

Another option to consider is a

chat facility. Website chat has been around for a while but it has grown in popularity during the lockdown. Moneypenny.com recorded a whopping 109% increase in uptake for SMEs.

Now, I’m not suggesting you should install a chatbot and pester everyone that enters your website – that’s one sure-fire way of pushing people away. It does mean though that you can be on hand to answer any timely questions.

A great way to manage chat facilities is to start the conversation online and then swiftly move them onto a phone call to help personalise the process. You can then move them along your sales pipeline, if they’re a good fit.

Easy fix #3: **Set boundaries**

We’re all busy and we want answers quickly – but this can often lead to unrealistic expectations. Service-led businesses struggle with this because, unlike in eCommerce, store pricing is usually bespoke and so clients have to wait.

We can’t escape this, but a few simple changes to your copy can help to explain it. By adding “We respond to all enquiries within two working days” sets the expectations at the beginning.

Another great thing to consider is managing customer expectations after they’ve submitted the contact form. What valuable insight could you share at this point?

We’re all guilty of it, but just using the standard “Thanks we’ve got your response” is a missed opportunity. The potential client is keen to engage with you so build on this and share relevant articles that they can browse whilst they wait for your response.

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Great start to the year

Black Country engineering firm Deritend Group has started the year with two major 'framework' wins with Severn Trent Water and Welsh water company Hafren Dyfrdwy Cyfyngedig.

Deritend has been awarded the fabrication and mechanical frameworks which means it can provide essential maintenance, repair and replacement services to all clean and waste sites across several counties.

The company expects the work to be worth up to £20 million over a potential seven-year period.

Neil Ashwood, framework manager at Deritend Group, said: "This is a massive achievement for our business and gives us a really strong platform going forward.

"About 30 suppliers were invited to tender for the framework contracts and nine were eventually appointed, which means we have been approved to carry out work across Severn Trent Water and Hafren

Dyfrdwy Cyfyngedig sites."

Deritend, which was acquired by Richard Hale and his management team in 2001, plays a key role in ensuring clean water in homes and that production lines meet requirements.

The recent relocation of its headquarters to West Bromwich takes its annual investment to over £1 million, with new equipment installed and an upskilling programme implemented for the majority of its 120-strong workforce.

"We are often the first sector to emerge from the downturn and this certainly appears the case, with the last six months seeing a number of new contract wins and preferred supplier status secured for the global supplier database IESA.

"The Severn Trent Water and Hafren Dyfrdwy Cyfyngedig framework wins was a great way to start 2021 and we look forward to helping keep these sites operational," said Mr Hale.



Neil Ashwood, centre, with James Hale and Jasen Astle



Keith Spedding from Shakespeare Martineau

INVESTMENT IN PROPERTY AND TECH IS STILL HIGH

The Birmingham corporate team of law firm Shakespeare Martineau helped raise more than £2.1 million by advising a pair of businesses on placings and subscriptions on the Standard List and AIM.

Clients Crossword Cybersecurity and One Heritage Group announced the share issues which attracted high demand from new and existing investors.

Property developers One Heritage Group undertake development and re-development of new and existing buildings, as well as facilities management and managing the letting of the properties. The new shares generated an additional £548,500 investment in the business in order to expand its property portfolio.

Cyber security and risk management experts Crossword Cybersecurity undertook an oversubscribed fundraising of more than £1.6 million. The technology commercialisation company will invest the funds into sales and marketing resource, for product development and support for general working capital purposes.

Keith Spedding, partner and business transaction and growth specialist at Shakespeare Martineau, said: "These deals go to show that money is out there and available for good companies with good stories, and there is no sign of it drying up.

"Property and technology sectors are seeing a huge amount of investment, with other sectors such as medtech and fashion also making stock market headlines.

"We are very pleased to have helped these two excellent companies with their growth plans."

Programme offers chance to retrain

A training and employment programme is set to give more than 200 people in and around Birmingham the opportunity to retrain and secure full-time work.

The jobs initiative is part of a partnership between Birmingham-based call centre outsourcing specialist Sigma Financial Group, BMet, Birmingham City Council and JobCentre Plus.

Funded by the West Midlands Combined Authority, it will give unemployed people the chance to learn new skills for free and have the opportunity to join Sigma, with 15 candidates trained and assessed every month until July this year.

The sector-based work academy partnership originally began in 2015 and has since seen more than 1,000 trainees go through the programme, with 625 starting new call centre and customer adviser roles at Sigma.

Jo Regan-Iles, group people officer at Sigma, said: "We've enjoyed a really successful partnership over the past five years and this latest jobs and training drive is yet another milestone.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has played a role in seeing around 200,000 people unemployed across the West Midlands. This programme aims to help push that number down and give people new skills.

"We have already seen hundreds

of people join us through the programme and many of those have worked their way up through the organisation into supervisory or management roles. There are so many stand-out stars and we look forward to taking on the next group of talented people who want to reset their careers, reskill or get back into work."

Andy Street, mayor of the West

Midlands, said: "Retraining and upskilling are critical to our region's economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Training in the skills that employers need, both now and in the future, is a crucial way to help people who have lost their jobs get back into employment quickly. Sector-based work academy programmes do exactly that."



Jo Regan-Iles from Sigma Financial Group

RECRUITMENT DRIVE PROVES A SUCCESS

A Solihull business has started a recruitment drive and created 10 new roles for young people across the region.

UVA UK is set to launch its new app-based ride-hailing service in Birmingham and is on the hunt for five apprentices to help drive the start-up's growth ambitions. The range of new roles includes team leaders, business administration and digital marketing.

