

BASINGSTOKE:

Annual Report & Accounts

“When it comes to describing the performance of the Basingstoke economy in numbers, let’s start by getting a sense of perspective,” says Alec Brooks, partner and head of company/commercial at law firm Lamb Brooks. “Because the collective turnover generated by the top 100 companies in Basingstoke in the last financial year was £11.4 billion, an increase of 7.5%.

“Pre-tax profits were £1.2billion, creating a profit margin of 10.6%. But actually, the pre-tax profit total slipped back 9.5% over the year from £1.3billion, with large year’s margin being 12.3%.”

So let’s look at some of the detail behind the figures...

The company with the biggest turnover in the borough is Computer 2000 Distribution, with sales increasing by 15.2% to £1.4 billion, and the directors predicting more diversification and organic growth – such as the acquisition last year of rights relating to the distribution of Autodesk software in the UK.

But arguably another Tech Data Corporation owned company based in Basingstoke has taken the spotlight. Formerly called Brightstar Europe until September of this year, Tech Data Mobile posted an increase in turnover of 173% to £368million.

The largest percentage increase by a public company was achieved by De La Rue, with sales up 14% to £528million. Interestingly, its former cash handling division, Talaris, sold to private equity and this year acquired by the Japanese Glory group, upped its turnover by 20% to £143million.

Of the two Motorolas, electronics business Motorola Solutions UK came out ahead with sales of £311 million, down 45% after the sale of its networks

business. Motorola Mobility UK, now owned by Google, and embedded in mobile communications, achieved £251million, but that was up 28.5%.

One of the most familiar names in the commercial lexicon of Basingstoke is Centerprise International, which is still the largest independent company in Basingstoke by sales. However, the IT products and services group doesn’t use the V-word. According to the directors, the strategy is for a continuing move



from volume to value, so while sales dropped 10% to £46.4million, profits were up 5% to £2.1million. The company’s community involvement is documented in their accounts, sponsoring Basingstoke Town Football Club. Rafi Razzak, chairman and founder of Centerprise International has a significant interest in the club.

Mention should be made of Chas A Blatchford, a world leader in prosthetic and orthotic products. Under the stewardship of chief executive Stephen Blatchford, the fourth generation of the family-owned business, the company increased turnover by 15% to £45 million. And it’s not just products but services which make up that figure; Blatchford are responsible for looking after individual NHS prosthesis patients (more than 250,000 appointments in a year).

And Basingstoke is home to a number

of companies which might pass under the radar. Adare International, and its trading arm The Purple Agency, are headquartered here with sales of £74.7 million. The marketing services company says: “It’s all about the people, our personality, our passion, our energy, our blend of magic and logic.” And before anyone should dismiss that as marketing babble, they lifted turnover by 18.4%.

The biggest pre-tax profits - they may have moved their manufacturing to Speke, but their UK headquarters is still in Basingstoke, and Eli Lilly & Company produced a pre-tax profit of £340million, albeit a decrease of 31.6%. The best performance by a public company came from Genus plc, the world leader in bovine genetics who posted a 33% increase to £54.4 million.

Computer storage products distributor Hammer – whose group has the delightful title Megafun Ltd – is the independently owned company with the biggest pre-tax profits, up 111% to £6.9 million on sales of £105 million.

A quick look at asset values...

The top companies headquartered in Basingstoke collectively had net assets of £4.6 billion; that’s an increase of 5.7%. Current assets totalled £8.3 billion, a rise of 4.9%, with current liabilities rising by 14.2% to £5.4 billion. But total assets outstripped total liabilities by 45.9%.

The company with the largest increase in net asset value is Talaris, up 194% to £28.3million, still a little way off Eli Lilly & Company’s £630million, a figure which increased by 40% over the year.

Basingstoke is home to the headquarters of a number of companies with a global reach, and the 100 biggest in the borough are responsible for 52,621 jobs. Of course, because

these are international businesses, a significant percentage of people are employed elsewhere, but just as a figure it would represent 63% of the total jobs market in the borough.

The number of people employed by the top 100 companies in Basingstoke is actually remarkably consistent - the figure rose just 0.1% over the year.

It's interesting to note that Basingstoke is the most self-contained employment location in the county, providing jobs within the borough boundaries for 67% of Basingstoke people eligible for work.

Overall productivity increased by 2%, average salaries also rose, by 2.7%

The biggest increase in staff numbers was achieved by Tech Data Mobile, formerly Brightstar; numbers increased 224% to 146. JDSU, the electronic test equipment company took on 116% more staff, from 63 to 136 according to their accounts, and technology provider Imtech increased their payroll from 57 to 82, a rise of 44%.

The total salaries paid by the top 100 companies, leaving aside national insurance contributions by both parties is £1.7billion, an increase of 1.66%.

The average salary, shorn of NI and pension contributions, is £40,046, a 2.7% increase over the year.

What the data shows is that Basingstoke has a talent pool with the skills and talents which are in demand. And while staff remuneration rose by 2.7% over the year, the remuneration of the highest paid directors in the county increased by 2.9%. And if we look at the average remuneration of the top paid director at the top 50 companies in Basingstoke, the figure is £323,000.

If we look at productivity

in terms of turnover per employee, overall, productivity in Basingstoke increased by 2%.

By far the biggest investor in research and development has been Eli Lilley, who invested £146.7 million pounds from their turnover of £823 million, which was up almost 5% compared to the previous year.

For a less expected example of how investment in the future pays dividends let's look at Sanden International. The Basingstoke company is described as a sales and distribution business, but they invest in R&D to enhance products for their marketplace, spending just under a million, an increase of some 200% over the year. They saw pre-tax profits rise by just over five and a half million to £14.7 million, up 62.5%.

Another interesting example is Multitone Electronics, who in 1955 installed the first ever 'bleeper' or pager system. They prefer to talk about messaging nowadays, and their private network systems embrace SMS and email. In the aftermath of the 7/7 terrorist attack on London, Multitone's was the only network still working. And today the company is still investing in R&D, £277,000 at the last count to see where the envelope can be pushed.

Overall, the investment in R&D taken across all the companies in Basingstoke which file full or medium accounts slipped 2.7% over the year.

Flexible infrastructure to meet clients' needs

"I know it sounds trite, but in a service company, people make the difference." David Radcliffe, chief executive of Hogg Robinson Group plc pauses. The quoted company, which can trace its origins to a Francis Hogg and his broker-in-law Augustus Robinson who set up an insurance and merchanting business, has moved on to become what it describes itself as an 'international corporate services organisation'.

