

Paris Smith digs in with Barfoots

In this latest Paris Smith client profile, *The Business Magazine* dons its wellies to see how the Southampton law firm has nurtured an 18-year relationship with Barfoot Farms, one of the UK's foremost fruit and vegetable growers



Ask Peter Barfoot how he built up his business from a 20-acre vegetable plot to a £185 million turnover global business that supplies the UK's major supermarkets and he'll modestly reply: "It's the question I'm asked most, but I don't really know the answer."

Many of the reasons behind his success can be found in his autobiography, written partly as therapy while recovering from a life-threatening brain injury after a polo playing accident. It tells how the sixth generation Hampshire

strawberry grower shook up the UK food industry with a combination of innovative ideas, stubbornness and passion for business.

Barfoot joined forces with his father to set up Barfoots of Botley in 1976. Over the decades he bought land around Botley and later in Pagham and the Rother valley. He now farms 8,000 acres in the UK.

Barfoots also operates in 32 countries, 'following the sun' to grow produce for UK consumers.

Sweetcorn comes from Senegal, courgettes from Spain, with sweet potatoes and asparagus from Peru. Barfoot's daughter, Jo-Anne, runs the Spanish operation.

"You probably eat our vegetables without knowing it," said Barfoot, who estimates that his company supplies around 90% of the UK sweetcorn market. "I think about that fact 24 hours a day. I wake up in middle of the night thinking about sweetcorn."

He added, with pride: "In Senegal, we indirectly employ 3,000 people and are helping to positively change the lives of 30,000 people who live around our farms."

Trusted relationship

Paris Smith's managing partner Peter Taylor first got to know Barfoot socially nearly 20 years ago. Barfoot soon became a firm friend and client. "We understand what drives the Barfoots business and share common business values. A good sense of humour with Peter also helps," said Taylor.

As well as its specialist agricultural team, Paris Smith's commercial, employment and corporate teams support Barfoots. Taylor is also a director of the Barfoot family trust, which was established to ensure the continuation of the company 'in perpetuity'.

Barfoot commented: "I know I can rely on Peter to bring whatever expertise we need."



Business philosophy

Having supermarket giants as customers is not without its challenges. Just-In-Time delivery and 365-day a year supply require complex air, land and sea logistics. "It's a tough, fast moving business," said Barfoot. "We have to be able to trace every product from the supermarket shelf to the field where it was grown."

Underlying the sophisticated, technology-led operation is a simple, plain-speaking business ethos. "Treat everyone the same way as you'd like to be treated yourself. Have integrity in everything you do," said Barfoot.

Powering ahead

His practical approach to problem solving saw Barfoots become one of the UK's renewable energy pioneers when he opened an anaerobic digestion plant in Pagham in 2010. Waste material from sweetcorn production creates electricity, fertiliser and recycled water.

"We generate around two megawatts an hour, which is enough to run all our cold stores and factories and we sell the surplus to the National Grid," he said.

Sterling frustrations

Fluctuations in the value of sterling are a constant issue for Barfoots, a situation made worse by Brexit uncertainty. The company buys around £2.5m of currency every week and was particularly hard hit when sterling fell 10% in the aftermath of the EU referendum result in 2016.

"We have had to become currency traders," he said. "When our FD gets it right, he's a hero. When he doesn't, we don't talk to him."

Paris Smith on call

The relationship with Paris Smith can be summed up by a recent incident involving a burst sewer pipe in a farm field. Barfoot was straight on the phone to Taylor to help sort out the legal situation. Taylor happened to be on holiday in Bali at the time where it was 3.30am. It goes without saying that Taylor and Paris Smith were quickly on the case.

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