The recruitment drive coincided with National Apprenticeship Week in February which shone a light on the work being done by apprentices and employers across the country to future-proof and develop the nation's

workforce. The new apprentices will be taking on an 18-month programme to develop their skills, increase their confidence and work towards their apprenticeship qualifications with support from UVA and training provider Remit Group.

Alongside this commitment, UVA has created five additional roles as part of the Government's Kickstart scheme, which aims to create new job placements for young people between the ages of 16 to 25 on either universal credit or at risk of long-term unemployment.

During the placements, candidates will take part in masterclasses with

leading industry business partners, receive a recognised qualification on completion and have the opportunity to be appointed by UVA full time.

Ayesha Rees, CEO of UVA UK, said: "The creation of these new roles is a vital part of our commitment to giving back to the local community and nurturing local young talent across the region.

"We want to make sure that candidates get the fullest and best experience they can when placed with us so they become well-rounded, confident young people, equipped with the skills they need for the next stages of their careers."

Playing with fantasy

Millions of pounds are being invested in the Birmingham ‘creative quarter’ to create and safeguard jobs. CARL JONES talks to one of the companies which is well placed to reap the rewards

Nigel Harris is feeling slightly frustrated. “There’s a really big contract hopefully coming our way very soon, but I’m not in a position where I can talk about it just yet,” he says.

No worries, I reply – after all, it gives us the perfect excuse for a follow-up feature some time very soon, doesn’t it?

Harris is certainly no stranger to big, high-profile projects. A veteran of children’s television, he has produced and directed more than 300 hours of broadcast content across many iconic brands such as Teletubbies, Rosie & Jim, Brum and Twirlywoos.

He’s also worked on a string of multi-camera shows for both the BBC and ITV, such as Xchange, 50/50, Saturday Show Extra, Jim Jam & Sunny, and Newsround . . . to name but a few.

It’s a job which has taken him all over the world, from the Hollywood hills of Los Angeles to the beaches

of Australia and many points in between.

“I’ve been very lucky to travel to these incredible places with my work, and have had some fantastic times along the way working with some fabulous people,” he says.

Harris is now the creative director of Jellybob Limited, a specialist in TV work, digital content and immersive content, based at the Custard Factory in the heart of Birmingham’s creative quarter.

The company, which was formed in May 2019, moved into its current Digbeth base in October last year – a highlight in what has been a disjointed and disorientating time for the creative sector, to say the least.

“I’ve got to be honest, the past year hasn’t been the best time to be finding work in the creative industries,” he admits. “A lot of broadcasters have found themselves with projects on their books they simply haven’t been able to produce.

Working on the Twirlywoos stage show

“At the same time though, it’s been the perfect time to work on project development – while being conscious of the fact that there are a whole lot of people who are doing exactly the same. There’s certainly a lot of really creative stuff going on at the moment.”

Harris says he considers himself incredibly lucky to have been able to write, produce and direct the equivalent of around 175 feature films of multi award-winning global content for young audiences over the past three decades.

That’s more than 300 hours of storytelling with strong visual narrative, globally distributed using a traditional public service broadcast platform right into young people’s homes.

But the landscape is changing rapidly, and ‘traditional’ certainly isn’t the way you’d describe this sector right now.

“The way in which people are consuming content is becoming very different and it’s evolving at a rapid rate,” Harris says.

“Our mission at Jellybob is to not be constrained by traditional approaches, but to engage with some of the new exciting and emerging aspects of creative media, as well as more traditional programme making.

“We are excited to find ourselves armed with an intense curiosity backed by exciting plans to grow our new brands which are Jellybob Digital alongside Jellybob Immersive, which we hope will engage us with a digitally creative momentum.

"It is our aim to catapult Jellybob forward into a new, exciting and as yet unknown world of immersive digital content.

"Using our experience as content creators we are able to pivot our skills towards immersive content that promises to be exciting and relevant, combining digital focus and an important social impact.

"For us, this is going to mean looking far beyond just children's television, where there are very few broadcasters and a lot of people trying to get their content aired.

"I see us developing far more in the direction of immersive content, virtual and augmented reality – and not just for the entertainment sector. There are possibilities for using this very same technology in areas across business and the medical sector.

"These are going to be the jobs of the future for today's young people who are brought up creating digital content, whether it's for games, visual effects or other things. There is much more crossover between these areas than there has ever been."

Harris sees the wider Birmingham community, but particularly Digbeth, as the perfect place for his business to be right now.

While acknowledging that there is still work to be done on the local infrastructure, he's enthused by developments such as the £18 million 'creative content hub' which has

"These are going to be the jobs of the future for today's young people who are brought up creating digital content."

been earmarked for a 50,000 sq ft campus at The Bond, in the heart of the city's creative quarter.

A planning application has been submitted for the transformation of five derelict heritage buildings on the Fazeley Street site, and the developers say: "It's the first step towards creating a cluster of film, TV, games and virtual production that will pave the way for new and immersive media content of the future."

It's also a sign of the growing desire among Birmingham-based creatives to take a collaborative approach to progress, working together to hopefully attract more major, lucrative projects to the region.

The Bond redevelopment scheme has the backing of Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP which has earmarked £3 million towards the set-up costs.

Director Anita Bhalla says Birmingham's creative industries are being seen as a priority sector that could stimulate inclusive economic growth and act as a catalyst for significant job creation in the coming months.

"The creative content hub will be an exciting addition to the media landscape and at the heart of innovative production in the region," she says.

"It's also an exciting step towards creating a TV, film and multimedia cluster in the heart of Birmingham's

creative quarter in Digbeth."

Harris is on the inaugural board of Create Central alongside the likes of Peaky Blinders mastermind Steven Knight and other industry leaders from the West Midlands, seeking to work with national and regional partners to 'turbo charge the screen sector in the heart of the UK'.