But Radcliffe is at pains to say that it's not just the travel, accommodation, venue sourcing, and the expense and data management for clients using software HRG have developed themselves. "If you own the technology, you can be as flexible as you like," he says. "We can bend the infrastructure to fit the client. But we need people who want to do that as a matter of course."

That characteristic became apparent when bold decisions had to be taken to generate cost savings as the world economy ran out of steam. In 2008, the Hogg Robinson Group plc share price dropped alarmingly to 5p, then found itself up at 70p.

"Our major global competitors had to shore up their balance sheet, and it took a while to make the investment community realise we were different because we didn't need to make a call for more money," recalls Radcliffe.

But it required significant redundancies. "A year later we felt that the back half of 2010 would pick up, but we had to get there first," explains Radcliffe. "We were very honest with our people and said that we needed more restructuring but that there were other options to get us through - a 5% salary cut, or a three-month sabbatical on 20% of salary. We held our breath - and 80% of the staff took the offer up. We've subsequently repaid all the money to them, with interest.

"When you have got a workforce in a company which is prepared to act in a way which is supportive, most things are achievable."

The volcanic ash cloud which caused aviation chaos in 2010 put that to the test. "When we asked for volunteers, 800 staff came in at the weekend," Radcliffe recalls. "We brought back 28,000 people."

One regular HRG initiative has

about a dozen staff from all over the world (different each time) spending two hours with the CEO, bringing questions from their workplace. Which led to the launch of an initiative which provides justification for the company's tagline 'HRG - People Going Further'.

"One of the questions I was asked was why, as Hogg Robinson is an international business, an employee in a particular country couldn't work abroad," explains Radcliffe. "So we invented our Interchange Programme, which gives people the chance to work for a month in a different country. We invent a fictitious job, for example, a location finder for a film company in New Zealand, which anyone wanting to go to that country can apply for. Typically there will be thirty-five placements drawn from 500 applicants. It means that people are using their imagination, not something they often get to do in the working environment. I think that companies sometimes forget that with every employee they get a free brain. We deal with the cost and accommodation, but anyone in the host country who puts them up is paid an allowance. Then every week they write about their experiences on our intranet."

The old travel management mould, which Hogg Robinson broke, would see a corporate services company typically make its money from commission paid by the airlines or hotels. Instead, HRG hands over that income from suppliers, and in turn, the clients pays a fee for that end-to-end management service, and enhanced savings.

Radcliffe isn't fazed by the notion that the lure of low-cost airlines might tempt companies into making their own arrangements. "We have a client company which needs 5000 flights a year to Germany," he explains. "A seat on a low-cost carrier was, for example, £80, as against £150. But taking into account the extra travelling to Stansted Airport each time, the additional eighty kilometres away from the destination because the low-cost carrier was flying into a secondary airport, and we were able to demonstrate how that low-cost carrier was more expensive on price alone.

"One of my favourites is the hotel rate quoted on the internet, which the client realises, when they arrive, doesn't include local and national

taxes or the cost of wi-fi access. So the cheaper deal is more expensive than the hotel which charges a higher amount up-front. We do all that information finding as a matter of course."

"For a company which needed to achieve across the board savings, we tightened up their travel arrangements with more use of advance bookings, moving more UK domestic travel to rail, with more use of restricted rather than open tickets. Although there was minimal impact on the traveller, we delivered £640,000 saving in that financial year."

Service enhancements include Hogg Robinson alerts, which inform an individual traveller about something which they need to be aware of once they've arrived, together with any alterations to the arrangements which need to be made as a consequence.

"What we want to be," says Radcliffe, "is the best company providing the end-to-end solution; which isn't the same as being the biggest."

www.hrgworldwide.com

Enabling companies to do very clever things

"Basically, we make things which go in and out, up and down, and round and round, which enable companies to do things which are really clever."

Of course Gary Livingstone, managing director of LG Motion, is being as simplistic as possible by way of explanation. And rather modest as well. Essentially the company design and manufacture motion technology products, integrating lasers, sensors, scanners, and optics which are so extremely accurate at both high and low speeds and can move so minutely, they enable a single human hair to be sliced fifty times.

Watch Wallace and Gromit, or Oscar-nominated The Pirates, and the cameras operated by Aardman Animation are mounted to LG Motion slides. "They are so accurate in terms of positioning that if they make a mistake in filming, they can re-shoot it easily," says Livingstone, who had to sign the commercial equivalent of the Official Secrets Act to install the kit.

It's that additional layer of confidentiality which he believes is a



Gary Livingstone

reason why the company is trusted to work on commercially sensitive projects as well as for the nuclear industry and the Ministry of Defence. “Some of our work, for the development of precision engine turbine blades for example, won’t result in a product for maybe as long as a decade,” he explains.

Livingstone started the company in 2004 and has achieved 10% growth every year since, with exports primarily to Europe representing a quarter of sales. “Mentally we haven’t been taking part in the recession,” he declares. “We concentrate on working with industries which have momentum. Science and research have largely escaped government cuts and the sensible corporates have been prepared to continue to invest in R&D.”

The company also uses technology to bridge the geographical distance between company and clients, and will set up a dedicated webcam link so that they can see their equipment under test.

Livingstone took an engineering apprenticeship when he left school and it’s a training route he’s still committed to, taking on an apprentice a year and putting them through college. He believes that the biggest threat to his business is a paucity of skilled staff.

“I’m a gadget person,” he says. “I’m fascinated by how things work and I don’t like standing still. If I can’t attract like-minded people it’s going to be more difficult to keep

one step ahead, because the sweet-spot for us is to find solutions to problems which aren’t yet apparent.

“Last year half my staff of twenty-two were on college courses leading to formal technical and management qualifications, because to keep the company growing I’m going to need a management team with business acumen.

“The trouble is getting politicians to see that manufacturing isn’t something you can turn on and off. Twenty years ago the government didn’t invest in manufacturing and now it’s bemoaning the lack of capacity. If politicians would think longer than their term of office it would make a difference.”

Livingstone would like to see a cross-party, co-ordinated plan to attract more technology-based manufacturing and engineering companies to Basingstoke, if only to provide a larger recruitment pool.

“A university in Basingstoke would encourage emerging technologies to locate in the area and allow a critical mass of trained people to emerge,” he suggests.

www.lg-motion.co.uk

Sitting comfortably in an emergency

They say you can find anything on Google and Paul Mitchell, managing director of Environmental Handling Systems certainly did – it’s where he located his first clients after putting up an advert for organisations needing advice on health and safety and risk assessment. “I was bored with corporate life working in the waste industry,” recalls Mitchell, “so I familiarised myself with internet advertising. It was a peak time for health and safety and the business just took off.”

