

the story of john willmott & sons

150 Years
1852 to 2002



**WILLMOTT DIXON
GROUP**

John Willmott, the Founder, and his Sons

In 1852 John Willmott, a young journeyman bricklayer living in the small village of Bassingbourn in Cambridgeshire, was working for a local builder called Revills on a large estate at Wimpole owned by the 4th Earl of Hardwick.

The estate needed a new well to be dug and the Estate Manager asked John why he didn't start a business on his own account. This gave John food for thought and after some consideration he decided to strike out on his own. He was asked to provide a labour only price to excavate and brick line a new well in the grounds of the Wimpole Estate and as water is very close to the surface in Cambridgeshire the well only needed to be 12 foot deep and to be bricked up with 4 inch brickwork. With wages at the time at 3 pennies an hour for labourers and 5 pennies for bricklayers, John submitted his estimate, and the princely sum of £1 was agreed for the job. This was to be the beginning of a business which has thrived for over 150 years.

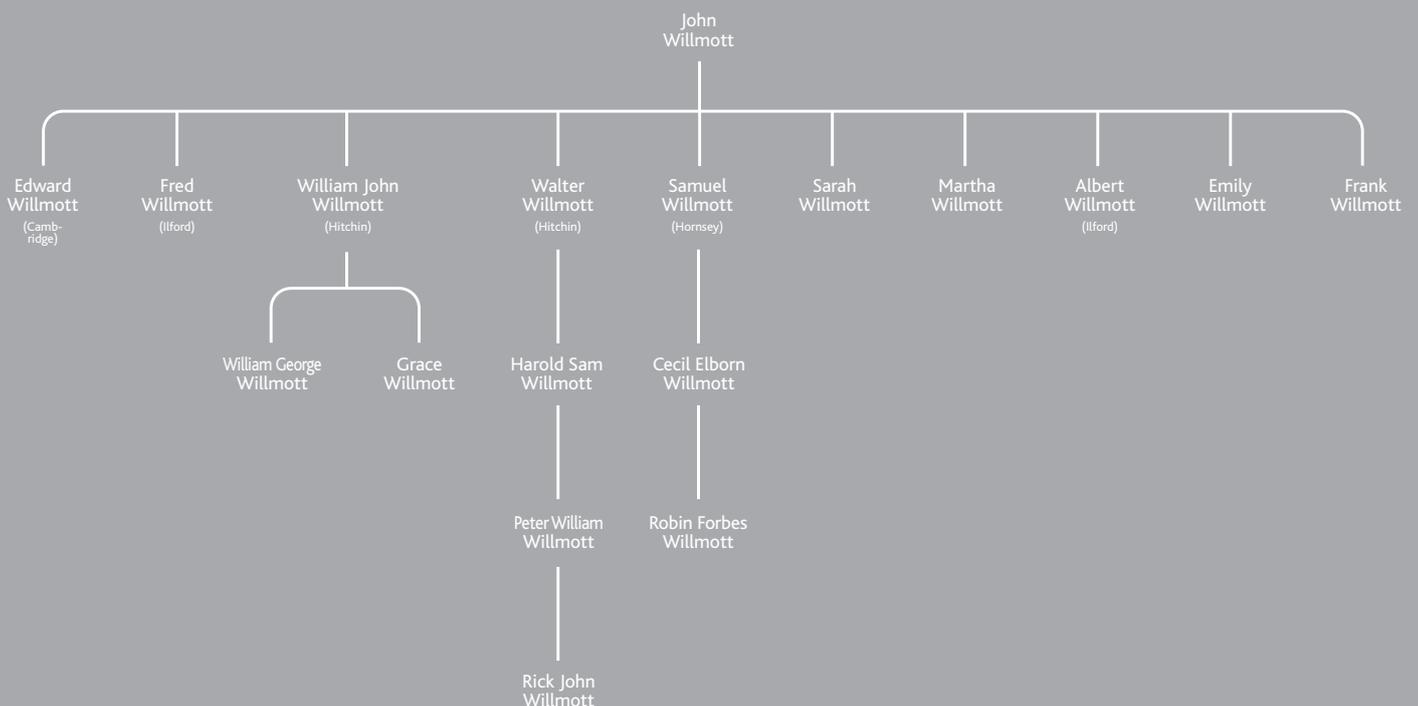


John Willmott – The founder

John Willmott, the Founder, and his Sons

After his marriage to Mary in 1853 John Willmott's business grew steadily and he soon moved to larger premises at Park House, Bassingbourn where he had space to build a Joinery Shop. His domestic responsibilities also grew, with a family of ten children over the next twenty years (seven boys and three girls) and as time went on his sons were taken into the business, probably at the age of around 12, and trained as either carpenters or bricklayers. In the early years a lot of work was carried out on local farm buildings and John would have travelled to work on foot. Other notable jobs around this time were the building of the Royston 'Lock-up', and the repair and re-seating of Ware Church. John often told the story of walking from Bassingbourn to Ware, staying the week, and walking back the following weekend.

As the family grew up and their participation increased it became necessary to look further afield for work. Edward, the eldest son, went to Cambridge and started a business there, and Fred and Albert moved to Ilford and established F & A Willmott at Ilford Hill. In 1878, William John, moved to Hitchin where he purchased a business from Frederick Jeeves based in Trevor Road, and a few years later he was joined by his brother Walter. Another brother, Samuel, operated a branch at Hornsey, carrying out work in the London area. As they were still working in conjunction with their father John, the firm became known as John Willmott & Sons and is the forerunner of the present company. The sixth brother, Frank, trained as a pharmacist and ran a retail chemist in Radstock but did not marry. John Willmott carried on working until his retirement in 1896 at the age of 66.



A century of building – 1852 to 1952

As the business flourished the family purchased a large field in Walsworth Road, Hitchin where they built two terraces of villas along the frontage, reserving the land at the rear for workshops. When he first came to Hitchin, William John Willmott lived at the Trevor Road premises he had purchased from Frederick Jeeves but after the villas were built in Walsworth Road he moved to No. 80, and this address remained the head office for the company for some 80 years. Opposite this site at the time, was a corn field which was later occupied by Ralph E Sanders & Sons Limited who were established in Royston in 1875 as coachbuilders for horse drawn carriages. They opened their purpose built carriage and motor works in Walsworth Road in 1906 and later became motor dealers and held the Austin dealership for many years. Adjoining Sanders site was the works of George W King & Sons Limited who manufactured agricultural, and later industrial machinery, as well as munitions during the war years. They moved to Stevenage in 1952 and eventually became a subsidiary of Camford Engineering.

