

# Look who's 40

## doing things The Entertainer way



2021 marks 40 years since The Entertainer first opened its doors – and it's fair to say a lot has changed since then. John Baulch and Rachael Simpson-Jones spoke to the retailer's founder and executive chairman, Gary Grant, to find out how it all began, who helped it happen and where The Entertainer is headed next.



Gary Grant in his first shop.

**G**ary and his wife Catherine opened the first The Entertainer store on 5th May 1981, when Gary was the tender age of 22 and, by his own admission, knew absolutely nothing about the toy industry. Upon leaving school with one O-level in Maths, he worked in a local bike shop in Amersham. With his eye firmly on setting up his own shop, a call from a friend working as an estate agent led to him buying a retailer called The Pram and Toy Bar in Amersham and changing its name. The rest, as they say, is history.

In the weeks leading up to the opening of The Entertainer, Gary spent hours in the toy departments of large retailers, painstakingly writing down the names of popular toy brands, such as Brio, Duplo, Spears and Harbutt's Plasticine. It'll come as no surprise to those in the toy industry that help with stock was forthcoming from several generous retailers and suppliers, who went out of their way to assist Gary in the earliest days of his new business venture. Vic Butcher, from Toytown Stevenage, filled up Gary's car with toys and wouldn't accept a penny in return. A lady by the name of Josie, who ran Chorleywood Toys and Sports, pointed him in the direction of lines that would get things going. But it was Robeneau's Paul Caspari and Ron Berg who really stand out for Gary. In the days running up to the opening of the first The Entertainer store, Paul (whom Gary describes as 'the most lovely gentleman') took the aspiring toy retailer round his showroom, highlighting exactly what he would need and how many units – and then put the lot on six-month credit. Gary says that if we spoke to any retailer who was around in the 80s and 90s, they'd tell a similar story about the support Robeneau offered retailers, especially indies.

The first rep to turn up at The Entertainer was from Playmobil. Together,



they tipped out some of the 'little blue boxes' all over Gary's desk, at which point, he tells us with a rueful laugh, he raised his eyebrows over what he initially perceived to be an overpriced 'box of plastic'. Gary adds: "I spoke to the same rep recently, and he reminded me of that first conversation we ever had... how things change."

Incredibly, Gary's first shop was one of three toy stores in the market town of Amersham. The others, Playtime and Kerridges, were just a couple of the two and a half thousand or so independent toy stores which existed across the UK at the time, many of which belonged to one of the numerous buying groups including Concord Toys, Upper Thames Wholesalers and White Rose. In turn, these operations belonged to an umbrella group by the name of Unigroup, which ultimately became what we now know as Toymaster. At the time, a gentleman by the name of Gerry Taylor was running one of the UK's first multi-branch retailers, Taylor & McKenna, and Gerry, along with the late Barry Walker, was instrumental in bringing together the fragmented buying group concept, which fundamentally improved the number of good deals on offer for independent retailers.

"In the mid-80s, my biggest competitors were Argos and Index, and their catalogues very much set the tone for Christmas," says Gary. "Index and Argos were embroiled in a vicious price war; the prices were printed in the catalogue



Gary with Darth Vader and a young customer

thanks to the business starting up in something of a golden age for toys, when the UK trade was really starting to take off in earnest. Back then, Gary tells us, Harrogate Toy Fair at the start of the year was crammed with hundreds of suppliers. Every space you could possibly hope to fit a stand in was taken, not just the halls – balconies, corridors and local hotels were considered fair game for enthusiastic exhibitors. Gary recalls a prank played on the late, great Jimmy Hunter, who was a close friend of the Casdon crew, a company known at shows for keeping an open bar. Jimmy hadn't yet arrived at the Crown Hotel, so after a few drinks with the Casdon team, to amuse themselves, they rang him, assumed the role of hotel staff, and told him the account from the previous year hadn't been settled. This meant, therefore, that Hunter Toys wouldn't be allowed to exhibit at the show. "Many readers will know Jimmy as well as I did and can therefore imagine how he reacted – the air turned blue," Gary says. "The rest of the Casdon team were rolling on the floor with laughter. He twigged in the end that we were pulling his leg, but it was a hoot up until that point."