It was 2004 and Mitchell had set up a consultancy in his converted garage and within the first month he was travelling to Penzance one day and Scotland the next.

His business has a specialisation in providing courses to train the trainers in their own workplace, from assessments for sitting correctly at computer stations to using special evacuation chairs in the event of a fire. It was the latter which kick started an idea that led to him setting up a sister company, Evacusafe.

“I worked with a group of disabled ex-servicemen and they hated the chairs they had to use,” he recalls. It was at this point that the internet came back into its own for Mitchell. “I emailed a number of manufacturers and eventually found a company in Taiwan who would make chairs for me for 20% less than any UK firm,” he explains, “so my brother-in-law and I went out there and picked up the prototype. We liked it so much we put our houses up as collateral, invested the money in the tools they needed to make the moulds and sent them back to Taiwan. Back home we had a website built and positioned ourselves in Google. We were so niche that customers found us.”

The timing was perfect. The new fire safety act was due to come in the following year, which stated that every organisation had to have a plan to be able to get all their staff out of the building in an emergency with the number of chairs determined by a risk assessment. Their first order was from a major DIY chain who bought 170, one for each of their stores and in its first year of operating Evacusafe sold 500 chairs.

But Mitchell was still thinking about ways to improve his design

and had a light bulb moment during a family holiday.

“I was in Florida looking around at the Americans, realising many of them would need much bigger chairs,” he explains. “I started to think about evacuation chairs that would allow people to slide across from their wheelchairs and which would have built-in carry handles. So I sketched out some designs and when I got home put them into a CAD programme and sent them off to Taiwan.”

When the prototype came back, Mitchell dispatched it for a punishing set of crushing and bending tests and it returned with a clean bill of health, able to take a weight limit of up to 160 kilos, ideal for the American and Middle East market which is where hundreds of them now are, as well as in hospitals and courts across the British Isles, care homes, hotels and supermarkets. Meanwhile his original company, EHS, is training people how to use them.

“There’s a huge rental market too,” says Mitchell, “from disabled people coming to stay with relatives or in B&B’s. We’ve also been talking to the London Ambulance service to design something more bespoke but at the moment they don’t have the money to progress it.”

The biggest building and the tallest hotel in the world, both in Dubai, have his chairs but getting them in there necessitated some nimble steps over the red exporting tape.

“We started to export in 2006,” explains Mitchell. “We looked for places with lots of high rise buildings and Dubai was a obvious choice. We did a trade show there which generated lots of interest, but it became obvious that we had to have a partner who speaks the language, so we found a local company who would sell the chairs on our behalf. There’s no legislation there which makes the chairs compulsory; they do it for customer care.”

Evacusafe doesn’t build to order but carries a large stock of around 400 chairs so they can be delivered the next day and for one conference centre in Liverpool, that level of service saved some blushes. Mitchell takes up the story.

“The ACC conference centre in Liverpool was hosting an event on fire safety just into the new year and they contacted us on Christmas Eve

to say they realised they needed a dozen chairs. We were able to dispatch them immediately.”

The one threat to business development, according to Mitchell, is cash flow.

“We rely on a combination of the customer paying us on time and banks supporting us,” he says. “We still had to put our houses up as collateral once to make sure our staff got paid. They’ve got mortgages and commitments so we were happy to do that.”

Mitchell plans to expand through design and exports; Brazil, Russia, India and China are in his sights. “The UK market is stable, he says, “and the European market will be driven by legislation, but elsewhere our chairs have to compete in terms of cost and performance. We use trade shows and social media to fill our order books and take every government grant we can, even though they only cover around ten per cent of our trade show costs.”

“We never just show people how to use a chair,” says Mitchell. “We go through different types of evacuation like looking after a pregnant woman in a power cut, not just wheelchair users in a fire. We know people will be scared in an emergency and training means a company has confident, considerate members of staff to get them out. It’s not about strength. Our chairs are made of lightweight aluminium. I’ve moved a man three times my bodyweight to show it can be done.”

In Mitchell’s office, two pictures take pride of place. They’re the original drawings for the first chair, not quite on the back of the clichéd envelope, but the paper’s frayed at the edges and the pencil marks are fading. He says he’s delighted with the way the business has gone since then but he has one more ambition left.

“I enjoy every day as much as when we started and if I could do anything else I’d love to list the companies and give my staff shares,” he says. “It would be the biggest buzz ever and it would reward them for all their hard work.”

www.ehsystems.co.uk

www.evacusafe.net

Evangelistic approach leads to mass adoption

Technology evangelists. Martin Neale is happy with the description of his company. “We work with Microsoft to position new technology in the marketplace, and it is a form of evangelism because typically there is little reward at such an early stage,” he explains. “That comes with mass adoption.”

There are maybe three other Microsoft partners in the UK (out of 30,000) which have this kind of brief, and ICS Solutions are also the third largest supplier of specialist contractors to Microsoft for consultancy services.

Opportunity came when Microsoft began to really expand its reach across sectors and service lines. “We realised that we have an ability to identify new technologies which we think could be big, mind-share with Microsoft, and invest in them,” Neale explains. “Once a company makes the decision to go that route, we’re positioned so they come to us to make it sing and dance.

“Cloud is an example. From the beginning of 2009 we were making the investment in expensive people and the time to explain the concept, to sew the seeds. Only in October 2011 did we begin to make a profit from it. But I want to invest in the future. Let’s be in at the start of the journey into a brand new world.

“Another example is our focus on SharePoint, the Microsoft ‘collaboration’ software which makes it easier to share, synchronise and store business intelligence, to evangelise, and we are one of the five leading partners in the country.”

Which led to ICS Solutions putting a Sharepoint platform into Harrods (saving the retailer £75,000 a year in print costs), as well as other big ticket work, such as the £1million deal to replace the complete IT infrastructure across ninety offices for the country’s largest loss adjusters over two years.

ICS Solutions was the consequence of a management buy-out from Macmillan Publishing, based in Basingstoke. Neale joined as a salesman, becoming sales and marketing director, before acquiring a majority stake. Today, in addition to a core staff of forty, ICS Solutions can draw on 600 contractors who have been through the company’s

seven-stage vetting process. “It means we have predictable quality, which is a key issue in the supply of IT contractors,” says Neale.