"There's a feeling that everyone is very much pulling in the same direction at the moment, whereas in the past there has been a frustration at the lack of connection across our industries," says Harris.

Two thought-provoking and iconic quotations take centre stage on the Jellybob website, encapsulating the company's aspirations and beliefs.

The first is from famous scientist Albert Einstein, who said: "What counts can't always be counted; what can be counted doesn't always count."

And the second comes from psychoanalyst Carl Jung: "Without this playing with fantasy, no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of the imagination is incalculable."

Nigel Harris has been 'playing with fantasy' now for more than 35 years, having got his initial foothold in the film industry working as a runner – these are the hands and feet of a production crew, who do all the running around and errands for senior members of the team.



Harris outside Jellybob's headquarters in the Custard Factory

From there he progressed to camera assistant, camera operator, location manager for BBC drama, assistant producer, assistant director and eventually series producer.

He has been line producer of many overseas shoots for the BBC, as well as line producer, production manager and director on the multi-award-winning children's show Twirlywoos for Ragdoll.

In fact, Harris has been involved in shows which have picked up no fewer than two BAFTAs, five Royal Television Society Awards, the Indie Award for Best Children's Programmes, and the VHE Entertainment Award of Excellence for Directing.

"I have a lot to thank Ragdoll for," he says. "Their ambition for their own shows is what has really pushed children's TV forward in recent times.

The export success of Teletubbies, for example, was absolutely phenomenal."

He remembers a time at the height of 'Teletubby mania' when the team would often be desperately trying to hide production from helicopters which would fly over the Teletubby Land set near Stratford-upon-Avon, trying to snap exclusive pictures.

When filming finished on the original show back in 2001, the owner of the land was so sick of trespassing Teletubby fans that she flooded it and turned it into a pond.

And yet, just last year, when he was at a showbiz party in Los Angeles, Harris revealed that senior industry figures were in awe that he had been involved in directing some of the Teletubbies episodes.

"People are obsessed with the

show even now," he says. "It's incredible – but it does show that we sometimes underestimate the value and power of children's programmes."

There was a time, in years gone by, when film stars would see it as beneath themselves to star on TV productions. And the same would have been true with adult TV stars who would hesitate at the thought of working on children's programmes.

But many of those barriers have been broken down. Harris says: "There certainly isn't that same kind of stigma any longer. It's been helped, I think, by the fact that many celebrities are only too happy to be associated with children's shows these days.

"On Teletubbies we worked with Derek Jacobi, for example, and I've also worked on children's TV projects with other well-known names like Mark Williams and Jason Manford."

Jellybob is currently working on what it describes as a 'massively ambitious' project, with the support of the BFI's Young Audiences Content Fund, which Harris is keen to get made here in the Midlands.

"We are looking for a broadcaster at the moment, and if it comes off, it could support many jobs in the region."

Yet another reason to book a return visit to the company some time very soon.



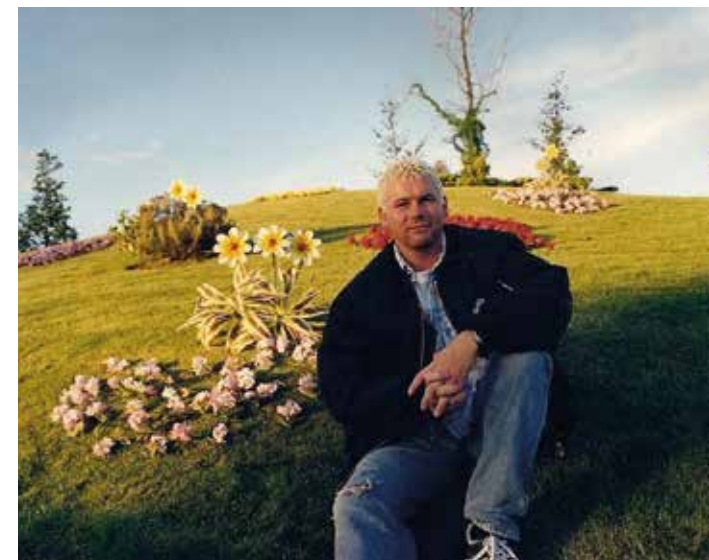
Nigel Harris with Jason Manford



Filming Tots TV in California



Behind the scenes in the Twirlywoos studio



In Teletubbyland

Birmingham 2022

A Midlands firm has been appointed to design, licence and retail a range of official Birmingham 2022 and Commonwealth Sport products.

Cube International is responsible for designing, sourcing, delivering and retailing licensed products at official Birmingham 2022 shops, other local and national retail outlets and via a dedicated online shop accessed via the birmingham2022.com website.

Approximately 1,500 products will be developed and sold – featuring Birmingham 2022, Commonwealth Sport and Home Nations branding. Cube International will also create exclusive ranges for the Birmingham 2022 official mascot, which will be unveiled later this year.

Around 35 official retail stores will be set up, including a Birmingham city centre megastore, and at a number of other city centre locations, transport hubs, games venues and temporary live sites. Cube International will also be responsible for building and operating the official online store.

The stores will employ around 300 people, with staff recruited where possible with the support of the Commonwealth Jobs and Skills Academy, launched by the West Midlands Combined Authority to

generate job opportunities for and improve the skills of local people. Roles will include customer service, security and warehousing.

In line with Birmingham 2022 and Commonwealth Sport's social value commitments, the range of products and the shops they are sold in will have a strong commitment to sustainability, with a focus on limiting single use plastics, responsibly

managing waste materials and reducing carbon emissions.

Ian Reid, Birmingham 2022 CEO, said: "Our retail offering will help to bring the games to life, building excitement as Birmingham 2022 draws closer. It will also help to support the West Midlands' economic recovery as we recruit hundreds of people to work in our retail outlets in the run-up to the games."



