

To The Edge

Entrepreneurial Secrets from Britain's Richest Square Mile

Malcolm McClean



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First published 2007 by
Capstone Publishing Ltd. (a Wiley Company)
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, PO19 8SQ, UK.
www.wileyurope.com

Email (for orders and customer service enquiries): cs-books@wiley.co.uk

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
McClean, Malcolm .

To The Edge: Entrepreneurial secrets from Britain's richest square mile / Malcolm McClean.
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-84-112782-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

PS3602.U733L54 2007

813'.6—dc22 2006041314

ISBN 978-1-84-112782-8

Anniversary Logo Design: Richard J Pacifico

Typeset by Sparks in 11 pt Dutch (www.sparks.co.uk)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper responsibly manufactured from sustainable forestry in which at least two trees are planted for each one used for paper production. Substantial discounts on bulk quantities of Capstone Books are available to corporations, professional associations and other organizations. For details telephone John Wiley & Sons on (+44) 1243-770441, fax (+44) 1243 770571 or email corporatedevelopment@wiley.co.uk

To

My little town

‘In this great future you can’t forget your past.’

Bob Marley 1945–1981

Dedication

Long before the digital age introduced sampling to the music industry, legendary pop duo, Simon & Garfunkel performed some rudimentary sampling of their own. They borrowed a stanza from a WH Auden poem and inserted it into their own song.

Auden's lines were 'After it rains there's a rainbow/ And all of the colours are black/ It's not that the colours aren't there/ It's just *imagination* they lack'. Then, they added their own words 'I'm never going back – to my little town'.

These are words which will surely resonate with many people who grew up in little towns; towns with little aspiration; little belief; little inspiration. Places where people can quite easily resign themselves to nothingness – little by little.

So it is with this in mind that I dedicate this book to my little town, and to people in little towns everywhere. Auden was right – the colours *are* there. You have to fight to discover your imaginative powers, and when you do the only limits are the limits you place upon yourself.

Most of the people in this book started out staring at a black rainbow. Today, they are colourful characters with colourful lives. They are the entrepreneurs living on the edge.

Wherever you are, whatever you do, please fight for the right to exercise your imaginative powers. There is a colourful world out there.

Acknowledgements

Working on this book has been an absolute joy, and an inspiration to me. I feel very privileged to know so many amazing people with such incredible stories. So my first thanks go to the characters featured in this book, for their time and their stories, and of course for the business ideas that have occurred to me as I have analysed their successes and failures.

Thanks also to the people who used their powers of persuasion to get the right people in the right place, believing that I could do justice to their story. The people who ‘oiled the wheels’ were Selwyn Demmy, Sara Lawton, Tracey Friedel and Clare Cooper.

Meanwhile, the staff at The Bubble Room have ensured that my table by the window has been supplied with countless pots of tea during my afternoon writing sessions, and I thank them for the interest they have taken in the guy in the corner lost in his imagination day after day.

Thanks go to my editor Emma Swaisland for doing something that makes everything seem easy – she accentuated the positive, which meant that I was willing to accept her judgement when she told me the things that just didn’t work.

Finally, I want to thank my friend ‘The Prince’. Albert Edwards and I were born within hours of each other, little more than a mile apart. He has made me laugh a great deal, inspired me through my difficult times and over the years has said some outrageous and ‘off the wall’ things which have often made me see a completely different way of doing things. He is a genuine Clown Prince.

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1

Don't push me . . . I'm close to the edge

Think of the richest square mile in Britain, and your thoughts immediately turn to the City of London or Chelsea.

In fact, a small village in Cheshire is home to more millionaires per square mile than anywhere else in Britain. The place is Alderley Edge, a tract of lush countryside thirty miles south of Manchester. It is a place where one in twenty houses sells for more than £1 million. According to Experian, the credit agency, 20% of residents enjoy a *seven* figure income and in its index of 'poshness' Alderley Edge scored 136 out of a maximum 137.

It is also the focal point of what has been described as Britain's 'Golden Triangle', an area formed by joining the dots between the points of Wilmslow, the village of Prestbury, and the jewel in the crown, Alderley Edge itself. It is both a semi-rural extended village and a topographical landmark. The Edge is a 500 foot sandstone escarpment rising dramatically above the Cheshire plain.

The media coverage of this golden triangle tends to focus upon the glitz and the glamour, the celebrity residents and proliferation of Bentleys and Ferraris. They create an image of a shallow *nouveau riche*.