It’s a positioning that intrigued £2.9billion turnover Computacenter plc, which bought a minority interest in ICS in 2011. “The motivation was our cloud expertise,” says Neale. “We don’t compete because there is zero overlap between us. But it brings new opportunities because Compucenter are the largest IT vendor in France and Spain as well as the UK.”

ICS Solutions were one of the first IT companies in the UK to open offices in India, but moved the development work back on-shore. “We couldn’t make it work” says Neale, “because early in the development curve it is all about customer interaction, with changes happening very quickly. Our people in India were very good at taking a specification which was worked out and applying the structured engineering, but the early stages of proving requires a different dynamic.”

But while the company’s modus operandi might be somewhere between leading and bleeding edge, its offices are somewhat more retrospective.

Much of the exterior of Skippetts House dates back to the eighteenth century, although parts of the grade two listed building have tudor origins. It had become the headquarters of Gould, the electronics company before being acquired by Compaq.

Every day Neale, who used to live in Skippetts Lane, would drive by the property to his then offices, and at a time when Compaq were rationalising their estate, he needed bigger premises to bring everyone under one roof from two locations. The acquisition of Compaq by Hewlett-Packard put the deal on hold, but a day before Neale was due to sign a lease elsewhere, he got a call asking if he was still interested in taking Skippetts House. Appropriate, given the building’s provenance, to say the rest is history.

www.ics.net

Long-term thinking is behind business park

When is a building more than just a building? The answer is – when it’s part of a business park which wins awards for sustainability. Something of a theme at Chineham Park, Basingstoke, which has seventy companies in its ninety-five-acre site.

Developers MEPC won a sustainability award three years ago for reducing landfill waste to zero. “We’re strong on that agenda,” says managing director Rupert Batho. “Our latest bio-diversity project connects the green spaces on either side of the park with a managed wildlife corridor.

“Our new buildings use 30% less energy than comparable property. We harvest rainwater and install waterless urinals, which use a cleaning mechanism. In construction and refurbishment projects we recycle as much in the way of materials as we can.

Since 2006, MEPC, owned by pension fund Hermes, have built two new buildings on a speculative basis as well as refurbishing 130,000sqft of occupied offices.

“We’re long term property holders so it’s all about relationships we can build with occupiers rather than simply seeing them as tenants. It is an approach which is delivering 85% retention across the portfolio. Pragmatic commercial

landlords will want to help businesses occupying their property to grow.”

Of course, MEPC have the luxury of being able to accommodate that growth when they identify an occupier’s requirements are likely to change. “We think about how we can mix and match our clients’ future needs,” says Batho, “because we get to keep the occupier and they avoid exit and entry costs. By doing that, we can save them money.”

An example of long-term thinking, is the speculative development of the 42,131sqft Central 40. With its double height reception, a mix of aluminium, glass and cedar panelling, it can house up to 400 staff and uses the latest technology to reduce its impact on the environment through waste recycling, lower carbon emissions and reduced energy consumption.

“We completed Central 40 when the Lehman Brothers went pop,” recalls Batho. “We built it into a grade A market but the severity of the financial crisis had a deep effect on demand.”

In stark contrast to Central 40 in terms of size, Chineham Park also includes ten occupiers in small suites which can accommodate up to twenty staff. Although Chineham Park has a big company feel, the enterprise suites which are managed rather than serviced, work for ambitious small companies looking for leverage from a prestigious address, and the kind of environment which is going to

Rupert Batho



attract the kind of people they need.

If companies decide to move in to Chineham Park - and Computer 2000, the IT product distributors relocated their 530 staff here from elsewhere in Basingstoke - they'll benefit from 3600 parking spaces and free buses laid on to ferry their staff to and from the station up to forty-six times a day.

"Five years ago when we were doing viewings, the prime question was about the rent," remembers Batho. "Now the main concerns are broadband capacity and infrastructure provision. We have wide fibre optic and broadband provision across the park. If not, our companies, and the park, wouldn't function."

www.mepec.com

Holding it together to prevent injury

Here's an interesting statistic. In a bomb blast, broken glass can explode into a room at forty metres per second, and that's what can cause the highest number of injuries.

When a fourteen kilogram car bomb went off in a London department store in 1983, ninety people were lacerated by flying shards, but if that glass had been fitted with a protective film, it would have held together. None of those people would have been injured.

That's one example GP Window Films use when they're advising organisations on the type of glass to use in their buildings. But they don't just major on safety – the right type of glass will have an impact on their energy bills, reflecting and absorbing solar energy, which can save in the order of 10% on air conditioning.

The film, invisible to the eye when installed, is activated through a fine spray of water and sticks onto the glass. "It's five times more difficult to put on than wallpaper because it needs to be perfectly smooth," says GP Window Films managing director Steve Gargett, "but once on it'll last for up to twenty-five years and has a scratch resistant coating. The film can be put on externally, which means it can be used in listed buildings where the glass can't be changed. The film rejects heat and lets the light in. It also stops UV radiation which can damage wood

floors and paintings. It can be clear or tinted to reduce visible light and saves having to install blinds against the sun."

"We worked in a government building recently where there was a seven degree temperature difference in one room with staff complaining they were cold in the winter and too hot in the summer. The human body takes ten minutes to adapt to temperature change and it's distracting while people are working. The film helps to stabilise temperatures and can reduce heat loss by up to 40%, with the result that people can work more effectively as well as the organisation saving on the cost of energy."

Since starting the business seven years ago, Gargett has built niches, not only in energy saving expertise but in counter terrorism and mitigating disaster.

"Eighty percent of injuries in a bomb blast come from flying glass and people need to be protected in public places," he asserts. "Glass breaks in different ways and long shards are the most dangerous. Just making glass one millimetre thinner could make it far less effective and people aren't the only casualty. In the Bunsfield oil and gas explosion, it was a Sunday morning and no-one was working in the main building but hundreds of companies nearby lost data and IT systems were destroyed in the blast wave because windows were blown out. In so many cases the glass in the buildings wasn't resilient enough."

It's not only in buildings where the film can be used but out on the ocean too. Gargett saw an opportunity recently when piracy started to become more prominent.

"We've helped more than a hundred ships and tankers to secure their glass," he explains. "When a vessel has been involved in an incident, they don't want to have to make a detour into port because windows have been smashed in an incident, something which could cost them \$10,000 a day. We send out the film with detailed fitting instructions and we talk them through it to make sure they've got it right. Our short-term goal is to develop a strong presence in niche areas and that's one we're well on the way to achieving."