We were keen to know if back in those early days, Gary had any idea of the magnitude of success that lay ahead. The store he took over, The Pram and Toy Bar, took £35,000 the year ending May 1981. The following year, under Gary's guiding hand and now called The Entertainer, it took £100,000. The year after that it took £250,000. In 1984, a second The Entertainer opened on The

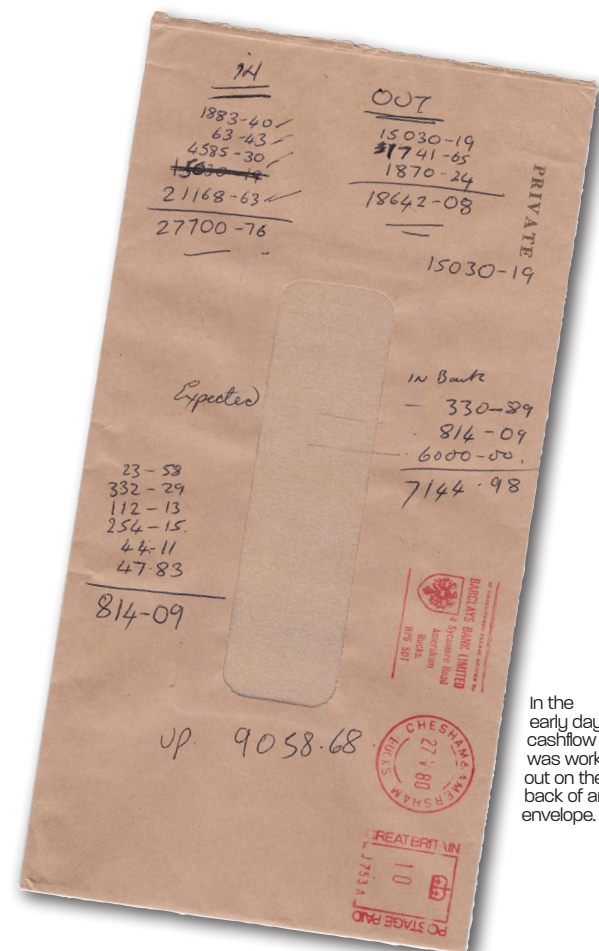
Broadway in Beaconsfield. Although some within the industry clearly saw glimmers of where the retailer was headed – Freddy Franks, whom some readers may remember from a company called Fairie Glen, told Gary early on that he was 'the next Gerry Taylor' – Gary himself had no idea that his fledgling business would end up becoming the UK's largest independent toy retailer. Many of you will recall the close working relationship that Gary had with David Fogel, owner of The Toy Stack; Gary says he learnt so much from working with David during those years.

In 1991, Gary became a Christian, a decision he says turned his life on end and completely changed the way he did business. In line with Christian teachings, the retailer began to tithe 10% of its profits, which continues to this day, and is now heavily involved in several charitable projects as well as its own The Grant Foundation. 1991 also saw the demise of Zodiac Toys, then the biggest high-street toy chain with 91 locations. The Entertainer took over Zodiac's Slough store the same year, moving into a unit in a busy shopping centre that would usually have only been available to the largest multiples. This marked the beginning of The Entertainer's meteoric rise to the top - the store was the retailer's first £1m location. From there, Gary opened new shopping centre stores in Uxbridge and Milton Keynes, fast realising that

and couldn't be altered online as conditions changed back then. Generally speaking, the buying groups would wait to price their catalogues until after Argos's hit the streets. Then Toys R Us turned up; that was a fresh challenge."

"I had the most amazing agents and reps from the very start, and that meant I stocked the best brands too," Gary adds, "such as my Spears agent, and Jez Large from Palitoy. The Real Soft Toy company in Watford, which made the most beautiful teddy bears, plus Britains and Action Man. I was an official Galt stockist too. Back in 1981 and 1982, Rubik's Cube was massive, but we just could not get hold of them. I also couldn't get enough My Little Pony's. Believe it or not, I ended up driving down to Hasbro's offices just outside Reading, stupidly thinking they kept stock there, to demand they gave me more. That Christmas, Hasbro launched the My Little Pony Dream Castle, which was £24.99, and the big Transformers action figures, which were also £24.99. I only managed to get 144 of each Transformers character, and 144 of the castles, but sales were phenomenal. Think about what they'd be in today's prices and then consider one small shop selling so many. It was amazing. Then, in 1984, the £4.99 Star Wars speeder bike came out. We sold 144 of those in a week, from one single shop."

It's difficult to know whether The Entertainer's success in those early days was at least in part



In the early days, cashflow was worked out on the back of an envelope.



Gary's first delivery van



there were some serious volumes to be achieved at shopping centre locations, followed by Camberley and Basingstoke in 1993. By 2001, a decade after Gary's transformational year and two decades after his first Amersham shop opened its doors, his store portfolio sat at a very healthy 25.