The Joiner's Shop moved to Hitchin from Bassingbourn in the early 1890s. This was a timber building standing on wooden posts, with the shop itself on the first floor. Below was a timber store which included a saw pit where trees were converted into planks. Machinery had not yet been introduced to any great extent but around this time the first circular saw was installed, powered by an old portable boiler which generated its steam from the refuse of the Joiner's Shop. Two sawyers, the Worbey brothers, worked as "top sawyer" and "bottom man". William Pettengell, who moved from Bassingbourn with the company, was Joinery Shop Foreman for 52 years, first at Bassingbourn and then at Hitchin.

In the early 1890s they were trading as John Willmott & Sons, and a considerable amount of work was carried out for the then Great Northern Railway Company, when stations were being rebuilt and modernised. Contracts were completed at Huntingdon, Yaxley, Three Counties Arlesey, Stevenage and Brookman's Park. Later the company was also responsible for building the over-bridge at Norton Way in the newly formed town of Letchworth Garden City. They carried on working for British Railways for many more years up to and after the Second World War, which included work as far away as Manchester, Leeds, Norwich, Doncaster, Harwich and Clacton on Sea.

During the same period the branch of the family business at Hornsey, run by Samuel Willmott, worked on such notable contracts as the rebuilding of a large block of flats and shops in Marchmont Street, Camden, the re-erection of buildings in Clifton Street in the City, and Baldwin's Place in Gray's Inn Road. Joinery formed a large part of work in those days and the Joinery Workshop at Hitchin provided all the joinery for both Hitchin and Hornsey.

The company built up a very good reputation for the quality and craftsmanship of its joinery work, and specialised in bank and shop fittings. After the 1914-18 war a great deal of oak panelling was made for war memorials, with one contract having over 23,000 letters carved and gilded on the panelling. The oak for this work was purchased from various estates, felled and transported by rail to the Saw Mill at Hitchin, where it was sawn to size and kiln-dried in the Joinery Shop. Other significant contracts carried out in the early

A century of building – 1852 to 1952

1900s included Hitchin Girls' Grammar School, Architect Edward Burgess FRIBA of Hitchin, and Brighton, Hove and Sussex Grammar School, Architect S.B. Russell, FRIBA of Grays Inn.

In due course the sons of John Willmott, William John, Walter and Samuel married, and in turn their sons came into the business after serving apprenticeships. William George, son of William John, was apprenticed to William Seymour & Sons in 1899 for three years, working a 59 hour week for three shillings a week in his first year. In 1902 he was articled to Robinson & Roods in London and qualified as a Surveyor. Likewise in 1907 Harold Sam Willmott, son of Walter Willmott, was apprenticed to his uncles at F & A Willmott in Ilford in the trade of carpenter and joiner, and in 1912 was also sent to Robinson & Roods as an apprentice surveyor. Both William George and Harold Sam served in the 1914-18 war. Harold was badly wounded in 1916 returning to the company after being discharged, and William George was demobilised in 1919 when he also rejoined the business.

William John Willmott, who has been described as the pioneer of the Hitchin company, became a Justice of the Peace in 1916 and also served for several years on the Hitchin Urban District Council, and became its chairman. He was a very keen business man, well known for his straight dealing and fairness to his employees, and was mourned by all when he died in 1922.

Walter Willmott also served on the Hitchin Urban District Council and was a member of the then Hitchin Board of Guardians. He died suddenly after a sea bathe in 1929 whilst staying at Clacton-on-Sea where the company was rebuilding the railway station. (Note: The Board of Guardians originally administered the Poor Laws and the Workhouse in the community. These institutions were abolished in 1929 but the Board of Guardians continued as a charitable organisation for the poor of the community. The Hitchin Workhouse became Chalkdell House in 1930, then Lister Hospital from 1943-1972 and finally Hitchin Hospital until its closure in 1992.) Both brothers and their families were prominent and active members of the Hitchin Congregational Church in Queen Street, Hitchin. It was perhaps fateful therefore that many years later, in 1974, the company was to purchase this then redundant church and build a new head office on the site.

In 1924, as the families were growing up and the business expanding, it was decided to separate the Hitchin and Hornsey branches and form two separate companies namely, John Willmott & Sons (Hitchin) Limited and John Willmott & Sons (Hornsey) Limited. The first directors of the Hitchin company were Walter Willmott, his son Harold Sam Willmott (known as Mr Sam), and William George Willmott (known as Mr WG) son of the late William John Willmott.

Among the many important local contracts completed by the company around this time were the Hitchin Boys' Grammar School, the North Herts & South Beds Hospital Extension, Hitchin, a Nurses' Home at Barnet, work at Fairfield Hospital at Arlesey, and the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital at Welwyn. In 1925 the company also completed a housing development in Hitchin, known as the Manor Estate, which was built on the grounds of the old Hitchin Cricket Club off London Road on the south side of the town. The roads are now known by the names of Lister Avenue and Coach Drive, Hitchin. Mr Sam and his wife Gladys



Brighton Hove and Sussex Grammar School

A century of building – 1852 to 1952

were to raise their family in one of these houses named “Oakfield” on the corner of Coach Drive and Gosmore Road.

One unusual contract in 1930, which took nearly three years to complete, was the building of Bailiffscourt at Climping near Littlehampton, Sussex for the late Lord Moyne (formerly Walter Guinness). The mansion was erected in a 15th century medieval style around a central courtyard, using reclaimed materials collected from various derelict and abandoned buildings around the country. Some of the materials came from Hertfordshire, namely a 16th century fireplace from a house in Tilehouse Street, Hitchin, an oak screen said to be from a medieval building in Hitchin, probably a Cloth Hall destroyed under a slum clearance scheme, and ceiling beams from a demolished barn in Letchworth. The Architect was the late Amyas Phillips, of Phillips of Hitchin (Antiques) Limited. He was an antiquarian and enthusiast of historic architecture, and this was his only architectural commission. After completion the house was furnished in a pseudo-medieval style, with items such as two pronged forks, pewter plates, tapestries, oak chests, tables and cupboards, many of which were also designed by Amyas Phillips and made from reclaimed materials.

A large part of the work involved the restoration and reconstruction of a Norman Chapel which is still in use today for marriage blessings. The contract also included the relocation of buildings from around the country which were saved from demolition or decay by Lord Moyne. They were restored in the grounds of Bailiffscourt and included a brick and timber 15th century gatehouse, a sandstone and thatched 16th century building, and a 17th century timbered house. To further improve the estate following deforestation by the previous owner, Lord Moyne purchased 1,500 trees, mainly oak and ash, from a nearby forest, which were uprooted and replanted on his property. Almost 90 percent of the trees survived, and years later the Ministry of Works sought advice from John Willmott & Sons on this procedure in connection with the transplanting of trees for the Festival of Britain site in London.