The company's medium-term goal is to work more strategically with the public sector across its portfolio of buildings, by auditing the glass to assess

risk - from a simple matter of someone bumping against a window, right through to safety in the event of a blast. "At this point," says Gargett guardedly, "we're having conversations. We're advising and providing information which can be taken to the next level."

He's aware that window film is a market which is almost as competitive as double glazing. "If you are competing with similar solutions, then cost tends to be the deciding factor for the customer," he suggests. "Although we can't stop other companies copying our products, by the time they've caught up we're onto the next generation. And what we are providing is a knowledge-based sale."

Gargett is quite excited about a new product he's working on which has the 'intelligence' to adapt to our variable climate. "Utility bills may not be the biggest element of a company's budget but it's the most unpredictable," he says. "Reducing variants will help to take away the spike in the bills."

His own company has offices in a former stately home, with landscaped grounds, which he believes adds a sense of calm to his own creative process.

He'd like the government to lower VAT on energy saving products, which he believes would contribute to the reduction in energy consumption. But what will continue to help drive his own business forward is in the gift of government regulations.

"More stringent building regulations result in the need for architects to specify higher standards of energy efficiency," he explains. "Glass is an essential component, but it works best with our products."

www.gpwindowfilms.com

Keeping calm and thinking differently

When 9-11 happened, the world stopped travelling. Not every company was alarmed by the implications.

"Encouraging business people not to get on aeroplanes but to use video conferencing was what we had been preaching for years," explains Kevin Wilson, managing director of AuDeo Systems, "and we believed that everyone would start doing it.

"How wrong we were. What we were

From the outside, Lamb Brooks is deceptive. The office looks small, but perfectly formed – when in fact the building itself goes back further than you would expect and houses over 65 members of staff. This strength in depth means that whatever your particular need, there will be a legal adviser who can help you.

Ann Davies and Robert Finlayson, the joint managing partners at Lamb Brooks, will be the first to explain how the firm's pedigree benefits its clients.

"In our archive we recently found a letter between Mr Lamb and Mr Brooks regarding one of Jane Austen's suitors," says Ann, "Throughout the firm's existence, which spans over 200 years, our client care and attention to detail has ensured that our clients receive a quality service in a style and manner appropriate to them. Robert added: "each client – be it a managing director of a large company or a private individual embarking in business for the first time – has their own expectation of what a lawyer will deliver to them, and how that advice will be delivered. We adjust our approach according to the needs of our clients, to ensure that they gain maximum benefit from the advice and support they're receiving from us."

A particular jewel in the firm's crown is its commercial team. The combined strength of the solicitors in the employment, commercial and property teams mean that any issue which arises can be managed.

By way of example:

Alec Brooks, the head of the Commercial Services Group (as it's collectively known) has worked on a multi-million pound contract for a multinational mobile telecommunications company – requiring expertise in both commercial contract law and also intellectual property rights.

Simon Arthur, commercial law partner, acted for a secure networks provider to acquire a business and assets from a company in administration. Time was of the essence and the employment team assisted with securing the employees of the target company.

Warren Sadler, commercial law partner, has acted in numerous management buy-outs, and having worked in industry for a number of years he is particularly adept at spotting the issues within a company which need addressing before a deal can be finalised.

Mark Izquierdo, partner in charge of the commercial property team, deals with many portfolio clients – managing their assets for them and working on development projects with them.

Viv Whiteaker, associate solicitor in the commercial property team, assisted in the sale of a wholesale bag supplier – along with its property interests – in a way that secured the long-term future of the employees and customers of the company.

Bal Jaj, associate solicitor in the commercial property team, specialises in agricultural assets and has many landowner clients who turn to him for advice in leasing, developing and re-financing their estate to maximise the return on their property investments.

Tom Rossiter, consultant in the commercial property department, has worked on the re-development of part of Greenham Common into a thriving business park.

David Argent, head of the employment team at Lamb Brooks, used to run his own business and is able to advise his clients – from multi-nationals to small local businesses – from the unique perspective of having been in their shoes.

Kirstie Johnson, an associate solicitor in the employment team, has advised employers on their contracts and handbooks and takes a proactive approach to ensure that the opportunity for employees to bring claims is minimised.

The commercial team at the firm is supported by a number of other departments which ensure that any issues, from disputes, to the formation of trusts and private advice for individuals, can be dealt with under one roof.



Simon Arthur, Warren Sadler and Alec Brooks



Robert Finlayson and Ann Davies



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providing was considered to be a capital purchase, and companies were putting a hold on that as well, regardless of the benefits. We were preparing for meteoric growth, but instead there was a significant downturn. So we found ourselves in a position where there were more players in the market chasing fewer customers.”

What Wilson did was to keep calm and think differently. “We decided to focus on what the customer needed to achieve rather than what we had to sell them,” he explains, “because then it is all about understanding and building relationships rather than simply price and delivery.

“But the problem with that strategy is that it comes about by evolution not revolution. So the second big change was that we stopped telling customers what we sell and talked about the benefits rather than the features - quantifying rather specifying. And because video conferencing was now better known, we could move from the educational, evangelical even, to focusing on the concept of visual communications.”

What could help is that video conferencing has been re-branding itself as unified communications and as telepresence.

The sector is seeing 20% growth per year, but that’s largely because of demand in emerging markets. “That figure should be closer to 50%,” suggests Wilson. “Companies have more overseas interests than ever before, and we can provide a money-saving, stress-reducing way of them communicating effectively,” he declares, still sounding somewhat evangelical it has to be said. “For £15,000 a company can have a full video conferencing facility, with a fifty-inch screen, and everything cabled in.”

The change of focus at AuDeo Systems also required some cultural adjustment.

“If a company is to make sure the product sold is right for the application, then it has to have a set of values that its staff follow,” Wilson explains, “otherwise an order can be high in value but at the expense of a relationship with the customer.

“What the owner-managed business has to engender is a sense of pride and recognition. If the boss doesn’t recognise achievement,

then how can we expect people to take a pride in what they do.

“I’m not saying price isn’t of real importance. I’m just making the point that only one company can make it their competitive advantage. You have to make the customer want to buy into your style, values, personality; make them feel they can trust you.”

