

# Friends reunited

An accidental meeting between Stephen Chard and Neil Robinson in Australia is behind the Chard Robinson group, which owns green champion Accent Property Management. Here, they tell **Clare Bettelley** about the friendship and the business, which has taken the Cambridge market by storm.

**A**ccent Property Management's wide-ranging green company policy captured the hearts and minds of the entire judging panel for The Negotiator Awards 2009, hence the eco-minded team scooping the newly-created Green Champion of the Year Award on the big night last November.

Award entrants were asked to provide a range of information about their efforts in making the world a greener place, including details of their overall sustainability strategy and evidence of improvements in their carbon footprint.

As well as Accent's bags for life initiative, which offers clients company-branded jupe bags, judges were particularly impressed with the oak tree sapling presented to guests at the company's summer garden party last year, which forms part of its ongoing drive to minimise the business' impact on the environment and promote green awareness throughout the local community.

Further, the company uses a range of social networking groups, including Facebook and Twitter, through which to communicate with clients instead of printing and posting company literature, having already transferred more of its advertising online – it last year doubled the number of portals it uses – and taken to using double-sided printing and in colour only where necessary.

Kristian Turner, Accent's brand and marketing manager, says: "Through the course of 2008/9, we cut our paper usage significantly. It wasn't all about saving money; certainly in part it represented an effort to spend more wisely and respond to market trends, but our target was also to reduce our printing by 50% and stay greener."

## Travel

An office relocation to the town centre last October has helped bolster the Cambridge-based property management firm's green efforts.

Turner says: "One of the prerequisites for the move was better access to public transport links; we're now minutes from the bus and train stations, and the city centre is within easy walking distance.

"Limits have been placed on the use of pool cars (already low emission) to travel certain distances, and staff are encouraged to use public transport to travel to work."

A cycle to work scheme is the latest addition to Accent's green strategy, with company-branded bicycles (pictured) available for purchase to further assist the team in reducing its carbon footprint in the local community.

Turner says: "The company is a member of the Cycle Scheme, a government-backed initiative giving employees a tax break in order to purchase a bicycle through their employer.

"Several of our staff are now cycling to work on their brand new bikes. We've also had showers fitted at the new office for those participating in the scheme."

## Hell

Accent is part of a family of property businesses owned by long-term friends Stephen Chard and Neil Robinson. The accidental friendship was a result of a flight delay in Australia where Robinson was on a break. Neither one had exchanged contact details on their first introduction, but they were able to rectify this when the delay resulted in a chance reacquaintance.

Later in 1996 New Zealand-born Chard arrived in England where Robinson, with whom he had remained in touch, suggested he rented a property, an experience Chard recalls with disbelief. "Agents would happily take my deposit and application fees and then refuse me because I didn't fit the box because I didn't have a job, even though I was offering to pay six months' deposit upfront.

Chard, who had sold his existing IT business before arriving in the UK, adds: "I didn't

actually need a job - I was reviewing what my options were - but I needed somewhere to live."

Robinson came to the rescue and Chard ended up lodging with his new friend while he continued to mull his career options.

## Show

As part of this deliberation, Chard decided to visit a franchise show at the NEC in Birmingham, though this, like his friendship with Robinson, almost never happened. "I hired a new car, zoomed off down the A14 towards what looked like Birmingham, but I'd read an old map and they'd changed the road and you had to keep hopping of the A14 to stay on it and so I ended up in Peterborough the first time round, having only been a week off the boat."

The combination of the show and a previously unforgiving property management experience resulted in Chard proposing a business partnership to his friend.

Robinson, who hails from Ely in Cambridgeshire and was at the time working for Cable during a planned year out after university, recalls: "I got a call asking me if I fancied doing this. Obviously, there were more rounds of meetings and talks and trying to get some money out the banks, but that was it."

## Start-up

A beauty parade of property franchise networks resulted in the pair opting to start-up with Leading Agencies from which they bought the Cambridge license and launched their business from their flat.