A rather interesting reference is made to Bailiffscourt in a book entitled 'The Cottage in the Fields' by Gerard Young, involving Mr Ball, Lord Moyne's Estate Manager, see below:

"You can imagine the wild rumours that swept throughout the plain when the inhabitants saw whole trees going by on lorries for months on end. Mr. Ball stayed at an Arundel hotel during the building of Bailiffscourt, and went to and fro each day. The hotel folk were curious about him, not knowing where he went or what he did. Then they discovered he had something to do with the strange happening at Clymping. The hotel barman leant confidently over the counter one evening, and said to him: 'Y-know, funny things are going on down there. They've got an army of men in Canada digging up trees, floating 'em down the rivers, bringing 'em over the Atlantic in a special boat, and 500 lumbermen are planting 'em at Clymping'. Mr Ball said 'Really', and raised his eyebrows in mild surprise."

One of the Foremen on this project was John (Jobby) Upchurch, who rented a house for his family in nearby Climping. His daughter, Mary Bradbeer, remembers the experience of living in Climping and attending the local primary school. She recalls that the



"Oakfield" Coach Drive, Hitchin

A century of building – 1852 to 1952

Willmott men were accommodated in a very old derelict building known as Kent's farmhouse where they had to look after themselves without any gas or electricity. Candles were used for lighting and cooking was done in their rooms over a coal fire. The men on the top floor could hear rats in the roof at night, and the toilet, a five seater, was in the grounds outside. Mary still lives in St. Ippolyts near Hitchin in a bungalow built on land bought from Willmotts at the time of her marriage. Mary also worked for Willmotts as a young woman, at both R.A.F. Chivenor and R.A.F. Alconbury. At Alconbury she recalls the Willmott employees being allowed to listen to a wartime concert given by Bob Hope.



13th Century Chapel at Bailiffscourt restored by Willmotts in 1930



Bailiffscourt Hotel in 2008

Bailiffscourt, which is now Grade II listed, is currently owned by Historic Sussex Hotels. They value the, albeit pseudo, medieval architecture and have retained and highlighted the unusual features commissioned by Lord and Lady Moyne.

The company also completed many notable buildings in Letchworth Garden City, such as two factories for the Irving Air Chute Company, a large part of the British Tabulating Machine Company Factory, St. Christopher's Theatre and School, (now St Francis School) Letchworth Golf Club, and Letchworth Open Air Swimming Pool. Other contracts of note in the area were work to convert Temple Dinsley for use as the Princess Helena College at Preston, near Hitchin, and the construction of Burloes Hall near Royston for Sir Cecil Newman. A copy of the final account for Burloes Hall shows a total cost of £12,853. 11s. 6d. During the second world war the company was almost totally engaged on contracts for the Air Ministry all over the country, and after the war, moved on to bomb damage repair work and the construction of badly needed new housing for local councils.



The Ozone Swimming Pool, Letchworth



Irving Airchute Factory, Letchworth



Burloes Hall, Royston

There were many loyal, long service employees during this period, who completed their apprenticeships and stayed with the company all their working lives, such as Arthur Izzard, William Skelcher, John Emerton, and Charles Faulkner on the Joinery side of the business, and Arthur Brice, decorator, Berk Monk, Foreman, Tom Worsley, Labourer, Frank Harris, Machinist, and many, many more.

A century of building – 1852 to 1952

The Board of Directors expanded after the war and in addition to Mr. W.G. (Chairman) and Mr. Sam (Managing Director) now included John Budgen, George Froy, Cecil Toll, Ben Ward, Miss Grace Willmott (sister of WG) and Mr. E.J. Wilson. Miss Grace was to retire as Director and Company Secretary in 1949 after 50 years service, when the role of Company Secretary was taken over by Miss Ivy Wilson who remained with the company until her retirement in 1962.

On Tuesday 6 May 1952 the company commemorated its 100th Anniversary with a Dinner for all employees at the Hermitage Halls in Hitchin. This was followed by a Concert Party compered by Peter Drake. The Chairman, Mr WG, proposed a toast to the future of the firm and Mr John Upchurch, General Foreman, replied offering congratulations to the company on reaching its centenary. The following is a short quote from a report in the Hertfordshire Pictorial the local paper of the day.

“Mr WG Willmott, Chairman, presided over one of the largest and jolliest of gatherings seen in the Hermitage Halls of recent years, there being about 340 employees and friends present from Hitchin, Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City, Cambridge, and Weston-super-Mare.”

Miss Ivy Wilson was presented with a gold watch in recognition of 25 years service to the company, and Mr Jack Weston was presented with a cup and pewter tankard as winner of the firm’s Darts Championship. Jack Weston joined John Willmott & Sons in 1950 as a plant fitter and remained with the company until his retirement in 1981 by which time he was a director of the John Willmott Plant Limited.

Mr. E. J. Wilson also organised a separate celebratory dinner for architects, clients and friends at Letchworth Hall Hotel and Letchworth Golf Club on 10 June 1952. This venue was chosen because we had recently built the new Golf Clubhouse.

In the 100 years since John Willmott had completed his first contract in 1852, working conditions had changed beyond recognition. At that time transport was either on foot or by horse and cart, there was no machinery in use on site, and all woodwork was done by hand. With the introduction of motor vehicles and steam trains, transport of materials and men was speeded up tremendously, and site machinery such as excavators, bulldozers, electric drills, portable saws, mechanised wheelbarrows and hoists made a world of difference.

Progress after the war years

During the 1950s the company maintained a modest growth, despite difficult trading conditions. The Chairman, 'Mr WG', introduced new guidelines on estimating and control of contract costs leading to the appointment of a Surveyor, Brian Howard, a few years later in 1962. An early form of Cost Value Comparison was introduced for all contracts, a more sophisticated version of which is still in use more than forty years later. In 1960 John W Bayliss, an Accountant with the company auditors Tingle Comber & Company, began advising the Board on their accounting methods and was appointed a Director in 1965. He continued to advise the board as Financial Consultant, Director and Company Secretary for many years until his retirement in 1999.

In 1957 'Mr WG' retired as Chairman after over 25 years in the post and remained as a director in a part time role until his death in 1964. His cousin 'Mr Sam' became Chairman and at the same time his son, Peter Willmott, was appointed a director. None of 'Mr WG's' family followed him into the business, except as shareholders. His only surviving son, Michael Willmott, had a career in agriculture and regrettably died at the very young age of 41 in 1970. In 1961 John Budgen was appointed Managing Director and Peter Willmott became Deputy Chairman. Peter was to succeed his father as Chairman in 1966. Their fellow directors at that time were George Froy, Cecil Toll, and Ben Ward. Unbeknown to many, John Budgen had a talent for sketching and painting and in fact the picture of Hitchin Girl's Grammar School which adorned the front cover of the company's Centenary Brochure in 1952 was drawn by him.

