

GREAT BRITAIN Limited

Newly entered into this year's Sunday Times Rich List, Mike Oliver started his business from a one-car garage in Hale, now he and his family run three companies based in Knutsford and the Oliver Valves brand name has become synonymous for secure valve solutions. He takes time out to talk to *Louisa Castle* about beginnings, business in Britain and, his passion, Bentleys

Mike Oliver trained as a design engineer and worked his way up other people's businesses until he was running them for the owners. In doing so he experienced how business should be conducted, how things should be done as well as experiencing the polar opposite, how things shouldn't be done. This gave him clear ideas on how a business should be run and the crucial elements that make it a success. Like so many of us, after fighting against the grain to do things 'right' for long enough, he decided the best way to do it right was to do it himself.

And so in 1979, with no money, two kids and a one-car garage, he set up in business on his own. His product was a high pressure needle valve which would fill a highly-required gap he had recognised in the oil and gas industry. Thirty years later and the company is the largest privately owned valve engineering firm in the country. It is based on Parkgate Industrial Estate where it began life and where it has spread to six factories and three

companies, each tailoring its product to a different niche market. And it turns over in excess of £50million.

Armed with my research I set off to interview the man himself, a little apprehension in my stride, girls and valves don't mix, but then girls and cars aren't meant to either... One tour of the factories later, I was beginning to get a feel for the sense of pride that it takes to work here. Later, when I was sitting in front of the man himself I had this confirmed to me: The question I asked was what were the main reasons for the success of his company?

Number one was the overall attitude of the company, a can-do attitude and a phrase that gets thrown around when you speak to any successful entrepreneur or business person. "Impossible is not an option." And you don't need to look too far to find the evidence to support it, take the belief that was behind the set up of the business some 20 years ago and couple that with a business built on finding the problem (or the niche) and providing the



solution and you have Oliver Valves.

Second (and these are in no particular order) was the importance of getting the people right. Not only attracting the best people in the field for the position available but motivating them with a clear direction and opportunities to develop within that. As we've already said, the reason for the creation of Oliver Valves was due to Mr Oliver's belief that, after working for others, he could do it better himself and there's a big jump from that belief to employing nearly 200 people.

This is where so many small **“ IMPOSSIBLE IS NOT AN OPTION ”**

businesses fail to become big businesses – I think the term is 'control freak' I've heard it said often enough – as the brains behind the business can't let go and trust others to help the business along but that in turn stifles the potential of the business. Don't get me wrong Mr Oliver

still has his finger on the pulse of everything that goes on in the business, but once a clear direction has been given he trusts the people he has chosen to do the job to his exacting standards. Firm but fair.

I do admit I probed him on this for quite a while as this is the area that can see the downfall of any promising business. Unfortunately I had many more questions to ask in my time frame so we never did get to the real bottom of managing people successfully. I think it's about trust; not only in the person but also in yourself to find that right people who share your passion and values. One day the conversation will continue on this and if it does I will pass on any golden nuggets I glean.

Getting back to the question I asked, the final reason for success we discussed was the importance of gross margin – a vital aspect that is often overlooked in starting and managing a business but one that directly impacts risk, return and cash flow: "Gross margin is king."

Evident in our discussions was



that Mr Oliver is proud to be British. He is a patriot and almost apologises for owning a non-British car, but he is also frustrated at the way that Great Britain Limited is being run. "We are close to losing our national identity and pride and this means we can't pull together to run the country well. We are heavily into the politics of envy, if a man does well it is the British way to knock him. It is not a healthy way to be."

Given the current political cat-fighting, maybe a change

of career is on the cards for Mr Oliver? Having spent only a short period of time with him, he makes more sense than anyone I have seen Mr Paxman interview and he has a passion that is missing from so many of our pallid politicians. I am only surmising here, I have no inside knowledge to set the rumour mills in motion...It would make a refreshing change though.

My time was drawing to a close (time really does fly) and I know little about the man behind the business, but then he

as a business person was who I was here to see. I do know he is passionate about his family, his business, his country and his hobbies – his pride and joy being a 1929 Bentley Speed Six Le Mans. I know he is a leader although he questions what it is to lead, likening himself to a conductor of an orchestra.

I know he can walk with anybody and has time for everybody as he takes the time to explain to me the most basic of engineering principles.

I also know that he has fired

up my passion for my country when all is doom and gloom around me, just as any great leader (or conductor) should do, and I see a time when Great Britain Limited will be just as it should, given the right can-do attitude, the right people and a healthy respect for its gross margin of course. ■