

# THE PROFESSIONALS

*Patrick McMahon, Bidwells*

# PAT TRICK

*Patrick McMahon is senior partner at Bidwells and has just been re-elected for an unprecedented third term. He is obviously doing something very right, Jenny Chapman went to see him at the firm's head office in Trumpington*



**Y**OU have to be pretty good at what you do to be chosen by your partners for a third successive term in the top job. Well, I reckon so, which is why I asked Patrick McMahon, Bidwells senior partner, to be my latest victim for this series.

"I've never done a CV in my life," he says at one point, so here goes now.

He comes from Wales, and tells me there are quite a few Welsh folk in and around Cambridge: "We seek each other out." His home was Cardiff, school Sherborne, uni, a poly in Glamorgan where he studied estate management. His father was a doctor, but Patrick was not too hot on science: "He was quite pleased I went a different route."

After a short time with Barclays on the property side of things, Bidwells spotted him and invited him to join the London office in investment.

"I joined in 1989 and have never wanted to leave. After a while in London I found I was spending more and more time at head office in Cambridge, so I moved the family here."

He came to Cambridge as head of commercial, and seven years ago became senior partner. He comes across as modest, I ask the questions, headcount has risen from around 350 in 2010 to around 500.

More to the point, a firm focus has been established on the so-called Golden Triangle. Is it golden?

"Yes, and it has the potential to be platinum for the UK. It is a brilliant cluster – particularly in life sciences, and all the techs – and our belief is that these three areas, Cambridge, Oxford, London, rather than being separate, if you look at them as one cluster, this is really strong on the international stage.

"If you look at clusters in the US – Boston, San Francisco – the distance between them is huge. If everyone in the Golden Triangle can work more and more together this will increase competitiveness on the international stage, it's a really interesting proposition.

"Cambridge is a net exporter of money to the Exchequer, and so is Oxford and London, while so many other towns and cities are not."

And Bidwells is sitting in a very good place in this triangle of good fortune, except, I have yet to buy this triangle story, it's been talked about for decades, I remember interviewing a chap whose sole job was to promote it, but nothing happened. Cambridge ran away from Oxford and has given

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the other place the cold shoulder pretty much ever since. Travelling between the two has to be via London, although this could be about to change with the coming of a new rail link. We'll see.

Still, it doesn't matter what I think, Patrick McMahon knows much more about such matters, and he has a vision, one which resulted in Bidwells opening an office in Oxford five years ago. Turned out to be a good one – the firm now acts for half the Oxford colleges (and 70 per cent of Cambridge colleges).

Bidwells, he tells me, number 15 in terms of scale, in the country, when it comes to surveyors, has made a deliberate decision not to go global: "We have decided this is not for us, that our focus is on the UK. It's really important to know what you are not and what you are, and to be authentic.

"We are independent and a partnership, and one of the most important things is the culture we think we have managed to maintain and develop. There is that wonderful saying 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'; you need a good, clear strategy, but without the culture you are not going to get there.

"We have deliberately not grown too fast, and our people are looking after their clients ahead of the

interests of the firm. People trust that."

Bidwells is broadly estate management or rural, and residential. The rural business is nationwide, and includes the entirety of the Scottish coastline, managed on behalf of The Crown Estate. Tasks include forestry, renewables and agriculture.

Residential is not just about selling houses, but getting planning permission on behalf of clients: "We need new homes," Patrick says, "and we need a lot of them. We are way,

way behind as a country by about 200,000. We need to be building 250,000 homes a year and we have consistently been building under that, at about 100,000 a year.

"We are very involved in trying to see more homes built. We are looking at land at the moment on behalf of clients that will bring forward 300,000 homes – that's the size of Southampton if they were all put together.

"We have sites coming through the whole time, starting from this year to some sites which will be 10 years away. No, very few are green belt, they are normally brownfield, ex-industrial. We are working on a big site next to the new station, 25 acres in the middle of the city, off Cowley Road, owned by Network Rail and to be developed by Brookgate; that'll be 900 houses with building starting next year."



What about the planning process? Is it a pain?

"While it is difficult, there are lots of different groups that want to be heard. Everyone beats themselves up in Cambridge, but, actually, I think it's pretty good. You need to consult and take on different views, and this takes a long time. If you look back, the quality of what's been built is really good in Cambridge, whereas elsewhere it can look rushed and be disappointing.

"There are lots of sites all round Cambridge and within, and the focus is to try and regenerate land rather than develop sites well outside the city, which puts a burden on our infrastructure. This has to be the way to plan sites going forward, its more sustainable.

"We know we have got some problems in Cambridge, but more than 20 per cent of commuter journeys here are by bike, far higher than the rest of the UK, the next highest is Oxford at 13 per cent, and then it's down to 1 per cent for the rest of the country." Oh, dear, only this very morning the *News* front page has a picture of bikes over-running Beijing and a warning of the same thing happening in Cambridge.

"We have award-winning park & ride here," Patrick continues, "but it needs to be free – free parking and free bus rides, plus more of them. The cost of not doing this is far greater than the revenue currently collected by charging for parking and riding."

This comes from someone who heads a firm managing more than 10 million sq ft of science-related development, which, he points out, is "substantially" more than anyone else in the UK. Cambridge Science Park is in there, and I take the opportunity to ask him about something biotech CEO, Dr Sarah Howell, told me that CSP is not building labs now, only offices.

"There are lots of labs on the Addenbrooke's site," Patrick counters. "There are quite a few on the science park and they are very popular, so we are looking at proposals to build, it's quite exciting, a new development called Lab Quarter. But it is three times the cost of building offices."

We switch back to "rural".

"Who knows what's going to happen with our break from the EU? Anyone farming who thinks they are going to do better than they are now is going to be sorely disappointed, because they will be worse off and need to look at diversification."

This is the main reason Bidwells recently took on John Hoy: "He's the 'king' of diversification – Madame Tussauds, Knebworth, Goodwood, and Blenheim Palace, where he was CEO for 14 years. He turned Blenheim from just an amazing house into one of the most important visitor attractions in the world."

Serious transformation is under way under Hoy, and we can expect to see those who have concentrated on farming making more and more of their income from pop concerts, weddings, themed events, and people generally having a good time.

And so, the man as opposed to the senior partner, Patrick is 51 has three children at The Leys, and the family lives in Barley near Royston. He plays cricket, and, wait for it, is an artist in bottle tops which he sticks on various objects such as the elephant in our picture.



***We are looking at proposals to build, it's quite exciting, a new development called Lab Quarter (on Cambridge Science Park)***



Patrick McMahon, with  
his elephant sculpture  
Picture: Keith Jones