The company continued to grow in the sixties, despite a severe credit squeeze in 1965 which was accompanied by significant Government legislation. Such Acts as the Offices, Shops & Railway Premises, Industrial Training, Contract of Employers, and Redundancy Payments, had a considerable impact on the business. In addition the devaluation of the Pound in 1967 had significant consequences on the national economy.

With a view to widening the company's portfolio and increasing turnover, a speculative housing company, John Willmott Developments Limited, was formed in 1965 which traded successfully for over 10 years building houses for sale to the public. Projects were completed at Beckett Hall, Welwyn, Benslow Rise and Lister Avenue Hitchin, Kimpton, Pirton, Needingworth, Yaxley and Brampton. The company also acquired two M & E companies, Engineering Services (Luton) Limited and C S Thompson Heating & Plumbing Limited, together with a small local builder, C F Burr & Sons Limited. However these did not prove viable and the M&E companies ceased trading four years later and C.F Burr was sold to Silvertons, a small local builder, in 1970.

In 1969, John Willmott & Sons (Hornsey) Limited, run by 'Mr Sam's' cousin Cecil Willmott and his son Robin Willmott, was reunited with the Hitchin business, 45 years after they had separated into two companies in 1924. A new parent company was formed, John Willmott Construction Limited, to carry out large building contracts, and the "Hitchin" and "Hornsey" companies became subsidiaries covering small building works in their respective geographical areas.



Letchworth College of Technology 1957
See Spirella Building on right behind the trees

Moving home – The 1970's

At the beginning of the 1970's four longstanding directors, appointed in 1949, departed, namely John Budgen, George Froy, Cecil Toll and Ben Ward. Ian Dixon, who had joined the company in 1967 as General Manager, was appointed a director and was soon to become Managing Director. He then led the company through a period of significant growth, resulting in it becoming widely recognised as one of the top ten privately owned construction companies in the UK.

Although the offices at 80 Walsworth Road, Hitchin, had been extended by the purchase of the adjoining property at No. 81, the company had outgrown this space and looked at several options for larger accommodation. Constructing a new building on land owned by the company at The Cutting beside Hitchin Railway Station was considered but rejected and it was finally decided to purchase the site of the Hitchin Congregational Church in Queen Street, where an earlier generation of the Willmott family had worshiped in the early 1900s. Planning permission was granted to demolish the church and build two 2-storey office blocks, and application had to be made to the Home Office for approval to move graves in the adjoining graveyard. The new head office was built using the steel framed S.E.A.C. building system marketed by the British Steel Corporation. The company had recently joined a consortium to construct schools, offices and industrial buildings using this S.E.A.C. system which operated through a subsidiary named Systems Construction (UK) Limited.



Former Hitchin Congregational Church



New Willmott Offices, Queen Street, Hitchin 1971



New Offices at Henlow 1978

The company moved into the new offices at 43 Queen Street in June 1971 but within a few years it was decided to relocate to premises where the joinery and plant operations could be accommodated on one site and to dispose of the premises at Walsworth Road and The Railway Cutting. Therefore in 1975, ninety-seven years after the company had become established in Hitchin, they moved out of the town to a site at Henlow in Bedfordshire which was purchased from a pyramid sales company called Golden Chemicals.

This was a greenfield site including a suite of offices and warehousing, as well as land with development potential. Initially the Accounts Department and Specialist companies moved to Henlow, including the Joinery Shop. The parent company board took a suite of offices in Goldington Road, Bedford for a short period before rejoining the other companies at Henlow in 1978 after a new office block had been built on the site.

Growth in the 1970's

In 1971 the parent company name was changed to John Willmott Holdings Limited to reflect its role of focusing on strategic and policy matters for the operational subsidiaries. The company then embarked on a period of considerable expansion, mainly through acquisition. A Specialist Division was established, partly to protect them from an acute shortage of qualified operatives in specialist trades. The "Plant" and "Joinery" departments were formed into separate subsidiary companies and the following companies were acquired:

- 1973 - Dolling & Goss Limited (Plasterers)
- 1973 - Classic Decorations Limited
- 1974 - Wachal Flooring Limited
- 1974 - Kengal Sales Limited (Interior Furnishings)

In 1975, to compensate for the downturn in the investment in new buildings by both Government and industry, John Willmott Maintenance Limited was formed to provide a 24 hour building maintenance service to local authorities and the industrial, commercial and domestic markets.

For a short spell from 1972 to 1975 the company traded in Guernsey through John Willmott Holdings (CI) Limited with two subsidiaries, but this proved not to be viable, mainly due to difficulties with local building permits. They ceased to seek further work or investments in 1974 and completed or sold off current developments in Guernsey over the next few years.

The company's long range plans to achieve national coverage for their construction activities began at this time with several acquisitions. The most significant being the acquisition of the current contracts of A.E. Symes Limited of Leyton in 1976, which provided a considerable boost to turnover and established a presence in London. Like Willmotts, Symes was an old established family firm, founded by Albert Eli Symes in 1892, and based on the importance of excellent workmanship and the quality and loyalty of its employees. Most importantly the acquired workload included the high profile £1.7 million contract to refurbish the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors headquarters in Parliament Square, Central London. The company took pride in completing this contract successfully in 1977, which was not only the Silver Jubilee Year of Her Majesty the Queen but also the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the John Willmott organisation. As an added bonus the newly refurbished premises were officially opened by Her Majesty the Queen on 8 March 1978 .

Other building company acquisitions during the 1970's were:

- 1976 - James Whiffin Limited of Epping, Essex
- 1976 - Lester & Co. (Contractors) Limited, Sydenham, Kent
- 1978 - W.W. Gould (Norwich) Limited of Norwich
- 1978 - Seaman (Building Contracts) Limited of Lowestoft, Norfolk

Despite a depressed national economy in the mid 1970's, the company successfully sustained their growth momentum. By 1980 they had a network of regional geographical building companies, a varied group of specialist support companies, and a small property development division. The Group turnover had increased from £2.2m in 1970 to £29.8m in 1980.



New headquarters for Provident Mutual Life Assurance in 1976

The company celebrates 125 years

In 1977 the company celebrated its 125th Anniversary with a dinner and dance for all members and staff in the grounds of Wimpole Hall, Arrington, Cambridgeshire. This was where the founder, John Willmott, had undertaken his first contract in 1852 to build a well for the Earl of Hardwick. The National Trust had just acquired Wimpole Hall and in return for being allowed to hold the event in the grounds, the company paid for the restoration of an 18th century lead statue called "Samson Slaying the Philistine" by John Van Nost which had fallen into a sad state of repair.