Joaquin and Javier Bello, Team England Beach Volleyball Players

BREWERY LAUNCHES ITS FIRST BEER

New brewery Gypsy Brew has toasted its arrival on the region's craft beer scene with the launch of its first beer.

The brewery is the brainchild of pub landlord Gary Meads and barber

Al Smith, and Gypsy Water – which they describe as 'a classic American Pale Ale' – is their first bottled beer to go to market.

The micro-brewery is based next to Mr Meads' pub, The Coach and Horses in Weatheroak Hill, and was set up after the friends' businesses were forced to cease trading during lockdown.

Mr Meads said: "Creating the brand and our first beer has been a labour of love for Al and me, and while it hasn't been easy, we're proud to have brought something positive to fruition during the pandemic."

"Having worked on the Gypsy Water brew since last March, it's both exhilarating and humbling to be able to share it with Birmingham and beyond."

Mr Smith added: "I've always been fascinated by stories behind brands, and so when the opportunity came for Gary and I to bring our joint venture to life, it felt natural that we build our own heritage into the heart of it."

"Gypsy Brew is the telling of my Romany Gypsy lineage, with products brewed at a pub that has been in Gary's family for over six decades. It's the perfect fusion of two Birmingham families' stories, and we hope that it does our fellow Brummies proud."



Al Smith, left, and Gary Meads from Gypsy Brew

New HQ for iconic brand

Norton Motorcycle Co has announced that it is moving to a new headquarters in Solihull.

The production site is the result of a multi-million-pound investment by Norton's Indian parent company, TVS Motor Company. It will be the most advanced manufacturing facility in the 122-year-old motorcycle brand's history.

The premises will be the central hub for all the iconic motorcycle brand's operations, providing a permanent base for its entire workforce.

Sudarshan Venu, joint managing director of TVS Motors, said: "The opening of the new headquarters represents a significant step forward for Norton Motorcycles. This state-of-the-art facility will create the foundations for a sustainable long-

term future for Norton."

Andy Street, mayor of the West Midlands, said: "The arrival of Norton's global headquarters to Solihull is a real vote of confidence in our region as we look to recover from the pandemic."

"It speaks volumes about the strides the West Midlands has taken forward in recent years that Norton has chosen to come home after more than a decade based outside the area."

"This investment not only re-establishes our historic partnership with Norton, but will set a world-class benchmark for exceptional motorcycle manufacturing at the heart of our region, creating hundreds of jobs in the process at what is an incredibly challenging time economically."



Tani Dulay

CHARITY EFFORT FOR INDIA

Recognise One, a platform set up by a group of Birmingham-based entrepreneurs, has raised nearly £380,000 to help support families caught up in farmers' protests in India.

More than 3,200 people have made donations after watching a Kisaans in Need event livestreamed on YouTube, which included many prominent Indian figures and attracted a large worldwide audience.

Kisaans, who are farmers or agricultural workers in India, have been protesting against a series of agricultural reform laws.

Recognise One is an apolitical platform working as part of a global movement that is committed to ending poverty and social injustice.

Investor and entrepreneur, Tani Dulay, whose day job is chief executive of Woodbourne Group property developers, has been helping to co-ordinate the charity effort.

Mr Dulay said: "Recognise One is strictly apolitical, founded on the principle of Sikhism, recognising the human race as one."

"We give voice to those that require it, no matter the colour, race or creed as part of a global movement committed to ending poverty and social injustice."

"We operate purely and transparently on a 100% donation basis, with any and all associated costs self-funded by us."

"The funds will go directly towards suicide prevention and mental health awareness projects, plus farming methods to yield better results, water preservation techniques such as the Israeli drip-feed irrigation system, and alternatives to pesticides. This will all support current and future generations of Indian farmers."



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Government hub

Birmingham is now home to a key regional hub for the Government after the final space at B1 in the Jewellery Quarter was taken in a five-year deal.

The deal follows the Government's initial take-up of 48,787 sq ft on a 10-year lease at B1 last year for the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government. At the time of completion, it was the largest deal to be agreed in Birmingham following the UK's first nationwide lockdown, and was one of the city's biggest deals of 2020.

Those behind the Jewellery Quarter building – developers Galliard Homes and Apsley House Capital – have now fully let the 92,472 sq ft space, with the

Government joining existing occupier, the Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust.

Property advisors Avison Young and Lambert Smith Hampton acted on both deals.

George Jennings, director at Avison Young, said: "This deal highlights the confidence the Government has in Birmingham and its commercial real estate offer. It will no doubt provide assurance to others looking for space that the city is a safe investment for the long term."

"In 2020, while the office market was understandably subdued, Birmingham did some impressive deals, demonstrating the city's resilience as a business and

investment location. As we move towards wider economic recovery, significant deals like this will stimulate the wider market.

"As a return to the office beckons in the months to come, occupiers' needs will evolve and both the city centre and out-of-town markets in Birmingham are diverse enough to adapt to meet them."

Alex Tross, director and head of office advisory at Lambert Smith Hampton, said: "Despite challenging market conditions, it's great to see this significant letting with the Government at B1. Getting a decision like this over the line is down to the quality and value of the B1 space in a core city centre location."

STATE-OF-THE-ART FIT-OUT FOR DLA PIPER OFFICES

Multinational law firm DLA Piper has appointed Overbury to deliver a state-of-the-art fit-out of its new regional offices in Birmingham.

Refurbishment specialist Overbury will work alongside architect TP Bennett and property and construction consultants Ridge to deliver the 40,000 sq ft fit-out across

the sixth and seventh floors of Two Chamberlain Square, which is part of the £700 million Paradise scheme.