"The next monumental change was 2008, when Woolworths went into administration," Gary notes. "By the time it closed its last store in January 2009, our portfolio was up to 45, and you could see a Woolworths from the front door of 35 of them. That retailer leaving the high street was a blessing for our business, but we were just coming off the back of the financial crash of 2008. Except for 2020, one of the most difficult years to be running a business like this due to Covid, 2008 was the most challenging year we've ever had. The financial world was all over the place and the fallout of that was a lack of consumer confidence. No one knew if they would have a job from one week to the next, and by October of that year our turnover was down -30%. It was a very worrying time."

Christmas 2008 saw The Entertainer claw back some of the ground lost during the crash, and the following year was spent repairing the business, motivating the teams, and bringing the head office back together to 'restart the heartbeat' of The Entertainer. Since then, things have gone from strength to strength. There are now 171 The Entertainer stores in the UK. Gary's son Stuart has been in the business for around 20 years, while his other son, Duncan, has been there around 15 years. Noting that without them he would by now be 'completely knackered', Gary's sons have clearly injected their own enthusiasm and drive into the business with their markedly different yet entirely complementary skill sets. The Entertainer's website launched 22 years ago, turning mail order into something resembling the online system prevalent across retail today, and the business moved into a bigger head office and warehouse complex in Little Chalfont two decades ago. Things have expanded

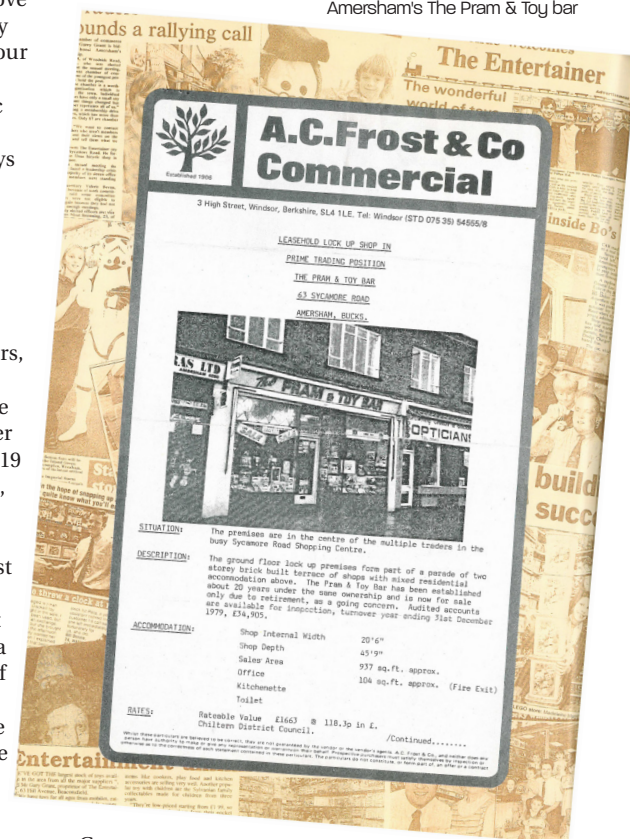
so much since then, The Entertainer is on the move again, relocating into somewhere yet larger. Gary recounts taking Mattel's Dominic Geddes for a tour of the Little Chalfont site, which was covered in cranes, bulldozers, and dumper trucks. Dominic commented to Gary that the site appeared to be very much a 'statement of intent', which Gary says hit the nail on the head – and the truth in that statement of that is plain to see today.

"One of the greatest joys for me over the years has been the opportunities we've been able to create for our staff," Gary adds. "At the moment, 150 of our staff are in our 10 Year Club. Anthony Buckle has worked for The Entertainer for 38 years, joining our YTS scheme and working his way up from there. Our store layouts are the way they are because of everything Anthony has achieved over all those years. There are countless others, too – 19 employees have worked here more than 20 years, seven for more than 25 years, another seven for more than 30, and two for more than 35. Added up, that's more than 900 years of service from just 35 employees. People recognise me as the leader of The Entertainer, but the reality is that without great people around them, leaders cannot grow a business of this size. You need a team made up of people that will go the extra mile, and we seem to attract more than our fair share. Certainly, the business has outgrown many of my skills, and we were fortunate to find Mark Campbell to be our CEO – Mark has worked with our senior team to make our company fit the new world of retail. Our success is built on the work of loyal people who are good at what they do. Our employees are committed to us, so we are committed to them."