At the 125th Anniversary Dinner it was announced that a Ten Year Club for employees would be formed to recognise service and loyalty to the Group. A Dinner would be held annually, when long service gifts would be presented to employees reaching 20, 30 or more years' service. The first recipients were acknowledged at this event and included Jack Harris, Foreman Carpenter, with 49 years, Don Castle, Training Manager formerly Site Manager, with 41 years, and Jim Smith, Machine Shop Foreman, who had completed 48 years. The theme of recognising the importance of staff loyalty was continued seven years later when the Diamond Club was launched in 1984 for Ten Year Club Members who retired whilst in service. Diamond Club Members would be entertained at an annual lunch and kept in touch with the company's activities through regular contact and newsletters.

During the 1970s the Sports & Social Club became very active, with internal and external sports tournaments and regular social events such as dinner dances, children's Christmas parties and summer barbecues many of which were held at Robin Willmott's home Cainhoe Manor near Clophill in Bedfordshire. The company's Trainees successfully participated in the Burnside Challenge Competition for several years, and in 1979 Willmotts were the first company to win both the overall Burnside Challenge Shield with their boys' team and the Harry Haslam Trophy with their girls' team. The Burnside Challenge was organised annually by the Luton & Dunstable Branch of the Institute of Training Officers and took its name from George Burnside who was General Manager of SKF Ball Bearings when the competition began as an inter-company event for local engineering companies.

With the emphasis very much on training and development, in 1974 the company's trainees and apprentices were given the task of building a ferro-concrete hulled sailing yacht at the Henlow workshops, using their plastering and carpentry skills. The boat was successfully completed and launched on 1 April 1977 at Ipswich Docks, and named The John Willmott. She was used by trainees and apprentices for several years before being sold in 1980. The boat has since been traced to a mooring on the River Blackwater at

Growth in the 1970's

Maldon, Essex, under her current name the 'Amaric'. The present owner acquired her in 1996 under the name of the 'Hartly Southseas'. She had been used during the 1980s as a sail training vessel, and then sadly neglected for most of the 1990s. Structurally the hull was still in good condition and the interior has now been refitted with a new modern galley. However most of the original structural joinery in the lower cabin is intact and the original twin furling headsails and 72 Thorneycroft engine are still in use. This is surely a testimony to the skill and workmanship of the Willmott trainees and apprentices.



Launch of The John Willmott at Ipswich in 1971...



...and after a refit and a new name in 2001

The challenges of the 1980's

The 1980s proved to be a difficult time for the company with the national economy and especially the construction industry in the depths of recession in the early years. Emphasis was placed on efficiency and increased marketing; structural reorganisation took place and some redundancies unfortunately occurred. Whilst maintaining the focus on their core building activities the company diversified over the next few years in order to spread the risk.

A company called Overseas Construction Development Limited was established to provide technical support and advice to construction companies overseas. This was set up in conjunction with Professor John Andrews of University College London and in 1981 O.C.D. completed their first commission for a major contractor in Egypt. Over the next few years several of the company's technical and professional staff benefited from the experience of working or lecturing overseas and one of surveyor, Glen Godfrey, successfully completed a 12 month secondment to Arab Contractors in Cairo in 1983. John Andrews had played a vital role as Management Development Advisor to the Group over a number of years, and was instrumental in the decision to send Ian Dixon to Harvard Graduate School of Business and Administration in 1976, where he successfully completed an advanced management course.

John Willmott Transport Limited was formed to provide an in-house service for the purchase and maintenance of company vehicles. In 1982 Ironbridge Motors Limited, a Ford Main Dealership in Southall, was purchased which joined John Willmott Transport Limited and John Willmott Contract Vehicles Limited to form a Motors Division. However it transpired that car sales were not the company's forte and the dealership at Southall was sold two years later.

The company invested in an insurance broker, Hedges Bonn Limited, who managed the group's insurances for a period of time. Investments were also made in two private hospitals, Seltzer PLC at Manor Hospital, Biddenham, and Hertfordshire Independent Hospital PLC at Pinehill Hospital, Hitchin.

A company called Consyst Computer Services Limited was created to deal in micro computers, and Resource Training Development Limited was established to provide training services. The intention was for these companies to provide services both inside and outside the Group. In 1982 an internal networked information system was developed called 'Viewdata'. This seemed somewhat revolutionary at the time and a VDU unit was installed in all offices enabling staff to call up a wide range of inter company information and news. As information technology progressed, this system was superseded by a more flexible Intranet service called 'Intranet News Touch' (IN Touch) and still later by 'Screensaver' which was available to all staff on their own computers.

In 1982, in order to separate the Group's development and building activities, the speculative housing and commercial development companies were transferred to an independent activity. This had a separately funded parent company named John Willmott Estates Limited which was headed up by Robin Willmott.

The challenges of the 1980's

In 1983 a large extension was added to the Head Office at Henlow, providing an additional second floor across the frontage and a new two storey wing at one end forming an 'L' shaped building. An Opening Ceremony was held on 22 February 1983, performed jointly by 'Mr. Sam' (Harold Sam Willmott) the oldest member of the company who retired as Chairman in 1966, and Karen Stott a Junior Secretary, the youngest member of staff at that time (see picture right). 'Mr Sam' was presented with a specially commissioned painting by Andrew King of a street scene in Hitchin looking from Bridge Street towards Tilehouse Street.



However, conscious of the need to promote the company nationally, in 1984 the company leased a suite of offices in Mayfair, Central London. In October of that year '34 Upper Brook Street' became the registered office and home to the parent company board, and remained so until they moved back to Hertfordshire in April 2000.

In the early 1980s the company purchased a Winnebago motor home which was converted for use as a mobile meetings room, and used to hold board meetings whilst travelling between the various company offices. This was in contrast to a rather more high flying form of transport used in the early 1970's, when the company owned a single engine Piper aeroplane capable of carrying up to four people. On some occasions it was piloted by Robin Willmott, who gained his pilots licence at that time, and was used to transport directors and staff to and from Guernsey during the company's short period of trading in the Channel Islands.

Continuing the Group's aim to provide national coverage, the Construction Division was expanded by the acquisition was Bush Builders (Norwich) Limited in 1983, which was merged with W.W. Gould Limited to form Bush Gould Limited operating from Norwich. During the next few years the company's building activities were consolidated around London and in the Anglia Region, until 1991 when they acquired two significant long established companies, J Wimpenny & Co. Limited based in Huddersfield and E. Turner & Sons Limited of Cardiff.

