



## Entrepreneurial Scotland...

After expanding into property, green home systems, and diverse investments, Ayrshire-based family business The Easton Group will soon mark 50 years of entrepreneurial success, writes Colin Cardwell

**T**HERE is (so far as we know) no template labelled “entrepreneur” secured behind the doors of London Business School or INSEAD. Entrepreneurs are as varied a group as any other and when Kenny Easton started out in 1974 at the age of 21, he would have thought of himself as an “old fashioned businessman,” says his son Steven, who with brother Peter are now senior directors of the Easton Group.

The property and investment group based in Dundonald, Ayrshire, is still family-owned and this year marks its 50th anniversary – and is ambitiously entrepreneurial. It has three divisions – Easton Housing, Easton Property and Easton Capital.

“We have a portfolio of commercial and residential properties and created a property management business to service that,” explains Steven.

“We’re able to buy properties that are perhaps undervalued and under-looked, because we have the capacity to renovate and bring them up to a standard where they can become a reasonable home for a family to move into.”

He notes the decline in social housing over recent decades, as stock has been sold but not replenished.

“We’re trying to provide good quality homes that are affordable for our tenants, where they can raise a family and treat that home as if it’s their own, with the landlord/tenant relationship being a partnership of equals.”

Peter says that commercial property – mostly local shops – comprises a quarter of the portfolio, from Montrose to the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway.

He agrees that Easton’s residential properties are intended for long-term rental with some tenants having been with them for a decade or so.

Steven admits the pair were struggling to scale the business when in 2014 they saw the opportunity



# Family ties bring a relatively diverse portfolio to fruition

■ Above from left, brothers Steven and Peter Easton are the senior directors of The Easton Group

to diversify toward energy-efficient home improvements.

“We decided to launch Green Home Systems, an energy efficiency specialist that installs insulation, solar panels and heat pumps into domestic housing. Within two years we were turning over a million pounds and within five years, we were turning over £5 million.”

With the advent of Covid, the company had to down tools at Green Home Systems but it used the dark period following the pandemic to invest in staff, training, new premises and equipment, which has paid off.

“This year we trebled turnover (in one year) to more than £17m with plans to treble this again to £50m over the next three years,” says Steven. “There are now more than 100 employees including an experienced senior management team.”



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In 2020 a 50% stake in the company was sold to Circularity Capital, a private equity company that specialises in the circular economy. Now jointly owned by Circularity Capital and Easton Capital and operated by an independent management team, Peter and Steven Easton provide strategic guidance and oversight as non-executive directors and board members.

The Easton Group has been investing in businesses throughout Scotland since the 1980s – always, says Steven, with the aim of enabling the business or entrepreneur to succeed and realise their potential.

“We’ve started making investments outwith our core property and home improvement sectors, including Ardgowan Distillery, which is currently under construction in Inverkip and Cumulus Oncology,

a cancer therapeutics development company that raised £9m last year to support the development of new treatments.”

Based in Edinburgh, he says this is Europe’s first biotech creation studio and drug discovery accelerator specialising in oncology and Easton Capital participated in the investment round with the Scottish National Investment Bank and a consortium of private investors led by Eos Advisory.

The brothers are actively looking at other opportunities.

“Peter and I have always been entrepreneurial at heart so we’re now looking at further ways to try and invest some of the capital we’ve created, from opportunities to grow our portfolio to becoming eco-friendlier and more sustainable and also mindful of the responsibility we have to grow and develop young talent to ensure we’re future fit and ready for the prospects and challenges ahead,” says Steven.

They live at opposite ends of a street in Dundonald with their office in between, and actively engage with the local community and Chamber of Commerce while the brothers’ father Kenny is chairman and advises on the strategic growth and development of the business.

“He hasn’t stopped,” says Steven.

“We joke that we change the locks but he still manages to get into the office – but also still steers us in the right direction and gives us a lot of support.” ■

## Growth counts on teamwork and collaboration

**M**EARN’S & Company, a Leith-based financial planning firm, is currently celebrating 30 years of business, having recently earned the prestigious Platinum Investors in People accreditation for the second time.

This achievement highlights the firm’s dedication to cultivating a culture of teamwork, shared purpose, and continuous employee development – cornerstones of their ongoing success.

Leading the business is managing director Catherine Bell, who took the reins in early 2018 after her mother, Margaret Mearns, the company’s founder, retired.

Catherine has been an integral part of Mearns & Company’s journey since joining in 2000, developing to operations director before transitioning into her current leadership role.

Under her guidance, the company has continued to thrive, with a clear focus on collaboration and alignment around shared strategic goals.

“Our Platinum accreditation reflects the strength and commitment of our entire team,” Catherine says. “Success for us is about everyone in our team working together, contributing to our goals, and staying true to our vision.”

“We have a culture where every voice is valued, which has been



■ Left, Catherine Bell, managing director of Leith-based financial planning firm Mearns & Company

critical to both our business growth and client satisfaction.”

In an era where financial firms are rapidly being acquired by national consolidators, Mearns & Company stands out as an independent, privately owned business. This independence has allowed the firm to maintain its unique, client-centric approach – an increasingly rare attribute in today’s market.

“We receive regular enquiries about potential acquisitions, but staying independent is at the core of who we are,” Catherine explains.

“It’s becoming a true differentiator. Clients come to us because they appreciate the personalised service and the continuity that only an independent firm can offer.”

In October 2022, Catherine, alongside her brother Malcolm Steel and directors Graeme McNally and Graeme Brown, completed a management buyout, further cementing their commitment to Mearns & Company’s future as an independent entity. As the firm celebrates 30 years of steady growth, Catherine credits teamwork and

shared leadership as the driving forces behind their ongoing success.

“Our growth is deeply rooted in collaboration. Whether it’s within our leadership team or across the wider company, we work together to deliver exceptional service to our clients,” Catherine says. “My role is to foster an environment where our team can collaborate effectively and collectively drive our strategy forward.”

This spirit of teamwork extends beyond the company walls. A vital component of Catherine’s leadership journey has been her involvement in peer-to-peer leadership groups, including her membership in Entrepreneurial Scotland’s leadership cohort. These groups

have offered Catherine invaluable support, insights, and accountability as she navigates the challenges of managing a growing business.

“Being part of Entrepreneurial Scotland’s leadership cohort has been an incredibly rewarding experience,” Catherine reflects. “Learning from other leaders, sharing experiences, and gaining fresh perspectives have been fundamental to my development. The support I’ve received has not only enhanced my leadership skills but has also reminded me of the importance of self-care – a critical aspect of effective leadership.”

Mearns & Company offers a comprehensive range of financial planning services, from individual investment and retirement advice to corporate solutions such as group pensions and private medical insurance.

With a strong presence in key sectors like oil and gas, professional services, and technology, the firm is well-positioned for continued growth, driven by a dedicated team, a clear strategic vision, and an unwavering commitment to clients.

As Mearns & Company looks to the future, their focus on nurturing strong teams and maintaining their independence will remain central to their success, allowing them to navigate a constantly evolving industry while staying true to their core values. ■



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