We asked Gary if he wishes he'd done anything differently during the past 40 years. After a period of contemplation, he notes that there's probably a lot he would have done differently – all the deals he got wrong, for example – but at the end of the day, he's got a lot more right. Every decision has been made with full commitment and effort, something



Where it all began: the A.C. Frost advert for Amersham's The Pram & Toy Bar



Gary calls 'The Entertainer Way' – looking at something, evaluating it thoroughly, and then giving it everything to make it work.

A self-described 'pessimistic budgeter', Gary knew that a cautious approach was needed coming into 2021 following several years of disruption. The Entertainer's figures from 2019 were used as a backbone 'with a little haircut', as Gary explains: "Our last absolutely staggering year was 2018, but the year after that was bullet-holed by Brexit politics, followed by a December general election. These factors really upset the apple cart for us at retail. And then 2020 was completely destroyed by Covid – how on earth do you then budget? The answer was to take the 2019 figures and trim 10% off. In reality, we had no idea what this year would look like. We factored in the January, February and March closures, which a lot of people thought was pessimistic, but with hindsight, this was a wise decision, as we didn't reopen until April. Since then, it's been fantastic, and we're really pleased with the response we've had from shoppers over the past six weeks."

As a result, the outlook has more recently changed from cautious to optimistic, though Gary does outline what he calls headline concerns for the rest of the year. Largely, these relate to stock and stock pricing, with substantial freight cost increases continuing to plague a number of industries. Raw materials and components are also going up in price at an unprecedentedly high level; at such a level that Gary doesn't ever recall seeing anything like during his entire career in retail. An order for metal shop racking, for example, came in at 17% higher than what was originally quoted six weeks earlier. And while inflation is a risk, Gary also sees the potential for reward, noting that if you can pass increases on, you'll have an opportunity to amortize some of your fixed costs over increased turnover. The Entertainer is happy to take on price increases, but there's a caveat; woe betide any supplier who forces an increase on Gary but not



his competitors, giving them a competitive pricing advantage.

“40 years ago, I would admit there was a slight ‘them and us’ approach to dealing with our suppliers,” comments Gary. “Nowadays, especially as Stuart, Geoff Sheffield and Scott Norman have become more involved, everything is based far more on partnerships. Yes, we need help and support on promotions and marketing, but suppliers also need to make a living too – give and take is required so that we all achieve our objectives. When Covid hit in March 2020, it was this attitude that meant we received a lot of support from the industry. I think we’re in for an outstanding year, even when you take into account that we were shut for the first three and a half months.”

As well as Covid, inflation, shipping and price increases, another challenge lay in wait - deciding how to celebrate The Entertainer’s landmark year. The pandemic means that what would have ordinarily been a big party was a somewhat scaled back affair. Gary entertained a gathering of staff with stories for the good old days for an hour – “I can remember what happened on a Wednesday 30

years ago but not what I had for breakfast,” he says – and a cake was enjoyed by all. Numerous suppliers had sent in gifts including a custom painted The Entertainer skateboard deck, while Ravensburger had turned a photo of the 10 Year Club into a special jigsaw puzzle.

Looking to the future, Gary believes that retail is going to have to change in the years ahead. The Entertainer’s online element is currently trading at more than double 2019, showing purchases haven’t fully reverted to physical stores even though the shops have bounced back incredibly well from the turmoil of the past year. As Gary explains, however, this shows that the toy shop experience is far from over.

“The Entertainer is all about providing children with a dream and a memory, and that is the toy shop of their childhood” says Gary. “My father lived in Wembley and used to take us to Zodiac Toys on Wembley High Street. I vividly remember that shop. I knew where everything was. It had a basement and I used to go down there and check out all the Corgi cars in their boxes. You keep these memories with you. I don’t remember the clothes shops I visited, or the grocer, but you always remember

your favourite toy shop. The internet just cannot deliver that. If we can make our shops – and by we, I mean the royal we, the whole toy retail industry – fun and interesting and visionary, with events and demonstrations and experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere, we will not just survive but thrive.”

Gary adds: “I’m the other side of 60 now, and at my age you start thinking about your legacy. Some people have dedicated their entire working lives to The Entertainer, and I have to ask myself what I want to leave behind. This is where our charitable side comes in. Imagine if Covid had wiped out The Entertainer; 171 UK stores, Poly, ELC, our international presence, all gone within three years, nothing to show but memories. A legacy needs to live beyond you. Most recently, we helped build a brand new Scout hall in Amersham, to replace one a certain young Grant wrecked around 50 years ago. That hall will be there in 50 years. It’ll outlive me, so The Entertainer’s legacy carries on. And with any luck, The Entertainer itself will still be around in 50 years too.”



A legacy - Stuart Grant, Gary Grant, Catherine Grant and Duncan Grant.