In 1984 the company joined a consortium of four partners to form Camtech Developments Limited with the original intention to develop a High Technology Science Park on 56 acres of land on the outskirts of Cambridge. The other three partners were Architects Lister Drew & Associates, Quantity Surveyors Bridgewater & Coulton, and Surveyors Young & Company. After negotiating a rather long and tortuous path through complex planning issues with Cambridgeshire County Council over several years, the site was eventually sold to Sainsbury's in 1991 and provided an excellent return on the investment.



Head Office in 1984, 34 Upper Brook Street, London W1



John Willmott Mobile Meetings Room 1983

A change of name – 1987

On 1 May 1987 the name of the Group was changed to Willmott Dixon Limited, to recognise the significant contribution made by Ian Dixon to the Group's growth and development over the previous twenty years. At the same time the company house style was completely reviewed and a new company logo, together with new improved livery for sites and vehicles, was introduced throughout the Group.



Peter Willmott and Sir Ian Dixon shake hands on the creation of the Willmott Dixon name.

In June 1987 a Site Safety Inspection Scheme was introduced, to place even more emphasis on improving safety on building sites. This involved a system of internal fines levied by a Group Safety Inspector who made regular unannounced site visits. This initially concentrated on the major building contracts but was later refined and extended to cover all activities, with awards presented twice yearly for the best performing sites and site managers. Willmott Dixon was the first construction company to have such an internal policing scheme, which continues today.

In order to focus on the core activities of construction and building maintenance, the Specialist Trades Division was disbanded towards the end of the 1980s. The Joinery company ceased trading due to a reduction in the need for specialist joinery. The Transport and Plant companies were merged to become Wimpole Hire Limited to enable them to trade outside the Group, and this company was subsequently sold to Ashted Plant Hire Limited in 1988.

The building maintenance activity was strengthening at this time and with a view to achieving national coverage the company embarked on a programme of expansion, achieved mainly by acquisition. In 1987 they acquired Wright Maintenance Limited of Leeds, and the following year purchased All Trades (Maintenance) Limited in Birmingham.

The importance of people as the most valuable company asset has been a continuing theme throughout the history of the company and in 1988 The Willmott Dixon Distinction Club was formed to recognise excellence in professional studies. Membership was open to those employees achieving one Distinction or more in their professional examinations. The Founder Members were Tim Carpenter, Dennis Cotton,



Inaugural Lunch of Willmott Dixon Distinction Club 1988

Chris Durkin, 3rd left, Tim Carpenter 6th left, and Mark Tant far right

A change of name – 1987

Chris Durkin, Nicholas Humphrey and Mark Tant. In the following years membership increased to eighteen at one point but the Club was allowed to lapse in the late 1990s when other ways were found to encourage and recognise achievement and excellence. Many Distinction Club Members have remained with the Group and have achieved senior management positions.

In 1989 the Annual Trainee of the Year Award was inaugurated, with the winner being selected from nominations submitted by the subsidiary companies. The first winner in 1989 was Stewart Brundell, a Trainee Site Manager with Willmott Dixon Anglia Limited, and this award continues to be enthusiastically contested each year. On his retirement in 1998, Sir Ian Dixon presented the company with an ornate engraved silver cup to which all the winners names were added. This continues to be presented to the winner each year at the Trainees' Luncheon, which is held at or near to one of the company's current contracts. The occasion is used to focus on a different theme of the ever changing world of building, such as the subject of "Innovations in Housing" which was promoted at the 2003 event by a visit to the Dabbs Hill Northolt Housing Development in Middlesex.

In 1989, Ian Dixon's Presidency of the Chartered Institute of Building and his "Building Matters" campaign, provided a unique opportunity for the company to contribute not only to a higher profile for professionalism in building but also gave a major boost to links with careers and education generally.

The Group's links with education were strengthened by the endowment of a Chair of Building Management at Anglia Higher Education College in 1989, and with the appointment of Professor John Bale as the Willmott Dixon Professor. Continuing this theme the company sponsored a Chair of Management at the University of Luton in 1995, when Colin Coulson-Thomas became the Willmott Dixon Professor of Corporate Transformation. In 1999 Willmott Dixon collaborated with the University of Luton to pioneer a Postgraduate Design & Build course, which several company managers successfully completed. Sadly the University closed their Construction Department in 2003 and the course did not continue.



1st Willmott Dixon Trainee of the Year 1989
Stewart Brundell, Trainee Site Manager



Design and build diploma validation ceremony, Chrissie Chadney, centre, with Rick Willmott on her right and Alan Hough on her left, pictured with Matthew Fletcher, Martin Ball, David Brown and Professor Tony Monk from the University



Participants of the pioneering postgraduate Design & Build course at the University of Luton

The 1990's and expanding horizons

In order to expand the Group's overall operations further and to take advantage of the European Single Market, Willmott Dixon began working in Portugal in 1989 through two joint venture schemes, one at Meia Praia in Lagos and the other at Quinta Rosa, Carvoeiro. A Portuguese subsidiary company, Willmott Dixon Construções (Portugal) SA, was formed in 1991 based in Lagoa. This was initially managed by Mark Tant, who moved to the Algarve with his wife Katie for an initial 3 year contract which lasted some 5 or 6 years. Mark joined the company in 1982 as a Trainee Site Manager and was one of the founder members of the Willmott Dixon Distinction Club. Subsequently many more employees and their families took up the opportunity to broaden their experience by working in Portugal.

In 1993 Group activities in Portugal were significantly expanded with the purchase of a one third share in Contacto SGPS, a Portuguese construction company based in Oporto. A lunch was held at the head office in London to celebrate this joint venture agreement, when the Chairman of Contacto, Manuel Vieira, presented the company with a solid silver model of a Portuguese sailing boat known as 'Barcos Rabelos'. (See feature in 'On Site' Issue 9) These sailing boats were once used to transport casks of port downstream from the vineyards, and today the port lodges of Oporto take part in a fiercely competed annual Barcos Rabelos race on the River Douro in Oporto. This partnership operated successfully for several years and provided a significant financial contribution to the Group and invaluable experience for senior management working in Europe. However following the inclusion of a third partner in 1997, a civil engineering company Ginnes Navarro, it was decided to withdraw as their future plans did not fit with the Group's essentially 'risk averse' policies.

