

Building firm

Starting out on your own is daunting, but Steve Wyatt of SW Building Contractors shows the benefits of caution, careful planning and working with the best people

BY JILL PELTON



Originally a bricklayer by trade, Steve Wyatt had been working for a company where he had been apprenticed, and then for a sub-contractor who asked him to join his business. He had been thinking about going out on his own, and the idea became more pressing when he wanted to stay as local as possible to his home town of Marlborough while his partner, Claire, was pregnant with their first child. Says Steve, 'Claire was the one who said, "You can do this. You're really good at what you do, so go and try it. If you go out on your own, what's the worst that can happen? You've got trades that you can fall back on and you can work for anybody".' With the support of his family Steve decided this was the time to set up his business on his own.

Building up the business

Steve started out by getting jobs from people he knew, and other work followed through recommendations and word of mouth. At one point, he turned what could have been a negative into a positive. After accidentally missing something

off a quote, Steve told his client what had happened and assured him that he would carry out the extra work without charging for it. 'The client said it was refreshing to find a contractor who'd openly admitted he'd missed something off the quote but who was still willing to do the extra work without charging more.' The client was so impressed that he gave a glowing review that ended up in *Which?* magazine. On the back of that, SW Builders got a job for a £50,000 extension, and things progressed from there.

Like most people setting up on their own, Steve initially had his reservations as he assessed what might be his strengths and shortcomings. 'When you become a contractor that's running the job, then you have to have a knowledge of everything,' he says. 'For example, there's no point in building from the ground up stopping at plate level and then not understanding how to cut a roof on a property. I started to educate myself more on plans, detail and recruiting some of my more experienced knowledgeable members from the trade. I needed to find myself a good plumber and a good electrician who I could call upon, which I did. These two



companies were very conscientious and we managed our work in similar ways.'

When thinking about the challenges involved in taking on bigger projects, Steve decided it would be helpful to find a mentor and met with a local quantity surveyor, Ian Walker, who he began working with. 'Ian was a breath of fresh air, a gentleman and a friend who I looked up to – my "construction dad" you could say. I needed to find somebody who was very good at pricing drawings and Ian was a specialist in this field. I wasn't doubting that I could do the work, but I didn't want to worry about missing items off quotes, especially if work was going to be on a larger scale.'

'I think the key to any success in a business and having a good name is to build trust with your client and be as open and honest as you can,' says Steve, 'but also to have some guys around you that you know that you can trust. We do try out different people from time to time and have done so over the years. It still always comes back to just me, Chris my head carpenter and Matt my head bricklayer running jobs – with the help of our fellow subcontractors who come everywhere

with us and who have been together as a group for the last 13 years. I can't forget the person that looks after all our enquiries and works closely with our accountants and is the main reason I started this journey; my partner and fellow director Claire. She keeps us all on the straight and narrow and makes sure everyone gets paid on time, which is so important – as well as homeschooling our two boys, Freddie aged 12 and Harry aged 7, during lockdown.'

Outstanding projects

'The company now does mainly bespoke extensions and renovations,' says Steve. There are a couple of projects which have really made a difference and which Steve takes particular pride in: a full kitchen extension and house renovation with a spiral wine cellar in the kitchen floor is one example, and a rather elaborate garden room next to a swimming pool is another. Both were bespoke, one-off projects. 'We'd been doing single storey extensions and double storey extensions, but I wanted to do something that was completely a one-off,' says Steve. 'And then I managed to get that opportunity.'

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The first one, which had the spiral wine cellar in the floor, four-and-a-half metres down was a job in Ramsbury. 'There were some real challenges; we'd never done anything like this before. I was particularly proud of the finish, and the way things went. The principal designer was a local company called Milton Architects.

'We also did a garden room next to a swimming pool with a domed ceiling, which was a one-off. No one in the country had ever done a domed ceiling like that. It was bespoke to the architect, Andrew Townsend Architects and to the client. That spiral wine cellar would take me on to more bespoke works. We really like the more modern, but clever designs that architects like Milton's produce.

The company became a Guild Member fairly recently in 2020. 'We've got the badge now,' says Steve. 'I had new workwear for my team – jackets, fleeces, hats, and we've got the company emblem on the left side and the Guild of Master Craftsmen logo on the right.' Steve felt the Guild was the right way to go. 'I hope to keep this mark', he says.