But that's not the real story. In fact, the success and the wealth have been hard-earned. These are self-made people. Entrepreneurs with amazing stories – triumphs, tribulations, disasters and incredible recoveries. There is another side to Alderley Edge and the golden triangle, one that the outsider would not see, and one that the media cares not to see.

The real stories are not to be found amongst the wannabe 'Champagne Charlies' that stalk the bars and restaurants, with their ever more incredulous tales of their next big deal. The real stories are to be found in the alcoves and corner tables; from the guy with the pot of camomile tea; from the millionaire in the Marks & Spencer's jumper; from the lady that bounces into the room with her infectious laugh; from the man who looks like the quiet librarian type; and many others. Mostly, people you wouldn't look at twice. Yet these are the people with the real stories. These are the movers and shakers.

The entrepreneurial spirit is concentrated in these streets like nowhere else in Britain. There is a richness of experience, talent, acumen, attitude, enterprise,

tenacity and grittiness which, if you could bottle it, would be an immensely powerful source of guidance and inspiration for any would-be entrepreneur.

To the Edge bottles the essence of the self-made entrepreneur and enterpriser, by looking where nobody has bothered to look before: into the lives and the business highs and lows of the people who inhabit the streets, the lanes, the alcoves and the corner tables of this extraordinary place.

It goes deeper than many other examinations of entrepreneurs, which often focus more on the froth than the Guinness. We are going to drill down beyond the froth to find out where these people came from, what drove them to their successes, what sustained them during their failures, and to look at what can be learned from their beliefs, behaviours and often quite exceptional experiences.

If you are a business person, entrepreneur or business owner needing a shot of inspiration, then this book is for you. If you are in need of some sharp insights into what it takes to become seriously rich and successful, then this book is for you. If you are simply an observer of human nature and want to be inspired by some quite incredible stories of the power of people to overcome whatever obstacles are placed in their way, then this book is for you.

You will find that the nature of entrepreneurs is to always be pushing back the boundaries, trying new things, blurring the edges. They thrive when they live life on the edge. **For these people, they feel that if they are not living on the edge they are taking up too much room.**

So if you want to glimpse the powerful secrets of entrepreneurial success, get ready; if you want to gain real insight into the extraordinary attitudes and behaviours of a group of extraordinary people, get ready; if you want to look beyond the media hype and behind what makes these people really tick, then get ready.

Get ready, because I am going to take you closer, closer than you have ever been to some of the least known, most colourful entrepreneurs in Britain. I'm going to take you closer ... closer to The Edge.

Not quite Camelot – more Meritopolis

According to legend, Alderley Edge is the home of the Wizard Merlin, the sorcerer in the court of King Arthur. He is the custodian of the King and his Knights of the Round Table, who await in suspended animation in the caves on the edge, for a time when England needs their help.

The thirteen Knights of the Round Table were the extraordinary people of their day. They were chosen because of their acts of bravery and chivalry and their extraordinary ability to consistently follow their values and beliefs in the face of adversity.

In that sense, they were just like entrepreneurs, and if there were a court of King Arthur today, it would no doubt be formed of the kinds of people whose stories I will reveal in this book.

Thirteen of them. The latter-day Knights of the Round Table perhaps?

Each with a different style, a different story. Each committed wholeheartedly, unequivocally, to the path that they have chosen.

Though Alderley Edge is not quite Camelot – a magical place and the bastion of chivalry – it does have its own kind of magic. A quiet kind of magic, where extraordinary men and women win against the odds and live in a kind of meritocracy, where their standing and influence is based not on where they came from or which school they went to, but on what they have done. **It is a miniature Meritopolis. The kind of place that politicians say they want Britain to become.**

So why does so much flak come in the direction of The Edge and the Golden Triangle?

If we really want a nation built on merit, a classless society, we should rejoice. Yet so often the media choose to focus on style over substance, froth over fact, gossip over greatness.

My daughter told me that at school there is a wallchart which describes a range of careers and the attributes required. Against the section on entrepreneurs, the attribute stated is 'Selfish'. I have found this to be a ridiculous and off-beam generalization. Certainly entrepreneurs are highly focused on achieving their objectives, they can be incisive, they can make unpopular decisions. But that's business. It's not personal. It doesn't mean that they are selfish, and it is time to dispel this media-perpetuated myth that entrepreneurs are self-interested in a vaguely villainous way.