In the 1990s the aim of the Group was to become established as the largest private building company in the country. The Group structure was rationalised with an Ultimate Parent Company known as Willmott Dixon Limited and three Divisional Parent Companies, Willmott Dixon Construction Limited, Willmott Dixon Maintenance Limited, and Willmott Dixon Housing Limited, each with their own regional business units. The provision of national coverage was achieved in 1991 following the major construction company acquisitions of J Wimpenny & Co. Limited in Leeds and E Turner & Sons Limited of Cardiff. Both companies were long established family owned construction companies, founded in 1884 and 1885 respectively, with similar philosophies and background to the original John Willmott company. (See 'On Site' Issues 5 and 6) The Housing Division had expanded considerably by increasing activity in the social housing market, and the acquisition in 1991 of Kalkare Property Maintenance Limited in Cheltenham had broadened their area of operations for the Maintenance Division. Housing was to continue its expansion by geographical growth rather than by acquisition.

In 1990 Colin Enticknap was appointed to the Ultimate Parent Company Board as Deputy Managing Director. In 1991, Peter Willmott stepped down as Joint Chairman on his 60th birthday and Ian Dixon continued in the role of Chairman, whilst gradually handing over executive management to Colin Enticknap, who became first Managing Director and then in 1993, Group Chief Executive.



Presentation of a silver Barcos Rabelos by Manuel Vieira of Contacto to Ian Dixon of Willmott Dixon in 1993

The 1990's and expanding horizons

In 1992, with the economy in recession, it became necessary to streamline the company structure to achieve overhead savings. Where possible subsidiary companies were amalgamated in order to increase competitiveness whilst, at the same time, maintaining a market presence. This regrettably meant levels of redundancy never previously experienced but after several difficult years the economy gradually recovered and the group consolidated its performance in the three sectors of building, housing and maintenance.

An important factor in the recovery was that the Group embraced the recommendations of Sir Michael Latham's report "Constructing the Team" published in 1994. This advocated the use of 'Partnering' as a way of dramatically reducing conflict in the construction process, and was to become a huge influence on the company's future operations. Sir Michael was appointed a non-executive director of the parent company in 1996.

Under Colin Enticknap's leadership a comprehensive training programme on the ethos of Partnering was embarked upon for all employees, alongside Partnering Workshops and Best Value Procurement Seminars for prospective clients. Initially Partnering projects were carried out by a specially formed company, Willmott Dixon Management Limited, which was very successful and won Contract Journal Awards for both the £20m Nortel Project at Paignton and the £15m 3Com Project at Hemel Hempstead. However as Partnering practices spread throughout the Group an increasing proportion of turnover for all subsidiaries was contracted on a partnered basis, and there was no longer the need for a separate company.



The 3com project, built in 1998 in Hemel Hempstead, was a successful Partnering project that helped pave the way for the business to become an industry leader in Partnering.

Willmott Dixon Housing Limited made steady progress and became established as one of the country's leading social housing contractors. One notable contract successfully completed in 1997 was the £27m Blackbird Leys project in Oxford, recognised at the time as the largest social housing project in the country.

Likewise Willmott Dixon Maintenance Limited had consolidated its position as the leading building fabric maintenance service provider in the country by focusing on customer needs and increasing efficiency. Both Housing and Maintenance went on to forge partnerships with social housing companies and public sector housing authorities respectively.

The 1990's and expanding horizons

The retirement of Peter Willmott in 1994, after 47 years service with the company, marked the end of one era and the beginning of another with the appointment to the board of his son Rick Willmott. A celebration dinner for Peter Willmott was held at the House of Commons, when the company presented him with a specially commissioned painting by Andrew King, of the Hitchin Girls Grammar School built by the company in 1908. Peter Willmott presented the company with an elegant chiming bracket clock. Three years later in 1997, Steven Dixon was appointed to the board as Group Sales and Marketing Director, in the last step in the implementation of the succession programme.



Rick Willmott joins the board following the retirement of his father Peter.

The Peter Willmott Achievement Award was inaugurated at the Ten Year Club Dinner in October 1994, to be awarded annually in recognition of significant achievement by an employee. Initial winners were Peter Smoothy in 1995 who triumphed over a lifetime of congenital disease and a successful heart and lung transplant, and Don Bowles in 1996 who made an astounding recovery from a serious brain tumour. This award was later refocused to acknowledge outstanding performance in client satisfaction, with the first winners being "Construction Turner" for their work on the Tonyrefail Leisure Centre in Rhondda in the year 2000.

In December 1998 Sir Ian Dixon retired after 31 years with the company. His considerable contribution to the success of the Group's growth during that time was recognised by friends and colleagues at a dinner cruise on the River Thames. Peter Willmott presented him with a magnificent silver statue of a racehorse, and Colin Enticknap handed over an enormous bundle of software to run on Sir Ian's newly acquired computer. His public work inside and outside the construction industry had previously been recognised by the well deserved award of a CBE in 1991 and a Knighthood in 1996.

Sir Michael Latham succeeded Sir Ian as Non-Executive Chairman, with Colin Enticknap as Group Chief Executive and co-directors John Bayliss, Steven Dixon, and Rick Willmott. In May 1999 John Bayliss retired as Director and Company Secretary after 30 years service with the company. At the same time the board appointed Christopher Sheridan as a non-executive director, whose area of expertise in finance and banking was of great benefit during his three years on the board. Following his appointment in 1994, Rick



PETER'S RETIREMENT
L to R: Peter Willmott, Tanya Willmott,
Valeria Dixon, Rick Willmott, Sara Willmott,
Ian Dixon, Pat Willmott

The 1990's and expanding horizons

Willmott, developed his role in the Construction Division, becoming Chairman of that Division in 1996 responsible for its five regional offices. Meanwhile Steven Dixon continued the task of marketing the Group and developing brand positioning, particularly at site level.

In 1998 Colin Enticknap, like his predecessor Sir Ian, went to Harvard University where he completed the same Advanced Management Programme, and returned fired with enthusiasm and ideas to lead the company through its next period of evolution. His paper entitled 'Introducing Change' was accepted by the board and implemented the following year. New 'matrix' management structures were introduced in the Construction and Housing Divisions lead by John Frankiewicz and Chris Durkin respectively in the new roles of Chief Operating Officers. The aim was to encourage much greater co-operation and teamwork across regional boundaries, more sharing of best practice and a better co-ordinated service for national clients. The Maintenance division was re-branded Willmott Dixon Property Services Limited in 1999, as part of their move towards broadening the range of services provided. In the same year a specialist interiors business, insp@ce, was launched, concentrating initially upon the Greater London market.

The Housing Division invested in a small Innovations Team initially to 'design out' repetitive problems and ensure the widespread application of best practice, before moving on to more strategic issues such as modularisation and standardisation of components. This initiative was supported by Professor David Gann of Sussex University, one of the country's leading experts in this field. The investment in the training and development of staff continued, particularly in information technology, to support the additional expertise needed for issues such as standardisation, prefabrication and whole life costing.