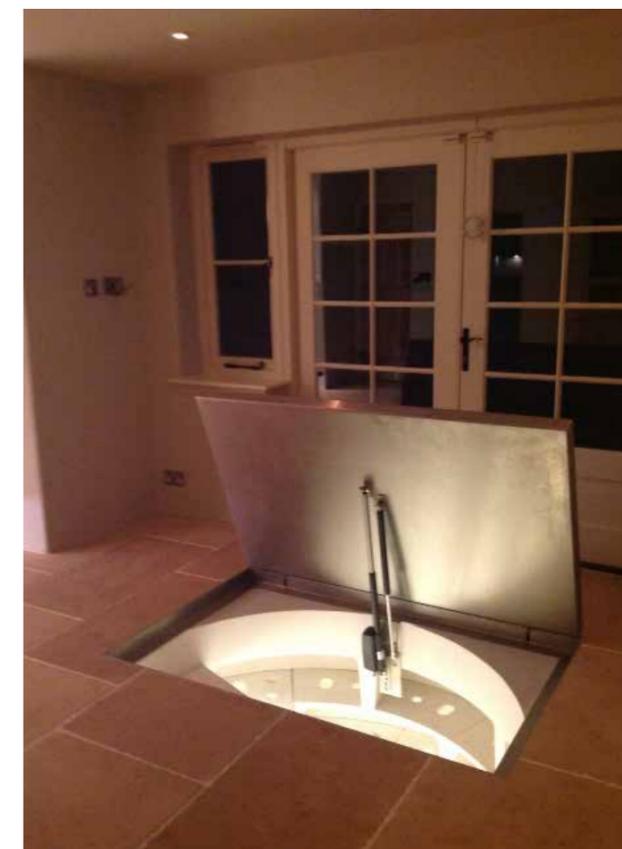
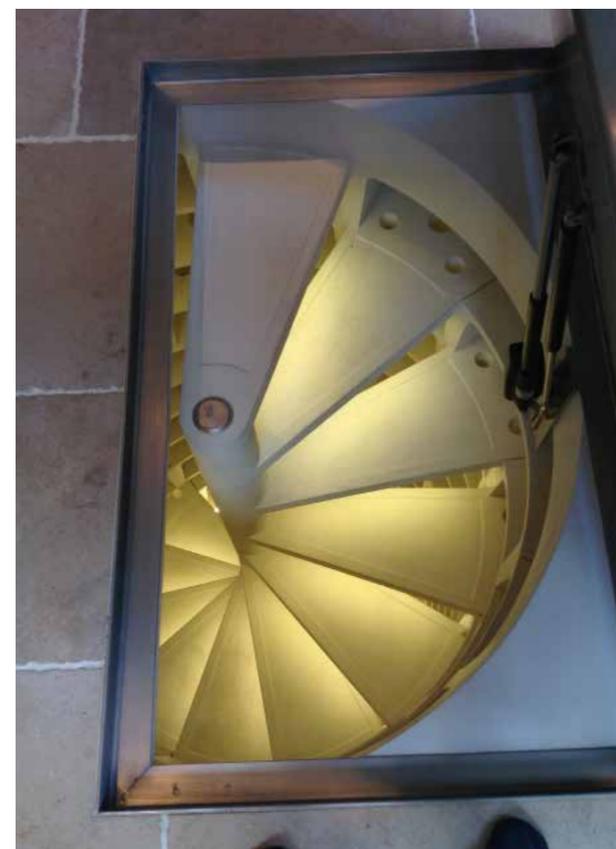
Finding a way forward

Like all tradespeople, the company has found recent months to be challenging. 'The last couple of years have been difficult, both because of coronavirus, and some personal issues, such as losing our stepfather of 22 years but I kept going', says Steve. 'I'm very fortunate – although I've only got a small team, they have been with me through thick and thin and we all get on brilliantly. They are a credit to our business and themselves. When we had the first lockdown in March 2020, we shut down for seven weeks, just because we felt that it was the right thing to do. No one knew how this pandemic was going to go. We were just at the start of a job. The client had moved out and needed us to do everything we could to get them back into their home. So, as soon as we came back we put Covid measures in place and of course we're still doing it now. But we found a way to work.

'Although the construction industry hit a bit of a wall when everything shut down, it was soon reopened again by the Government. And since then, the construction industry is picking up – as it's the backbone of the economy, isn't it? A lot of those people who spent time at home during lockdown may have thought about getting an extension. They may have decided that they're not going to move but need more space because they are working from home. We are now getting many more enquires about extensions.



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'For me, personally, as with the recession in 2008, I just keep my head down and keep doing what I'm doing. Because I can safely say I love what we do and my business. It's very easy to get up and go to work each morning knowing you're working on interesting projects. Working mainly outside breathing fresh air each day and working with the team that you love being around.

'I invest in small attributes that make the company better. I haven't got a large workforce but we have our own store, digger, skip, loader and vans. I buy a lot of tools that make our life easier on site; that's how we get jobs done. We want to invest in training and bringing youngsters in. We are now taking on an apprentice, who has had a delayed start due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic but is starting soon.

'And the rewards are very satisfying. It's heartening when clients come back from work and say, "Oh look, you've done that!'" Or "Wow that's different from this morning when I left for work." As Steve explains, "We are proud to be a family run company with a big sub-contracting following that help deliver high end quality results."

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