Wilson is still ambitious, but has strict parameters. “I equate outside investment with outside involvement, and I’m not ready to have other people influencing the culture of my business,” he asserts. “But that isn’t the same as being content with a business which ticks over. A company is only a saleable asset if the owner-manager can take a two-week holiday and it doesn’t affect the operation of the business.”

www.audeo.co.uk

Giving people a real sense of purpose

When David Medcraft first started his company from home, he’d work such long hours into the night that if the phone rang early in the morning, his wife Lynette would answer it on her side of the bed, tell the caller she was just putting them through and nudge him awake.

It was 1987 and the couple were working every hour they could to get the business going. David had resigned as a partner with a windows firm and Lynette had left her job in the travel industry. They started what is now Brackenwood Windows and Conservatories with £10,000 and turned their spare room into an office.

“I only had one fear,” recalls Medcraft. “We still had a mortgage and finance on a car; we’d gone from two incomes to none and I remember thinking we’ll have to fund everything now ourselves.”

One year on and they were making the sale, buying in products, installing the windows with the help of part-time fitters. But Medcraft was getting frustrated with his suppliers’ reliability (as in lack of).

“It was awful to have to tell people their windows hadn’t turned up,” remembers Medcraft, “so we started to think about how we could be more self sufficient.”

The couple chose a somewhat radical option. They bought machinery and began to manufacture the windows themselves. By this time they’d migrated from the spare bedroom to an industrial unit and taken on a couple of staff with manufacturing experience. But Medcraft’s background in engineering made him an exacting taskmaster.

“To start with I would reject more products than I would pass,” he recalls. But the relentless focus on quality seemed to pay off because soon the factory couldn’t cope with the volume of work, which meant the Medcrafts took over another unit, one with an interesting history - it used to be where Richard Branson’s Virgin manufactured condoms.

“At this point, eight years on, Brackenwood Windows and Conservatories had 10,000 square feet of manufacturing space, tremendously good cash flow, money to buy new vans and computers,” says Medcraft. “We were just about to go on holiday when we heard some news that would change everything. We’d had the auditors in all week and the accountant sat us down with the words: good news - the loss isn’t as much as we thought.

“We couldn’t believe what we were hearing. We had £150,000 in the bank and no borrowings, but it seemed aggressive cost increases were rising higher than sales. We had a £2.5million business, but not much in the way of monthly management accounts. We’d worked so hard, hadn’t taken much money out of the company and had doubled the size of the business. The fact we’d made a loss devastated us. It was not an enjoyable holiday.”

When the Medcrafts returned home, David had decided to put himself on every business course available and began the process of putting in systems for everything, even the simple things like adding the date and time when leaving notes for each other.

But for Medcraft, simply achieving efficiency spelled boredom so in 2007 he diversified into the commercial sector, starting with a huge refurbishment of the windows at a hospital near Gatwick and 150 new homes in Newbury for a house builder. At this point they were now in competition with the big players but Medcraft wasn’t fazed.

He defined how Brackenwood Windows and Conservatories could

make a distinct impression. “We focused on our qualities as a family friendly business. If you treat customers with respect as well as doing a good job, in return you get recommendations,” says Medcraft. “Our customers are invited into the showroom where they can touch the products and open and close the windows. We teach our fitters that from day one in a customer’s home or commercial property, they drape a clean dust sheet over their arm when they introduce themselves. They check if it’s okay to park their van in the customer’s driveway and they wear company sweatshirts. It all adds up to respect for the customer, and I think national competitors struggle to consistently provide that level of service.”

The company now employs nearly seventy people, and has a turnover of around £6million. But Medcraft believes that local authorities could do more to help businesses like Brackenwood.

“We pay £1000 a week in rates and when we tried to extend our building we were caught up in the complex planning system for months,” he muses. “Local companies should be fast tracked through the system.”

And it’s not just the local authority he believes could do more to help the economy. “If I had the keys to No.10,” says Medcraft wistfully, “I would lower taxes to small businesses which can demonstrate they’re investing in training.”

In fact it’s giving people a sense of purpose which Medcraft has engendered in his own company. When his service department came up with an idea to roll out maintenance and repairs to the wider public, not just Brackenwood customers, Medcraft decided to allow his staff to set it up as their own project within the business with an arrangement which means they would benefit financially from the success of their venture.

“We also bought a business specialising in painting UPVC which wasn’t making a profit so we moved it in with us,” he explains. “The staff running this part of the business are now getting bonuses for their hard work.

Seeing them energised and enthusiastic is terrifically exciting for me.”

His biggest concern comes from companies which promote cheap window replacements, but Medcraft rises above the potential threat.

“Many of them suddenly disappear and re-appear with different names, leaving customers with worthless guarantees,” states Medcraft. “We have three full-time staff managing the guarantees and the service department and that’s a big cost. Companies which move in and out of the business don’t have that overhead. They simply buy the cheapest products available at the time.”

One of the key moments for Brackenwood came when they realised they were losing money



David Medcraft

through manufacturing.

“We recognised,” Medcraft recalls, “that really we were a sales, marketing and installation company, so we closed the factory down and turned it into a showroom. We partnered with a firm in Wales who manufacture to our specification. We’re their largest customer, so we get an exceptional service.”

As to the future, Medcraft is determined to keep it in the family. “I enjoy my work immensely,” he smiles, “and I intend to stay in the company for my lifetime. One of my three children is already full-time in the business, and I hope that at some point the others will follow. Then perhaps I can take a back seat - I know, easier said than done.”

www.brackenwood.com

Keeping quality standards to win more complex work

“We used to gain three-quarters of our work from negotiation, but now virtually all of it has to be won by tender.

Those commissioning a house with a construction cost of £3million tend to be given the name RW Armstrong by their architects, but in the belief that contractors are on their knees, will want to scamper round to create a competitive environment.

“We know that unless we are the cheapest or thereabouts, it doesn’t matter about our reputation for quality, our experience, our references; we tend not to get the job. That means we

have to look for cheaper sub-contractors, which means more managerial input to control quality so the potential for problems isn’t increased.

“If you are a specialist, you put an awful lot of effort into each job because it’s what you do. So for example we would build protective boxing to go around a client’s Aga, which I know competitors won’t do. It comes at a cost, but we still have to do it because if someone plonks a toolbox on it, it means our reputation is damaged

as well as the cooker.

“We are seeing more new build than major refurbishment in the country house market, which is easier for a more general contractor to attempt than the complex remodelling of a listed building.”

And when high-worth property owners get what they pay for when accepting a tender which, according to Armstrong, is clearly under cost, they tend not to make that particular mistake again. “We were beaten on price for the new build of a house, but the contractor took longer than expected on the first phase, the construction of some outbuildings, and there were quality issues. So we were given the contract for the main house.