The sixth floor of the £4.7 million project will feature a reception area, staff lounge, boardroom and several seminar and meeting rooms. These will be fitted with hi-tech Skyfold walls which can be raised or dropped from

the ceiling to provide flexible spaces for different purposes.

The seventh floor will include desk spaces, touchdown areas, breakout meeting rooms and collaborative areas all set within an open-plan environment to house over 200 employees.

The two floors will be brought together by a feature helical staircase, designed to be a statement piece for the office.

Andrew Wood, managing director of Overbury's Birmingham-based team, said: "The designs have incorporated several key factors needed to create a successful modern workplace, including flexible spaces which will breed collaboration, innovation and a working environment staff will enjoy."

"We're looking forward to working alongside TP Bennett and Ridge to create a superb space which will ensure that DLA Piper can continue to grow within the city."

Work is estimated to be completed this summer.



WORK STARTED AT STRATEGIC MIDLANDS SITE

Construction of the new headquarters for manufacturer IMI Truflo Marine has started at a strategic site in the West Midlands.

A ground-breaking ceremony was staged at the site of the manufacturing and design facility at Birmingham's Advanced Manufacturing Hub.

Barberry Industrial – a West Midlands-based property investor and developer – was selected to purchase the site from Birmingham City Council and Homes England, and subsequently agreed to deliver a 57,000 sq ft headquarters and



manufacturing building on behalf of IMI Truflo Marine.

The engineering company will relocate to the manufacturing hub in Witton from its current site nearby. It has agreed a 15-year lease.

Managing director Mark Bloxham

said: "I am delighted to see the project under way. It will not only create a world-class manufacturing facility for our customers, employees and stakeholders, but it will also serve as a centre of engineering excellence to support our market."

NEW HEIGHTS REACHED AT SNOW HILL

Birmingham's changing skyline has been altered once more with property developer St Joseph topping out at 21 storeys in the Gun Quarter.

The new heights were reached at St Joseph's canalside Snow Hill Wharf, with construction of the tallest of its five buildings – The Regent – reaching its highest point of 598 feet.

The Regent features 108 of the 420 homes at Snow Hill Wharf and is currently the tallest residential apartment block to be sold in the Gun Quarter.

Members of St Joseph's construction team held a topping out ceremony to mark the development milestone, with the company now gearing up to welcome its first residents later this year after already selling 60% of the homes.

Snow Hill Wharf is St Joseph's first project in Birmingham, with the Berkeley Group division arriving in the city in 2017. When complete, it is set to house over 700 residents across a mix of one, two and three-bedroom apartments, duplexes and penthouses.

The development also features a cinema room, residents' lounge, 24-hour concierge service, sauna, steam room and gym, as well as three podium gardens overlooking the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal.

Charlie Joseph, director at St Joseph, said: "The Regent is the jewel in Snow Hill Wharf's crown. To see the building topping out and becoming part of Birmingham's skyline is a key milestone for St Joseph and the transformation of the city's Gun Quarter."

Plans for Midland's Mills

Birmingham-based property developer Cordia Blackswan has handed over its Jewellery Quarter site to Legal & General and SRM.

The move will bring forward a major mixed-use scheme to the Hockley Mills site, which has been handled by Cordia Blackswan from inception.

Hockley Mills is set to house 395 new BTR apartments, as well as 28,000 sq ft of commercial space for leisure and offices across four acres and eight buildings. The site was designed with the local heritage and architecture of the surrounding area in mind.

The £100 million investment from L&G means that the project now has the capacity to proceed to the building phase to create a new living space in the heart of Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter.

Marcus Hawley, managing director



of Cordia Blackswan, said: "It's been a great achievement to get the Hockley Mills project through the tough planning stages, and finding funding for the project."

"As part of our ongoing vision, and in alignment with our partnership with Cordia, we will now be focusing on other projects within Birmingham and the Jewellery Quarter."

Office hub complete

A £1.2 million refurbishment of a landmark office building in Birmingham has reached practical completion, according to joint developers Key Land Capital and Urban Village Capital.

The joint venture partners have invested significantly to deliver a high-quality business hub at Trinity Point in Halesowen.

Approximately 30,000 sq ft of office space has been refurbished, and some 20,000 sq ft of self-contained office suites is available for rent.

Office space provider Citibase has taken a lease on 10,000 sq ft to create an office hub providing space for SMEs and start-ups seeking flexible accommodation. It has agreed lettings to three occupiers.

Key Land Capital and Urban Village Capital are Birmingham-based investment and development businesses with multi-million-pound portfolios of developments across the UK.

Kevin Sharkey, chief executive officer at Key Land Capital, said: “The fantastic new facilities at Trinity Point will help businesses grow, collaborate, and create jobs for people in the area as companies recover from the affects of the pandemic and adapt to the new working environment.”

He added: “It has been exciting to see the transformation of Trinity Point with a comprehensive programme

of refurbishment. The office space has been stripped out and brought up to modern standards with new mechanical and electrical systems, LED lighting, complete redecoration, new carpets and upgraded toilets. The new office suites will provide first class business accommodation.

Contact agents Siddall Jones and KWB for more information on the accommodation available.

Trinity Point, conveniently located offering dual carriageway access to junction three of the M5, has benefited from an on-going rolling refurbishment programme since it was acquired by Key Land Capital in 2018. It includes suspended ceilings with LG7 lighting, raised

access flooring, air conditioning, two cores providing two passenger lifts. Externally, there is a car park to the front, side, rear and beneath the east and west wings, providing 160 spaces.

Key Land Capital is delivering residential projects worth more than £40 million across the West Midlands. Its mission is to provide affordable, luxury and modern housing to students and professionals, whilst maintaining solid returns for investors. The company raises private investment to develop sites throughout the Midlands, a mixture of residential new-build and office to residential conversions.