Built for the University of East Anglia in 1999, Elizabeth Fry House is still regarded as one of the most sustainable buildings ever built.



Bass Corporate Services Headquarters, Burton on Trent – 1993

With the emphasis very much on Partnering, client relationships and repeat order business, the Group focused on establishing special client relationships in sectors such as the hotel and leisure industry, and with local authorities and housing associations. Profits had steadily increased since 1995 and broke the £3m barrier in 1999 on a turnover of £245m. An ever increasing percentage of Group turnover was contracted on a partnered basis and Willmott Dixon was becoming widely recognised as industry leaders in Partnering.

Changes ahead in the new century

The theme of change continued in 2000 with the move from the very traditional Head Office in Upper Brook Street, Mayfair to new, more vibrant premises on the Spirella complex in Letchworth Garden City. The move from cellular office space to modern open plan, demonstrated the board's wish to become more visible and to promote communication and teamwork. This style and statement of intent was to be progressively spread across all company offices and staff training increased with particular emphasis on Achieving Potential and Empowerment.

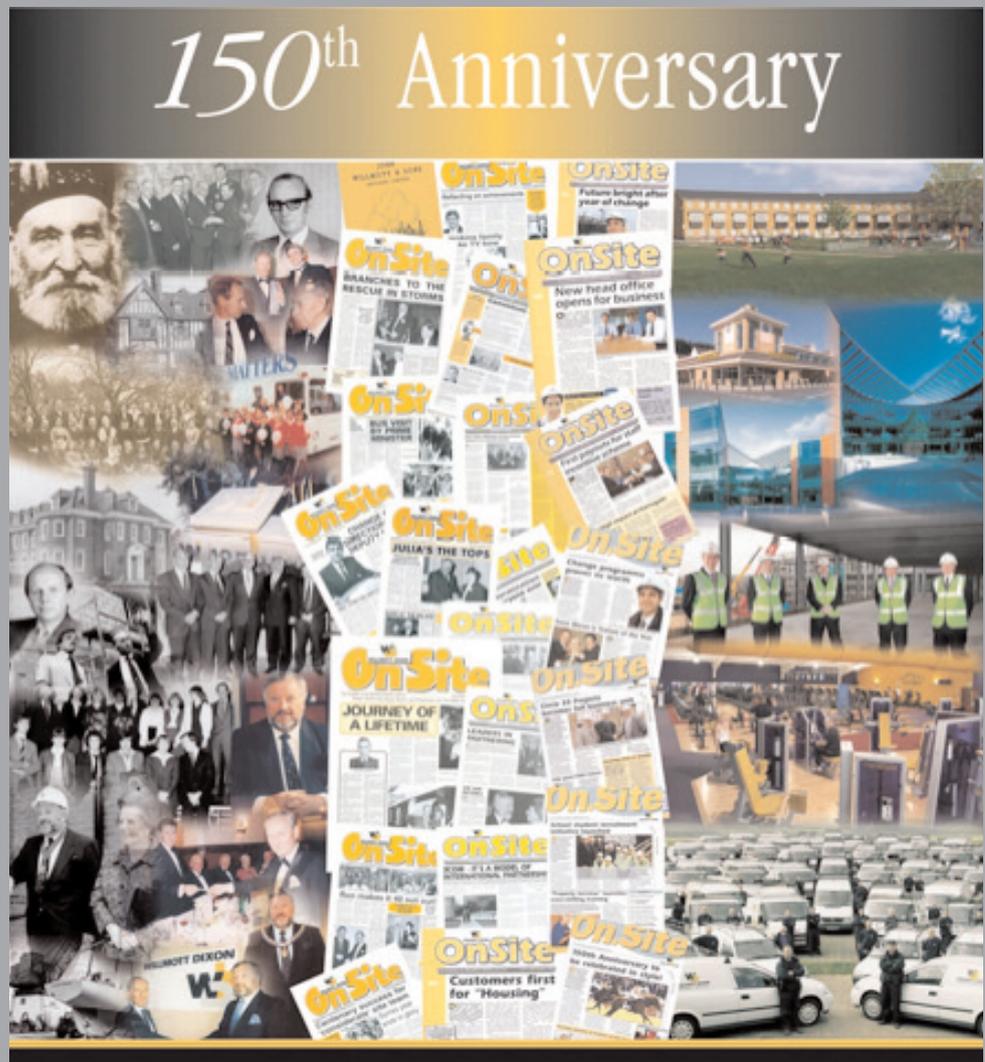


Rick Willmott, Colin Enticknap and Steven Dixon at the new head office, now open for business

In 2001 Rick Willmott became Chairman, following in the footsteps of both his father and grandfather before him, and Sir Michael Latham remained on the board as non-executive Deputy Chairman. Sadly, later that year, Sir Ian Dixon lost his long and determined fight against cancer and was to be greatly missed by all at Willmott Dixon as well as in the construction industry at large. To ensure a continuance of his presence, the company established and funded a Trust in his name to promote change in UK Construction and to encourage the concept of 'life long' learning within Willmott Dixon.

Changes ahead in the new century

In October 2002 the company celebrated its 150th Anniversary by entertaining all shareholders, staff and their families to a day's racing at Ascot. The day included children's entertainment, an 'Around the World' themed lunch pavilion with six outlets serving food from all corners of the earth, and an afternoon tea buffet. Two races were sponsored by the company, the Willmott Dixon Cornwallis Stakes and the Princess Royal Willmott Dixon Stakes. Lounges with betting facilities, and reserved seating in the Grandstand were available for the sole use of all guests during the day, which was thoroughly enjoyed by almost 2,500 people.



Changes ahead in the new century

The company is still essentially family owned and the memory of its humble beginnings at Bassingbourn was recognised in 2004 when the company replaced the iron gates to the Willmott Playing Fields in the village. The playing fields had been donated to the parish council in 1936 by Samuel Willmott, son of the founder John Willmott, but the original large iron gates had been sacrificed for the war effort during the Second World War.



Over the last 150 years the company has continued to focus on providing a high quality service to the customer, and to value, recognise and encourage the loyalty and development of its employees at all levels. One could say that this approach has been vindicated by the fact that the company has weathered many storms during this time, as economic climates fluctuated, and has outlasted or exceeded the performance of a number of its competitors from the early years. The company remains determined to deliver sustainable and resilient growth for its shareholders and staff alike and this looks set to continue into the 21st century. This will be very evident in the significant changes to come which can be the subject of future instalments of this story.

Margaret Valentine
2009