I have found the cross section of entrepreneurs featured in this book, between them, to possess all of the characteristics that make life worth living: innate goodness; kindness; compassion; philanthropy; chivalry; humour; social awareness, humility and an affinity with the underdog.

Perhaps in an odd sort of way, it is time to begin to appreciate entrepreneurs and celebrate what they stand for, to embrace this Meritopolis that is the Golden Triangle, and to learn the lessons that will stand us in good stead for dealing with the opportunities of today and tomorrow – a new kind of Camelot.

Creative communities

In small pockets around the world, creative communities have sprung up almost spontaneously. Nashville, USA is one such place: a small geographical area with a common interest – country music. It comprises established stars; backing musicians; wannabes; prospects; and inevitably fantasists. The same mix of char-

acters could be found in other creative communities: from Findhorn, the spiritual community in Scotland, to Silicon Valley in California, movers, shakers, fantasists, wannabes and supporting cast seem to be common characteristics.

In that sense Alderley Edge could be seen as a creative community for entrepreneurs – a place where ideas mix together, where boundaries get blurred, where people have the confidence to try new things. This idea first dawned upon me one wet Tuesday evening whilst I was sitting with a small group of friends in The Alderley Bar & Grill. Another couple of people joined our group and then some others, so that we had to pull two tables together. The older guys were regaling each other with stories of their business highs and lows, whilst the younger ones laughed and talked about their plans. Then I did something simple. I sat back and leaned my chair back onto its legs. This small movement distanced me from what was going on. These may be my everyday surroundings, I thought, but as I looked at who was around the table and considered what each of the people had done, I realized it was a quite extraordinary situation. **Living in Alderley Edge is like having a masterclass at Harvard Business School, every time you go out for a cup of coffee.** If only you could bottle that knowledge and experience, I thought. This book is my attempt to do the bottling and the distilling, to capture the essence of this creative community of entrepreneurs and make it available to others. It was one of those small insights – one which I hope will make a big difference to the thousands of people across the world who read this book.

The engine of this creative community tends not to be those who shout loudest, but those who go quietly about their business.

In the chapters that follow, we are going to meet some quite remarkable people:

- **The Alchemist** has an amazing knack of turning business base metal into gold, by buying companies for a pound and transforming their fortunes. His new store has been voted one of the 100 most inspirational stores in the world. He says he thought about the concept over a couple of pints. Whatever it is the Alchemist is drinking it certainly hits the spot.
- **The Soapstar** cut his teeth as an actor in an Australian soap and headed for the UK to become a star. Whilst waiting for his big break he worked as a cocktail waiter and forgot all about acting as he became captivated by the restaurant business. Today, his group owns 34 restaurants, turns over more than £50 million a year, and is growing at an incredible rate.
- **The Rover** is at the top of his profession. One that has hardly changed at all since its roots in the late nineteenth century. He cannot hot desk or log in from home. To do his job he has to be there. It has been good to him. He has earned enough money never to have to work again. Yet he will always

work. He has found within himself an enterprising nature and a genuine desire to help people. He is showing how making money and doing good need not be mutually exclusive, they can be symbiotic.

- **The Hustler** took possession of his bus pass nearly a decade ago. He has sold three businesses for more than £50 million at today's prices, yet he still goes to work seven days a week. At the age of 74, he has had more comebacks than Frank Sinatra. Who knows where the story will end?
- **The Undertaker** has an insatiable work ethic. When he combined this with his ability to decide what was important and focus upon it, he became the top life policy salesman in the whole of Europe at just twenty-three years old. He created his own product which has boomed as more and more Britons have taken up residence overseas. It's a fantastic business. People pay up front and nobody really wants to make a claim.
- **The Prince** stared into the darkness of the 500 foot sandstone escarpment that is Alderley Edge. His business troubles weighed heavily on his shoulders and he wondered as he stared into the abyss, 'Is this the way out?'. He looked across at the distant lights of the city where as a boy he had dreamed of glory. There was a way out. This was not it. He decided at that moment that in life and in business you should never, ever, ever, ever give up. Ever. Today he takes on property projects that are too messy or too risky for traditional developers. He has an extraordinary resilience towards risk. Whatever the difficulties, he refuses to give up.
- **The Hippies** lived in a commune, married in kaftans and have been driven by passion ever since they can remember. They set up a childcare business which today turns over £30 million. Yet to them, this is nothing more than an incidental statistic in their story. It was never about the money. It was about love, passion, creativity, people, music, poetry and togetherness. It was about breaking with the established way of doing things.
- **The Maverick** says he is not very good at anything, except, that is, for his amazing ability to get on with people. It's been a useful skill as he created success as an entrepreneur and then lost everything; brought his maverick style to bear on a business within a plc, turning it around from being the worst performer to the best in just three years; and now, back in business as an entrepreneur, he went from nothing to £175 million in little more than nine months.