MILESTONE FOR LONGBRIDGE REGENERATION

Property developer St. Modwen has concluded the £6.2m sale of 3 Devon Way, a 21,000 sq ft Grade A office building in the heart of Longbridge Town Centre.

The deal demonstrates the continued investment in Longbridge and marks a major milestone in the regeneration of the town.

The sale to Bradda Capital follows the building’s occupation by independent professional services consultancy Barnett Waddingham, which has relocated its Birmingham office to Longbridge after agreeing a 15-year lease on the building in January 2019 at £19.25psf. The pre-let deal between Barnett Waddingham and St. Modwen was recognised as the biggest out-of-town letting in the region for Q4 2018 and is anticipated to bring over 150 jobs to the town.

Marketed by Savills, 3 Devon Way attracted significant interest from buyers with an appetite for secure, long let, commercial property investments. The building’s location, high-quality design and excellent environmental credentials saw it achieve a net initial yield of 6.25%.

Elliot Sellars, Development Director at St. Modwen, said: “The sale of 3 Devon Way is a major step forward in the regeneration of Longbridge. Not only have we welcomed a fantastic new business in Barnett

Waddingham, but we have also welcomed Bradda Capital as an investment partner in the town – one which shares our values and long-term vision for Longbridge.

“This deal highlights the success of Longbridge as a sought-after location for businesses that want fantastic access to transport routes in a vibrant and bustling town centre location. We hope to welcome more businesses to the town as we bring forward additional space in Two Park Square, a proposed 48,000 sq ft Grade-A office building in the centre of Longbridge.”

Matt Jenns, Investment Director at Savills in Birmingham, commented: “The price achieved for 3 Devon Way is testament to the quality of the buildings and the award-winning mixed-use environment that our client has delivered at Longbridge Town Centre. It also demonstrates the strength and depth of demand for long income offices which we have seen in a range of similar transactions in 2020, post the spring lockdown.”

TAILORED WORKSPACES GOES LIVE AT BRINDLEYPLACE

Tailored Workspaces, an innovative new solution designed to provide businesses with support, flexibility and expertise when leasing and occupying office space, has launched at Brindleyplace, Birmingham.

Brindleyplace is home to 10,000 employees from international and local companies, including Deutsche Bank, Avison Young, Deloitte and Natwest. The destination attracts 4 million visitors a year who are drawn to its 22 bars, cafes and restaurants, shops, health and wellbeing facilities, a contemporary art gallery and public realm spaces.

Tailored Workspaces is a concept developed by Savills and Hines which provides three options to help support businesses with office fit-outs, installation of IT systems and the ongoing management of space with bespoke management services provided to meet tenants’ specific needs.

The product has been created specifically for Brindleyplace to ensure it supports future occupiers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in readiness for future investment opportunities with more companies looking to the regions outside of London for high-quality office space.

Businesses can choose to enlist the help of the specialist team at Brindleyplace to provide guidance



and ongoing support throughout the fit-out process and occupation thereafter, with the cost of any additional services spread across the duration of the lease agreement.

Prospective tenants can either choose to lease space conventionally, where they take the office fit-out into their own hands; or appoint the Brindleyplace specialist team to help design and deliver the office fit-out with IT services; and as a third option, embrace the full provision of services including fit out, full infrastructure and ongoing office management services, designed specifically for their operational needs.

Tailored Workspaces can be used by tenants looking to lease available space at 3 Brindleyplace, 4 Brindleyplace and the Oozells Building, and it is suitable for businesses looking to house between 16 and over 250

workstations within their own private office environment.

Raj Rajput, Managing Director – Asset Management, UK, at Hines, said: “We have engaged with and listened to our own tenants, underpinned by industry research, to develop this product in partnership with Savills. We are well aware of the acute challenges facing businesses of all shapes and sizes across all sectors at the moment and have tried to make it as easy and stress free as possible for tenants who are trying to plan ahead for the future of their business.

“Tailored Workspaces at Brindleyplace gives occupiers choice. They are free to use as much, or as little, support as they need before, during and after they move into their new offices. The product is about matching the specific needs of tenants with a simple solution in respect of fit-out and the provision of services.”

Positive outlook

Property assets in Birmingham remain on investors’ shopping lists despite the challenges posed by Covid-19 and the post-Brexit era, according to PwC and the Urban Land Institute’s annual Emerging Trends in Real Estate Europe 2021 report.

Birmingham is 18th on the list of European cities based on the local outlook for real estate prospects in rents and capital values, in comparison to 27th place last year.

The report found that the real estate sector across the continent is in the midst of a cyclical downturn, which coincides with long-term structural changes fast-forwarded by the pandemic. However, property is one of the few asset classes able to generate acceptable returns at a time of low or negative interest rates.

Jonathan Clements, real estate tax director at PwC, said: “The pandemic has accelerated a number of previously identified structural trends, notably the increase in e-commerce and remote working. This has forced

investors to re-examine the risk and return on assets.

“It is a challenging time for the real estate industry, with global political change, Brexit and the pandemic creating uncertainty, and understandably a cautious outlook for 2021. But this is balanced by the weight of capital to be deployed.

“The uncertainty of this year has shifted priorities in the sector. We’ve seen a move away from the mainstay sectors of retail, hospitality and leisure, a pause in relation to office, and a strengthening demand for alternative sectors such as housing, data centres, life sciences/health, energy and communications infrastructure with a continued desire for industrial property and logistics warehouses – which all benefit from growing demand in this new environment.

“There is a growing requirement to look more closely at the value to be derived from these demand shifts, and newer, emerging asset classes.



Johnathan Clements

Investors are therefore looking beyond real estate and into broader real assets – the built environment and infrastructure that surrounds us. These are all inextricably linked, not only to one another, but to how we live, work, consume and spend our leisure time – and we will see these trends play out in the region.”

