Hall & Pickles in Poynton, Stockport

There's business and then there's **family business**

Alex Bell speaks to two companies ranked in this year's Family Business 50, uncovering what it takes to establish, endure and excel as a family firm

It's been said that family business is a great British success story.

With an estimated 5.2 million family-owned firms in the UK employing more than 14 million people – it's hard to argue otherwise.

The state of the nation: the UK Family Business Sector 2020-21, an IFB research foundation report prepared by Oxford Economics, states that family businesses contributed £637 billion to UK GDP in 2019, while paying £205bn in tax receipts.

Whichever way you look at it, the family business sector is vital to the UK economy.

Following the release of *Insider*'s Family Business 50 – ranking the North West's top family businesses by profit and turnover – we speak to two firms operating in very different sectors.

With its origins in the Industrial Revolution, Hall & Pickles is a steel stockholding dynasty that was founded by John Hall the Fourth more than 200 years ago. Matthew Hall has been group managing director and chief executive for the last 26 years.

Hall & Pickles is headquartered in Poynton, Stockport, and has an annual turnover in excess of £100m. The group also ships more than 150,000 tonnes of steel per annum.

Sales director John Whittaker tells *Insider* that innovation, investment in IT, plant and people lies at the heart of Hall & Pickles's success.

"We are performing at a higher level than we have done for sometime," he says.

"Brexit, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have all had an effect on our business. But because we've always bought the majority of our steel predominantly from the UK, that's made a difference. The import and supply issues that other businesses have had to deal with have been less of a problem for us."

Touching on the family company's longevity, Whittaker adds: "It's always been about service, and we continue to invest quite heavily in that area.

"It's a company that has stood by its values and we don't compromise on those regardless of what happens in the industry. Hall & Pickles always looks after customers and staff no matter what the market throws at us. When you look at how many people have worked for us in excess of 10 years, it is incredible. That means we keep a good level of experience in the business and keep being good at what we do."

ONES TO WATCH

Connex One

Brothers Nick Mealey and Richard Mealey are founders of Connex One. The company aims to revolutionise legacy customer engagement technology and now handles 15 million transactions a day. Employing more than 300 people across six global offices, Connex One has further ambitious growth plans. The Mealey brothers believe that one very clever system, passion and impeccable service have driven their success story over the past five years.

Real Handful

Carly and Joe Taylor launched Real Handful in 2016 and continue with their mission to make better snacks that improve people's lives. Championing healthy, affordable, snacking habits, the husband-and-wife team sell products in more than 2,000 UK stores. ASDA, Waitrose, Ocado and Tesco are just some of the big names that stock Real Handful's award-winning plant-based trail mix. The business joined the Global Scale-up Programme in 2020 and has worked with the Growth Company and KPMG on international growth.

A FATHER AND SON TALE

Trafford Park headquartered Property Alliance Group, run by David and Alex Russell, is targeting significant portfolio growth. Alex talks about family dynamics and the company's evolution.

How did Property Alliance Group start?

My dad David Russell sold his kitchen company when he was about 29. Later it became a natural step for him to set up David Russell Property Holdings, which predominantly focused on industrial for the first 10 years or so. In 1990, with work also done in the office market, the name changed to Property Alliance Group.

Can you recall key moments that projected Property Alliance Group to new levels?

For the first 15 years, we bought and sold everything ourselves and grew as a result. A big change came when we formed partnerships with customers, the council and funding partners. The first project that really stands out though was Towers Business Park. We bought that with Moorfield and, at the time, I was at CBRE acting on the agency side. We undertook a comprehensive tenant satisfaction survey and listened to what they all wanted. We then spent money on it, regeared all the leases and attracted a lot of new tenants like Oracle. It was transformational and we exited that with not far off double our money.

Did it create ripples further south?

It went from us going down to London to try and attract investment and funding, to people knocking on our door and saying we want to co-invest with you. In 2014, I moved over from CBRE and we bought Trident Business Park for £5m, spent £7m on it and sold it for £20m. After that it was just back-to-back deals, and we had two joint-venture case studies that made significant money.

Premier House regeneration project in Manchester

Alex Russell

The three residential towers Axis, Manhattan and Oxygen seemed to be a game changer?

They represented change as we went from being a 100% commercial business to overnight being a big residential developer. I still class us a commercial developer but now we've got the benefit of having added residential to what we do as well.

What are the pros of family being at the heart of Property Alliance Group?

The pros are we all complement each other's strengths. As a kid, my dad used to drive me around building sites and we'd look around buildings all weekend. I absolutely loved it.

I bring in more of a corporate side to my dad's roll-your-sleeves-up approach and the huge benefit of having [my wife] Vicky in the business is she's the bridge between all the pieces in the jigsaw. She is the voice of reason when there are any family disagreements.

And the cons?

There aren't really any as we've had a massive change in the business where we are making decisions at board level. At the end of the day, when you work with family members that you get on with, it should be better than any kind of partnership because you trust each other 100 per cent.

Looking forward, what objectives have been set?

If you look at our performance over the last ten years, the growth in the existing portfolio has been undoubtedly the strongest performer. We have sold at good times and used that money to invest in development. We've set a clear ten-year plan to grow the portfolio by at least 50 per cent every five years. This would make the trajectory quite sharp but very achievable.