Not that Armstrong is making any special pleading. He’s invested

in experienced buyers who are constantly looking at the company's energy, IT, telecom costs as well as the construction materials. "Tender prices are 10% lower than five years ago, but we're still profitable and competitive," says Armstrong.

But a company can only reduce overheads by so much, which is why RW Armstrong have been looking at acquisitions to fill the gap. "There is potential in heritage work, the lottery-funded improvement of historic buildings, and we took over some valuable staff and contracts from a subsidiary of a group which went into administration." In addition to Daedalus Conservation, located in Dorset, RW Armstrong had acquired the old-established building firm EA Chiverton in Chichester. In total, the group has some 170 staff.

The heritage work is less competitive because much of the work can't be sub-contracted - the skills aren't out there in abundance for decorative plaster restoration - which makes the barriers to entry more sturdy.

And in the last couple of years, half-a-dozen of their 'drive prices lower' competitors have gone out of business. "For their clients it means their pride-and-joy project is delayed for six months, with the burden of additional costs when a new contractor is appointed," he suggests.

www.rwarmstrong.co.uk

Vulnerability and what can be done about it

Not the most elegant of words, but Stephen Kirk manages to make it sound like it should trip off the tongue. Interoperability. He's a VP of verification services at Underwriters Laboratories (UL), and it sums what the company delivers. It takes cellular, wireless and smart card technologies, with particular emphasis on convergent products (those that combine multiple technologies), and quite simply (but obviously not in terms of how they do it), works with manufacturers to verify their products are compliant, compatible, reliable, and secure.

"We have a unique combination of regulatory compliance knowledge, the ability to how wireless transactions

can be secured, plus an understanding of international standards," Kirk explains. "Customers want to reduce the number of suppliers, and one way we can help them achieve that is to provide them with everything they need for compliance and evaluation, and on a global basis.

"Of course security evaluation is less prescriptive in terms of following set standards; it's about identifying whether or how easily a mobile device can be broken into, and criminals aren't bound by standards or compliance. It's a question of establishing vulnerability and then seeing what can be done about it."

His company, RFI Global Services, was acquired by American-based UL, and the difference since becoming part of an ambitious international group has been invigorating, according to Kirk.

"As an independently-owned business we would look at maybe achieving 10% growth a year," he recalls. "Today it's about what we need to do to become number one in the world, what that means in terms of investment, sales, acquisitions. UL encourage entrepreneurial thinking; rather than a culture where something is banned unless it is allowed, it's something is allowed unless it is banned.

Underwriters Laboratories, a safety consultancy and certification group, produced its first standard 'Tin Clad Fire Doors' in 1903, and the following year the UL mark made its first appearance with the labelling of fire extinguishers. Today, UL have more than sixty labs worldwide, and has diversified into areas such as hazardous substances, water quality, food safety, and product performance testing, which is why RFI Global Services appeared on their radar.

In a six-month period, UL invested over \$4million in the UK to test fourth generation wireless technology, creating the first complete test facility in the country. "Without UL I don't think we would have been able to up-scale so quickly," says Kirk.

For Kirk, an MA in Engineering Science, Oxford University, it's about internationalising perspectives as well as market potential. "Our management team is now made up of people working on different contracts and from different countries," he explains. "For example, we brought over an operations

manager from Japan, which meant he got his language skills improved while we understood first-hand the culture of his homeland market. What it has made me realise is that in our education there has to be more of a requirement for languages; I'd say Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, maybe Portuguese for Brazil, not just French.

The key for Basingstoke according to Kirk, as for the UK as a whole is investment in infrastructure. "High-speed trains to Birmingham are fine, but the M3 here in the country's best performing part of the economy needs to be widened to three lanes," he suggests. "In countries like China and South Korea you see huge investment in transport infrastructure, accompanied by high speed wired and wireless internet access."

www.ul.com

Dynamic change to their traditional role

Andrew Finney completed the buy-out of HCR Group some thirteen years ago. He'll never forget the process.

"Countrywide asked us if we would like to take the employee and corporate relocation business off their hands," he recalls. "It took eighteen months, during which they suggested we should take over a rival. When that was done, they then decided to test the market, which led them to accept a higher bid, which didn't proceed.

"We had been a service provider but really only for other companies in the estate agency group, which restricted us in terms of growth, and I had become a frustrated entrepreneur caught up in a corporate safety blanket.

"The immediate effect after a management buy-out is freedom of action, and from the day we acquired the business to now it has been profitable on a month-by-month basis."

"Our traditional role has been to facilitate employee relocation, guaranteeing a price for their property, which means when they look for accommodation they're effectively a cash purchaser. Our job is to take on the burdens of someone who is in the throes of a lifestyle change but at the same time enable our other customer, who is paying the bill, to get their employee in place as quickly as possible.

But the dynamic has changed a tad, as Finney explains: “Before, a company would say to an employee that they wanted them to move in a couple of months, and that’s what happened because that person saw their career mapped out with that organisation. Now people consider whether the relocation suits them, and with dual-income families, moving to another location isn’t so straightforward a decision. The net effect is that the number of people who are prepared to move family and home for their work has declined, and there are more who will spend the week away and come home at weekends.

“So we now also provide what we call assignment support, where we find suitable rented accommodation, and make all the arrangements - which means we’ve become TV Licensing’s biggest customer - and then deal with the close-down when the person leaves that particular location. We’re looking after more than 7000 people on that basis across the UK. Effectively we’ve redesigned our business model from sale and purchase to rental.”

In 2010 HCR stepped in when competitor Phoenix Relocation, also based in Basingstoke, went under. “We retained their clients but their demise didn’t do us any favours,” says Finney, “because it associated our industry with a breach of trust.” That said, he can point to a 98% customer satisfaction rating for his company.

For every full service relocation, HCR plant a tree - “we literally do it ourselves” - with 600 at Basingstoke Common alone. “Our first tree planting went up on YouTube and had 14,000 hits, a real ‘halo’ business effect,” says Finney.

The change of corporate status for HCR Group has had a personal impact.

“Responsibility which comes with ownership changes you,” says Finney, “with the realisation that the people in the company are very reliant on you for their future. But you have to learn that your responsibility is to the team, not a specific individual. You have to do what is best for the team, and that means being big enough to take the brave decisions.