PwC/ULI’s report, now in its 18th year, is based on a survey of almost 1,000 property executives from 25 countries across Europe.



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Property business welcomes new project director

Property development and investment business Key Land Capital has appointed a new project director to help deliver its growth strategy.

Tom Martin will oversee the Birmingham-based company's residential and commercial developments at sites across the West Midlands.

His role will also include carrying out development appraisals, handling procurement, and managing the pre-construction and construction stages of projects.

Tom has been employed by Key Land Capital for the past year as a consultant and has significant experience in the property sector. He was formerly technical manager at Hayfield, and was a technical co-ordinator at both Lovell Partnerships and Persimmon Homes.

Managing director Kevin Sharkey said: "Tom is a strong addition to the team and we are delighted he has joined us as project director.

"Our focus now is on new-build housing. We are positioning the business to take advantage of government initiatives to get more SMEs involved in the housebuilding industry.

"It is clear that housebuilding and construction will be a key driver of the post-pandemic economic recovery."

New deputy vice-chancellor for Birmingham City University

Birmingham City University has announced that academic, researcher and university leader Professor Peter Francis is to take up the role of deputy vice-chancellor.

Peter will take up the position in July this year, joining from Northumbria University where he has been deputy vice-chancellor since May 2015. He will take on responsibility for the university's subject portfolio, support for students and recruitment.

In his time at Northumbria University, Peter has overseen an array of key projects including the university's response to the Teaching Excellence Framework, the development of a package of degree apprenticeships, and business transformation programmes on technology and student outcomes.

"The opportunity to take on such an important role at Birmingham City University is one I could not turn down," he said.

"It is a unique university with a rich heritage and an outstanding reputation for enabling people

from the city, the region and beyond to transform their lives for the better.

"I am very much looking forward to helping lead the university in the next phase of its history, giving every possible opportunity for students to achieve their fullest potential as successful graduates."

Peter will replace the retiring Professor Clare Mackie who has served as deputy vice-chancellor since 2018.



EY appoints head of financial services for the Midlands

EY has appointed Martina Neary to head up its financial services business in the Midlands.

Martina replaces Amit Thaker, who will retain a leadership position in the Midlands and returns to his tax technology and transformation role.

Martina is a CFO consulting partner at EY, advising businesses in the insurance, wealth, and asset management industries.

She has more than 20 years' experience working with some of the UK's largest financial institutions – including major UK and global insurance companies – and has significant experience delivering finance transformation projects, and advising on mergers and acquisition.

Anna Anthony, UK financial services managing partner at EY, said: "Martina is highly respected within the industry and understands the full potential of the Midlands financial services market.

"Having worked with some of the UK's largest financial institutions, she is well placed to guide our clients through the current challenges and opportunities."

Ben Morphet has also recently been promoted to partner, and will lead EY's financial services assurance practice in the Midlands.





Finance specialist joins property firm

West Midlands property consultancy Burley Browne has bolstered its property management team with the arrival of finance specialist Emma Cowley.

Emma has joined the Sutton Coldfield-based company as property accountant to help to deliver a complete property management service to commercial property landlords across the industrial, retail and office sectors.

With several years' experience in commercial property accounting – including service charge accounts and VAT reporting – Emma will oversee all aspects of finance in the property management department, working alongside Faryal Sheikh who leads the department.

"I am excited to be working alongside Faryal and look forward to helping to build the property management division while delivering high levels of service for our landlords," she said.

"Our aim is to drive the property management division forward and grow our portfolio of properties significantly. Offering added value to landlords is key to our growth and development strategy."

Temporary role becomes permanent

Public relations firm Grayling Birmingham has welcomed a new full-time starter in the form of Bella Martin-Williams.

Bella has been made an account executive following a stint working with the team on a temporary basis before Christmas.

Her role will involve supporting the wider team to deliver PR, social media and SEO activity across a range of Midlands clients including M&S, HSBC, ITG, Intercity Technology and Coventry University Group.

Before starting in PR, she worked as a professional vocalist and pianist for seven years, performing across a variety of events across the Midlands as a soloist and as part of a jazz band.

"I look forward to working across the variety of global, national and local brands that our Midlands team and wider network work with," said Bella.

"The experience I gained during working with the team on a temporary basis has been

invaluable. Taking part in work experience where it's available – even remotely – does reap rewards eventually if you demonstrate your passion and willingness to learn."



Promotion for employment expert

Midlands law firm Ladders has promoted employment and HR law specialist Faye Reynolds to senior associate.



Faye's promotion comes just 12 months after she joined Ladders as an associate.

She works with employers and employees on all aspects of contentious and non-contentious employment law.

"The past year has seen significant and frequent changes to the employment law landscape with new rules and legislation brought in to support employers and employees," said Faye.

"As well as coping with the impact of the pandemic and national lockdowns, employers face changes to the off-payroll tax legislation IR35, the impact of Brexit, pressure to address inclusivity and diversity, and support employee wellbeing for what is an increasingly remote-based workforce."

Senior consultant joins risk management company

Birmingham-based risk management consultancy Equib has welcomed a professional with more than 40 years' experience to its team.

Mark Alcock has worked as a risk management specialist on large capital projects and for operating companies in the mining, rail, defence, power and nuclear industries.

His career highlights include senior risk roles for the Astute Class Submarine, Metronet SSL, Crossrail Western tunnels and HS2 Phase 1.

Equib specialises in providing

risk advisory and management services to heavy civil construction and infrastructure projects and programmes.

In his role as senior consultant, Mark will be providing risk management support on BBV HS2, helping managers to fully understand risk exposure, risk treatment responses, and supporting informed decision-making.