With five years' business experience under his belt and a family of business-minded individuals behind him, Chard together with Robinson embarked on the network's two-week training course on the Isle of Wight.

Robinson says: "Starting from scratch without a franchise was not an option, given the legislation involved in lettings even then.



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“Every thing on the course was turnkey – every single letter was based on a flow chart, based on a system, based on a law. And every month we were sent new pages for our training folder with any legislative changes, and backed up financially in terms of a tracking client account.”

It was the systemised structure of franchising that particularly appealed to Chard when launching the business. “It was very systems-orientated, with a system of lettings and management mapped out, and if you followed it you couldn’t go wrong.

“We still follow those rules and procedures today. The business is no different today to what it was all those years ago; there are the same principles, they’ve just expanded.”

**Crossroads**

Despite finding elements of the training course challenging, such as the infinite realms of legislation, the pair’s business was a rapid success and resulted in them moving into a three-storey town house within which they turned the top floor into their office.

It was around this time that the business changed direction following the pair’s identification of an opportunity to exploit an explosion in the local buy-to-let market. Chard recalls: “We could see people investing in the wrong type of property to where the market was, so we started buying property on behalf of our rental clients.”

It was a compelling proposition, given that apartments in the town could at the time be snapped up for just £60,000. So, the pair sold their lettings franchise business in 1998 to focus on buy-to-let investment buying and hit the Cambridge social networking scene, aided by Robinson’s father who was a Cambridge lecturer, to build a robust client base. However, the new owner of their lettings business, a former London trader, lasted just six weeks before he decided he missed city life, forcing Chard and Robinson to buy back the lettings business.

**Spanner**

It was a spanner in the pair’s strategy, given that they had planned to refer their clients’ investment properties to their former business to let while they focused on their new investment strategy. Fortune played into their hands once again, and they finally offloaded the business later the same year.

However, it wasn’t long before the pair started receiving complaints about the quality of the management service their clients were receiving from the recently sold business. Like their lettings hurdle, the pair were forced to



U-turn on their decision to exit the property management business and bought in house the 60 units it had referred to the new owner to manage them themselves.

**Expansion**

The Accent brand was created in 2003 to differentiate the property management business from the investment division that was the very heart of the business the group founders longed to pursue. This is now branded Chard Robinson Property Investment and targets individuals with between £100,000 and £300,000 to invest.

The Chard Robinson group has since expanded to comprise of a range of additional businesses, including block management specialist Encore Estate Management, which it established in 2005, electrical control company Baulogic and interior design brand Chard Robinson Design.

A serviced apartment business, Cambridge Apartments, was also part of the enterprise, but was sold earlier this year following a merger with Your Space Apartments last year, which included a 12-month exit strategy.

The group's expansion forced Chard and Robinson to finally concede that they needed to relinquish their two-man show and employ a supporting team, which following a chartered accountant in 2003, has at Accent since included general manager Sarah Cox and Debby Wooding, who focuses on residential property investment.

**Home**

Rapid growth also prompted the team to relocate to their new premises on Hills Road in the heart of

Clockwise from top left: group guests enjoy the Accent Summer party; the Accent Team; an Accent-branded bike; the youngest guest at the Summer party and her mum.



Cambridge town centre.

Chard and Robinson have shelled out £100,000 on refurbishing the Grade-II listed Edwardian property, with further investment required to finish the project, which is in addition to the £140,000 annual running costs – four times the cost of their previous base. But they insist that the benefits – namely that the entire group can fit into the building – far outweigh the costs.

**Future**

Chard and Robinson are currently sitting on an investment war chest worth £15m with which



they plan to purchase between 2,500 and 3,000 units in London and Cambridge and anywhere in between within the next two and a half years.

Further mergers and acquisitions are also on the cards for Encore following its acquisition of London-based JP Management last July.

And so with oodles of cash in the bank, a wide range of global private property investments between them and, by their own admission, little regard for cost control, the world really is their oyster, with Cambridge likely to prove its pearl for many years to come.