“If owner-managers have their eyes and ears open at all times, that



Andrew Finney

will give SMEs a unique advantage, because they are of a size where they can react more quickly. I’m not saying it in the pejorative, that all large companies have more organisational paralysis, but an SME, with shorter lines of communication should have the ability to manoeuvre more quickly, to be more flexible.”

“I had the team wearing badges which said ‘I’m a Solutions Provider’ to encourage the mind-set that everyone has a part to play in meeting a customer’s requirements. What sets one service provider apart from another? It’s the culture, the atmosphere, teamwork in the true sense in that everyone gets on with each other.”

Finney has given his time to serve as leader of Basingstoke and Deane borough council. He was first elected in 2003 and a year later took on the economic portfolio. He’s overseen the demolition of obsolete office buildings, one of which hadn’t been occupied for twelve years, and the appointment of new developers at Basing View, the town centre office park.

And for the main shopping centre to be redeveloped, the council adopted an ‘invest to grow’ policy and bought out the investment company which held the majority stake. “It made commercial sense,” says Finney, “because we made a better return than having the money sitting on deposit.”

“Basingstoke,” he suggests, “has two

big assets - its geographical location, alongside a motorway, a forty-five minute train journey to London, and the financial strength of the town, a legacy of its new town status. Only 16% of services are delivered from council tax; property income is more than double the Council Tax revenue.

“It would be wrong to say that the council has a ‘we will never sell freehold policy’. What we would do with the capital receipts is the question, whether they would be invested in something which would generate continuity of income.”

Despite the deepest of national recessions, arguably skill shortages have continued to be a bigger problem in Basingstoke than unemployment. “The average length of service for an administrative job in Basingstoke is six years, and at the depth of the recession, the unemployment rate here was a still under 3%,” says Finney. “This is despite the disappearance of major manufacturers such as Linde and Eli Lilly, although both still have an office function in the town, as well as IBM, Wella and Alberto Culver.

“All businesses have a lifecycle, which can result in them being acquired and relocated, but a strength of Basingstoke is its diversity. We’re not economically reliant on any one sector.”

www.hcr.co.uk

How to square the proverbial circle

It's a typical problem. As a company grows, the increasing volume of sales can be accompanied by reduced margins, and the owner-managers find themselves working longer and harder just to stand still in terms of bottom-line.

The scenario is familiar to Phil Simmonds, managing director of contract manufacturers EC Electronics. What is extraordinary is the way he was able to square the proverbial circle.

"The big driver was that we got to the point where the business needed ninety people to do the work, and at that stage couldn't make any money from it," he explains. "We could have attracted more work, but that would have meant we needed to take on more people and the problem would simply spiral. And finding the right people for our cable assembly and printed circuit board work was a struggle."

In the sectors EC Electronics are working in - medical products, industrial controls, transport - customers were beginning to buy globally, and as a consequence of dealing with a sub-contractor in Romania, remarkably for the size of his business, Simmonds decided to set up a facility in that country to reduce costs.

"We found an area formerly dependent on coal mining, where there is a highly educated workforce, but high unemployment," he explains. "From starting with a small industrial unit we ended up taking three. We started by recruiting a UK national who had represented Romanian companies in this country. He was prepared to go out to Romania and run a company out there for us, but after nine months he resigned.

"It meant I had a lot more travelling for a while, but every month which went on we got better connected, and our business there is now completely staffed by Romanians, including the management team. Today we have seventy staff in Romania, thirty in the UK, but 90% of what we produce is made in Romania. Certain final product assembly - and work for the UK military - stays on-shore. In 2012 we increased our productive floorspace by 50% and invested in another SMT (surface-mount technology) line."

The experience has given Simmonds the same global mind-set that his multinational clients possess. Four years ago, EC Electronics realised that certain components they were buying from what they thought was the manufacturer, had actually been sourced from China. "In essence our supplier had turned themselves into distributors by procuring products which they used to manufacture themselves," he explains.

Which gave him more than a thought. He set up a trading company subsidiary to source the necessary purpose-built assemblies from China and also deal with the quality assurance. "Not only are we saving 30% on procurement costs, but because we are selling it as a separate service, we are increasing our volume which means better consolidated shipping rates," he reveals.

The materials are shipped direct to the UK and taken to Romania in EC Electronics' own transport, which brings finished product back on its return journey.

"We aim to have a flatline throughput, so there are no spikes, and the way to achieve that is to find customers who need a quality product and an order-flow which extends to say a thirty-six-month period," says Simmonds.

"Because sales, materials procurement, and manufacturing are all integrated, we can manage a customer's expectations. There isn't a company of our size in our sector which can provide this. And it gives the customer the necessary confidence.

"We're still in Basingstoke because we have thirty fantastic people here and the majority of our business is with companies which are located in the south of England, so we can get to the majority of them in an hour."

The eclectic range of products which have EC involvement include syringe pumps, test equipment, and a system which keeps salmon away from hydro electric plant turbine blades.

"We're back-office manufacturers," says Simmonds. "The core competence of most product producers isn't the actual manufacturing process. That process is just the means of getting their clever idea to the marketplace."

www.ecelectronics.co.uk

Anvil strikes new perceptive chord

Having its member of parliament, Maria Miller, appointed as secretary of state for culture, media, and sport, is appropriate for Basingstoke. Because since 1994, when the local authority invested in the development of the Anvil concert hall, Basingstoke has gained an international reputation for the arts as well as business.

The intention was to raise the profile of Basingstoke as well as putting down a marker for the town as a cultural centre. Its name reflects the unusual shape of the building which kind of resembles a traditional blacksmith's anvil.

Basingstoke has the biggest international concert series of any town or city in the south and west, and arguably with Leeds, it has more visiting orchestras in a season than anywhere else in the country apart from London. That roster of orchestras has included the St Petersburg Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, Czech Philharmonic, Indianapolis Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Oslo Philharmonic, Budapest Festival, Moscow Philharmonic, underpinned each year by the Philharmonia and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (BSO).

Said to have the best acoustics of any concert hall in the country with the exception of Symphony Hall, Birmingham, the individual sound quality and character of performers is immediately apparent in performance at the Anvil. And although the auditorium has been divided into different price bands, there's not much of an appreciable difference in terms of that sound quality regardless of where you sit.

But the venue is flexible enough to host touring opera, ballet, bands, and stand-up comedy. The seating in the stalls can also disappear beneath the floor to provide a level surface for exhibitions.

The Anvil Trust, an independent charity runs the 1400-seater auditorium and the Forge, a 100 or so seater studio inside the same building, as well as The Haymarket theatre in the town centre.

www.anvilarts.org.uk