"I have been fortunate to know and work with Equib for a number of years and have managed some of its employees directly," said Mark.

"I am looking forward to working more closely with the team, and helping project decision-makers to understand and manage risk."

Bill Zuurbier, chairman at Equib, said: "While Mark has been a valued member of our extended team for some time, it's great to welcome him on board as part of Equib."

"We look forward to benefitting from his in-depth expertise as we continue to optimise results on some of the UK's most challenging projects and programmes."



Pictured, from left, Adam Shaw, Tom Mander, Mark Venables and Andrew Du Plessis

Three appointments made at wire manufacturer

A West Midlands wire manufacturer has strengthened its senior management team with three key appointments.

Alloy Wire International, which celebrates 75 years of manufacturing this year, has promoted Tom Mander, Andrew Du Plessis and Adam Shaw to managing director designate, technical director and finance director respectively.

The trio will work with the current SMT to help the company in the next stage of its development, as it looks to maximise a £3m investment in material, new drawing machines, spooling equipment and office/factory improvements.

Mark Venables, managing director of Alloy Wire International, said: "We have built an incredible business and it is vital that we

have a succession plan in place to build on recent growth and take advantage of new opportunities in the UK and overseas.

"In Tom, Andrew and Adam we have three experienced professionals who are hungry to carry on the AWI journey.

"They will continue to learn from the three existing directors and also be encouraged to bring their own ideas and vision to the table."

Announcement of new CEO at PB Training Services



PB Training Services has announced the appointment of Alex Latham as CEO, succeeding Paul Latham who has moved to the position of group chairman.

With centres in Brierley Hill and Birmingham, PB Training Services delivers HSE training solutions to the energy, oil and gas, engineering, construction and education sectors in the UK, in addition to a range of bespoke and vocational technical training for the private and public sectors.

Since joining the firm as a health and safety administrator in 2016, Alex has been a key member of the management team.

"I am excited to set the direction for the business, allowing a renewed focus on customer needs as we continue to grow our organisation and adapt to current market conditions," he said.

"We have a fantastic team ready to meet that challenge and it's a proud moment for me to lead PB Training and our other associated companies such as TLC Platforms, Abstergo Consultancy and DAP Trading."

Paul Latham added: "Alex has displayed tremendous leadership throughout his career and has built up a rich bank of experience and knowledge."

Denise Morris

Founder and CEO of TAG Network Midlands

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insight

In one sentence, what does your role involve?

TAG Network Midlands is a networking community and membership organisation within the Midlands, developing professionals from the start of their career right through to them being established leaders, and my role is to create and steer the organisation's vision.

How long have you been in your current job?

I have been in my role since 2014, which has been a rewarding journey so far. Over the years I have had the privilege of connecting professionals with successful opportunities and have also supported the professional growth of aspiring leaders who have thrived within their career. I do not take for granted that I am in a position to make a difference.

How has your company responded to the coronavirus crisis?

TAG Network Midlands was amongst the first networking organisations to pivot and execute networking events, development sessions and socials all online within a few days of lockdown being announced back in March 2020.

Has the fallout from the pandemic presented any opportunities as well as challenges?

The opportunities have been endless during lockdown. We have been able to deliver strong and essential knowledge sharing, secure great partnerships and develop new strategies intrinsic to supporting more multi-sector young professionals, entrepreneurs and leaders within the Midlands.

During this period, I have launched a Work Experience Placement Programme, recruited a new Young Professional Board, appointed additional non-executive directors, released digital issues of our TAG Network Midlands Insider Magazine, hosted more than 50 events online, as well as developing a number of exciting projects which will be announced shortly.

The innate challenges that have had an impact on both the business community and individuals has been the absence or restriction of in-person interactions. Whilst technology has offered great ways to produce added-value content



and alternative connectivity, it does not fully replace the void or ability to communicate within a physical networking environment.

Irrespective of the obstacles, what I have appreciated is the greatness of my team and the supportive people I have around me. It has been humbling and inspiring.

How do you get the best out of your staff?

Communication. Leadership languages and methodology is more instinctive and flexible due to the current situations. As such, I have adopted many approaches. If your team doesn't feel included, valued, empowered to share their thoughts, be engaged or be heard, this in itself will create unnecessary barriers. Everyone within an organisation has to buy into the vision.

Times are changing, the way business is conducted during unprecedented times has shifted, and the ways teams interact is different. If you are to strengthen your brand proposition, your team has to be behind you and, likewise, you have to understand their unique needs.

How many emails do you tend to get in a day, and how much time do you have to read them?

On average, around 150 emails

land in my inbox daily, so prioritising my time is key. As time is precious, I do designate a specific portion of my day to keep on top of correspondence.

How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

Resilient and tenacious.

Highlights of your career so far?

Building a growing company.

Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?

I am pretty sure that I have perpetrated many faux pas in my time. However, nothing cringe-worthy springs to mind.

Pet hates?

Rudeness.

If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?

To not sweat the small stuff and stress less about the things you cannot change.

How do you relax away from work?

I have various hobbies and activities that relax me. I enjoy reading, listening to music, catching up with friends and family albeit via Zoom, and enhancing my culinary skills.

What do you believe is special about the Birmingham business community?

The abundance of talent, and people who genuinely want to support each other. What makes Birmingham's business community outstanding is the way we nurture ideas, how we are progressive, and its generators of great opportunities.

Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.

I used to play bass and rhythm guitar when I was in various rock/indie bands in my teens.

You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?

Okay, so I would take 'I Know Why A Caged Bird Sings' by Maya Angelou, Inception, and listen to Nirvana.

Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

Michelle Obama, Stephen Fry, David Bowie, Serena Williams and Chadwick Boseman.

What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

Steak with truffle fries!

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