

The Bucket



Visit



Thomas Gunn
 Managing Director
 Thomas Gunn Navigation
 Services

Building a successful business from scratch takes patience and hard work and Thomas Gunn, Managing Director of Thomas Gunn Navigation Services (TGNS), is no exception to this rule. A thriving, Aberdeen-based Admiralty Chart agent, TGNS specialises in the supply of navigational products and services to the international shipping industry, but it was through humble beginnings in the town of North Shields in Tyneside, England that Mr Gunn began his maritime career as an apprentice at specialist navigation instrument maker Lilley & Gillie.

Drawing inspiration from his father and grandfather, who both served at sea, Mr Gunn completed a Foreign Going Masters' Course at South Shields College, and qualified as a compass adjuster at the age of 21. Within a year, the young and ambitious Mr Gunn made the life-altering decision to set up his own business with his first wife Linda and the couple moved to Aberdeen, Scotland to begin TGNS – with the company's namesake calibrating compasses for the local fishing fleet and merchant fleet operating in Scottish waters.

Reminiscing over his move, Mr Gunn said: "Moving to Aberdeen was a bold move and at the time people thought I was mad leaving Northumberland because I had a good job there. But I was always looking for something different. You've got to do something with your life – the world's my oyster!" He added that as the name Gunn is Scottish in origin, in moving he was actually returning to his "roots".

"It was interesting times," he enthused. "I didn't know anyone at first. It was flying by the seat of your pants. But that was it, we worked hard and we never looked back. I did eleven years with no sick days and no holidays – you just got on with it. But I enjoyed every minute of it!" Not forgetting his own successes began with the opportunity of an apprenticeship, when starting his company, Mr Gunn took on an apprentice of his own, 16-year-old Martin Goodrum, who remains with the firm 28 years on as a senior Compass Adjuster and Service Engineer.

Now with a total of 150 staff worldwide, this family-owned business owes much of its success to its plucky and proactive Managing Director, who spends much of his time travelling the globe, holding regular face-to-face meetings with clients and attending shipping industry events. When asked about his main ambitions, Mr Gunn said: "Personally, I think it's important to be recognised by your peers, as a person and as a company, that you've done something with your life, rather than not having anything to show for it. I think that would be so sad."



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“It’s important to put as much time as you possibly can into your work environment, into your family environment, and into your social environment to get that balance. One of the most important things for me is good health and being able to achieve things in life. I would be devastated if I couldn’t achieve more things because I know I’ve got many more things to do.” Mr Gunn said he is keen to live to a “good old age”, perhaps into his 80s but added: “Nowadays, age is just a number. I’m 57 but I’m relatively still quite fit. If I didn’t have that “fit in mind, fit in body” kind of attitude, I wouldn’t be able to achieve half the things I want to.”

But what are Mr Gunn’s hopes for the future of his business? Describing his hopes for “stability in the marketplace” instead of a boom and bust situation, which is “unhealthy for the industry”, at the top of Mr Gunn’s bucket list is a desire to develop the Asian operations of TGNS: “The Singapore operation is going to be important to build business and create good relationships with ship owners and managers in Asia and the Far East. Singapore is a means to an end. If you decided you were going to base yourself in Singapore and never venture out of that environment, that’s a big mistake. You’ve got to use it as a stepping stone into Shanghai, Vietnam and Beijing; that’s the way forward.”

But as maritime navigation advances rapidly into a digital world, how will TGNS adapt? Mr Gunn said he firmly believes “there will always be a requirement for regular charts” but he noted significant investment has gone into developing the firm’s digital capabilities. Version three of TGNS’s ‘Voyager’ fully automated onboard chart management system was launched earlier this year and as Mr Gunn said, to succeed in the future of navigation, companies must “keep their ear to the ground” because when working with

rapidly changing technologies, “you can’t just stand still”.

This attitude towards work is one Mr Gunn carries into his personal life, where his enjoyment of high-energy sports such as skiing, cycling, running and windsurfing, complements this committed family man’s love of spending time with his family, including daughters Emma and Claire, grandchildren Lucas and Thomas, and wife Cherie and daughter Ellie.

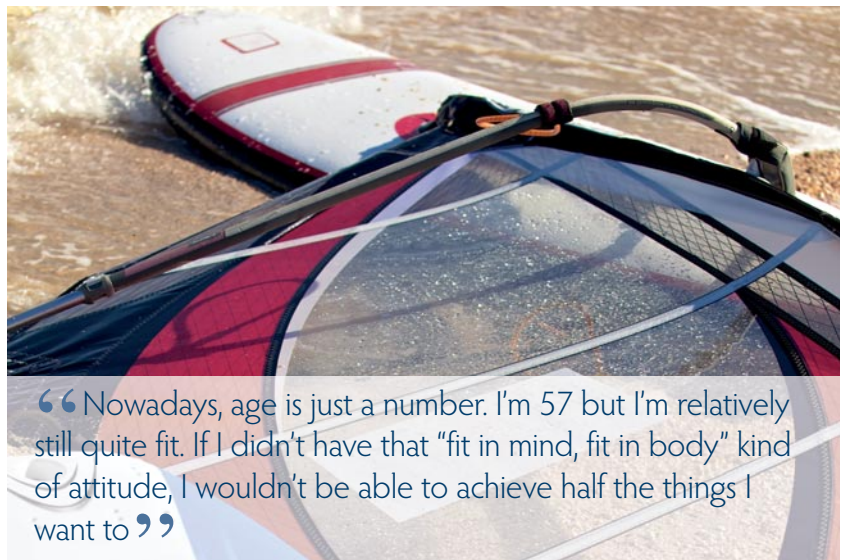
Mr Gunn is also involved in charities such as Rotary and the Shelterbox scheme, this a relief charity which provides emergency goods to disaster zones internationally. Mr Gunn said he has ambitions to continue building on the success of his charitable efforts by raising more funds over the coming months. He intends to approach local communities and educational establishments to discuss Shelterbox and so, gain further support locally.

Having enjoyed outdoor pursuits since childhood, Mr Gunn said he was “never good at football or rugby but always

excelled at outdoor activities”. He started rock climbing at a young age, only giving up at the age of 30 when two close friends died in climbing accidents. Mr Gunn has never climbed since but does take part in some mountain sports, including via ferrata – an Italian pursuit where participants wear a safety harness and traverse a mountainside using fixed cables, ladders and bridges.

This love for being “out in the elements” is something Mr Gunn is keen to pursue for the rest of his life: “At home, even if the weather is bad, I’m still outside – I’m in the garage or the garden, taking the dogs to the forest or out cycling, I don’t care as long as I’m out. I come home soaked but then jump in the hot tub!”

With a passion for motorcycling, Mr Gunn also takes time to tour Europe with his Harley-Davidson. As he concluded, his carefree nature has helped shape his life: “What you see is what you get – I’ve got no airs and graces – all I want to do is get on and do the best I can. I want to have no regrets.” ■



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