- **The Magic Bean** is an ethical entrepreneur who gives her staff more than just luncheon vouchers. They have group psychotherapy, a life coach and their own personal development budget which they can spend on anything that they believe will make them a better person and a more ethical professional. She likes to make money and knows how to do it. She demands to be paid handsomely for a job done amazingly. Then she gives a lot of her money away. She earns from the rich to give to the poor.
- **The Carer** screamed as she looked at the reddened mess where she had slashed the razor across her wrists. Fortunately this was not to be her end. Neither was it to be her beginning. Her turning point in life came much later, but only after she had endured physical abuse; become a teenage mum twice; tried to take her own life; had a financial fallout with her mother and her husband; and lost the love of her life in a tragic accident. Remarkably, unbelievably, not only has she survived, she is the charismatic owner of a business which is attracting the attention of serious buyers and as of today is valued for sale at £8 million.
- **The Bubbleboy** is barely out of nappies in business terms. He started his first venture at the tender age of twenty, and surpassed everyone's expectations, including his own. His business plans were hopelessly, stupendously off beam; so much so that he was delighted when he had to tear them up. He has learned something that you will never learn at business school: you have to pass the elbow test.
- **The Thinker** bought a book at the age of eight and found that it contained the foundations for creating a life that he can love. He practises the art of living on thin air. Mostly, his products cannot be seen, measured or weighed. He is in the business of creating and selling insight, using principles that have more in common with TV chef Delia Smith than with those laid down by the economist Adam Smith. In the new economy, knowledge and insight are becoming the new currency. It is worth watching the way the Thinker works: his insights contain the keys to something we are all looking for – a life that we can love.

So, here are thirteen people who can, in their different ways, offer you insights and inspiration. Meaningful insights which you can use to change the way you think, the way you work, the way you live and perhaps help you to become more entrepreneurial yourself. Unlike other books on entrepreneurs this is not a sani-

tized account of success. **These are not untouchable superheroes; these are real people.** Between them, they have had trials, tribulations, trauma; they have won and lost, bounced back, and changed tack. There is as much learning to be had in their mistakes and misjudgements as there is in their successes.

So why choose these thirteen people? There are other people around the Golden Triangle who may merit a mention. Some may have more wealth, others a higher profile. In the end, the choice of subjects was based upon some simple criteria. It was not about how much money people have accumulated, though you will see that some have done rather well on that score. It was about who could offer real insights; who would unfold an interesting story; and who was accessible. I determined accessibility on the basis that people should be one, or at the most two, phone calls away from me.

What has emerged is a magnificent cross section of people with great stories from a wide range of businesses. You will see that they could not have been more honest and more open. It will provide some tremendous insights which you can draw upon in your surge towards success as well as in your darkest hours. And when you do have dark days, don't be discouraged: many of the people featured in this book have had dark days too.

Inside the mind of a millionaire

Just what is it that goes on inside the minds of entrepreneurial people that makes them so different, that gives them the ability to achieve extraordinary things, that drives them through almost any obstacle?

Far from being a fanciful thought, thanks to the work of Dr Adrian Atkinson, a psychologist with whom I have become good friends, we are now able to see inside the mind of an entrepreneur.

In June 2004 the BBC commissioned a television series, *Mind of a Millionaire*. They selected thirty people to take part at Adrian's HQ, Edstone Hall in Warwickshire. Of the thirty people, fifteen of them were successful millionaire entrepreneurs and fifteen were not. The expert panel, of which Adrian was a member, were asked to try to work out who were the entrepreneurs and who were not.

Using a fifteen-minute questionnaire that he has devised, based on fifteen years of research, Adrian correctly identified fourteen of the fifteen entrepreneurs. What was he seeing? Why is the mind of an entrepreneur different and what can we learn from it?

The tool he uses to diagnose what type of mind people have is called the Personal Enterprise Profile (PEP). It puts people into a particular mindset based on their responses to the questionnaire, and, according to Adrian, has been shown to