

# Organic growth

A love of music and all things ecclesiastical have proven a winning combination for one passionate Northamptonshire business. **Nick Ryan** reports

As one of the UK's few pipe organ builders, Kenneth Tickell's business occupies an unusual niche. The sector is tiny and hardly renowned for millionaires or a get-rich-quick mentality. Yet his painstaking, organic approach has seen the firm grow from a one-man band to now having a staff of ten-plus.

"No one starts an organ building business to make serious money," says Tickell. "We do it because we have an innate wish to design and create new organs. We're probably working in the only profession in which suppliers go to visit a new client who wants to buy a new organ for perhaps £250,000, only to be told 'of course we don't actually have any money yet'."

Kenneth Tickell & Co's handcrafted organs have been installed in many famous establishments over the years, including St Paul's Cathedral, Eton College, Cheltenham Ladies' College and the English College in Rome. Recently, the business won a £700,000 order for a new organ for Worcester Cathedral.

## Looking back

Tickell won an organ scholarship to Hull University, graduating in 1978. "I was doing some organ deputising in a local church, there was a new organ being installed and I spent the summer helping out. It was fascinating, so when I graduated I approached a well-regarded firm for a job."

When that business seemed to be on a downward slide, Tickell set up his own firm in 1982. "Each year the business grew gradually," he remembers. "After three years working by myself, I employed another organ builder. Gradually, others joined and the business has since grown organically."

The company now dominates much of the UK market, but it hasn't been without its problems. Tickell admits during the early years there were "odd moments when contracts were close to running out and we needed to hunt around". Occasionally, the

business has had to take on partially funded projects, working in stages as money was raised. Success has created its own issues, too. Fully booked up until 2010, Kenneth Tickell & Co projects are now accepted on a "first through the door" basis.

Tickell stresses that HW has been a constant companion for the past 16 years. "They were on hand to help me with paying VAT, getting

my accounts computerised and moving from sole trader to limited company," he says. Put simply, management of the business has grown. "The challenge for me is to step back from handling every aspect."

## Learning curves

Tickell identifies making the move from owning his own small premises to taking on the lease of a much bigger industrial unit as one of the key challenges he has faced. Another was dealing with a threat from the EU last year regarding use of lead in organ pipe metal.

When quizzed on key lessons he has learned, he replies: "You must know and understand your clients' needs and be able to converse on their level. Also, you don't always have control over your destiny, but you need to be able to adapt and grow as the need arises."

Commenting on his growth strategy, Tickell continues: "We've only bought new machinery or expanded when the cash has been available. We take a five per cent deposit on signing a contract; 90 per cent as interim monthly payments; and five per cent final payment, plus any extras. I insist on this – having steady, predictable cashflow is vital to a small business.

"And we don't have bad debts. On the rare occasion a bill isn't paid on time, it's usually because the church has changed its treasurer, rather than anything more sinister." ■

For further information, visit [www.tickell-organs.co.uk](http://www.tickell-organs.co.uk)



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