

Chris Dawson - The Management Today Interview

A stereotype of the rags-to-riches entrepreneur, Chris Dawson started trading stuff while still at school, which he left with no qualifications.

A couple of months ago, MT ran a round table discussion about entrepreneurialism at the Dorchester Hotel in central London. We collected together eight leading self-made men and women worth a total of a quarter of a billion pounds in an attempt to get to the bottom of what makes them tick and discuss whether the fuel that drives them could be bottled.

One of the opening comments was made by Adrian Atkinson, a corporate psychologist and expert on the phenomenon. He expressed the belief that male entrepreneurs were made by difficult childhood circumstances, often including failure at school. Nearly half of entrepreneurs are dyslexic; they are rarely easy-going people and never stop working.

He then went one further: 'I'd say there are maybe only two people around this table who are true entrepreneurs; the rest are enterprisers, and there is a big distinction.' A collective intake of breath followed. So, Atkinson thought six of the eight did not cut the mustard – but declined to say who the genuine two were.

Chris Dawson was one of those around the table. Afterwards, he said excitedly to me: 'I knew that psychologist fella was talking about me. I knew I was one of those two!' To be badged thus was the ultimate recognition for him. A stereotype of the rags-to-riches route – a man who says he didn't acquire his first pair of underpants until he was 12 – Dawson describes himself as 'the Evangelist for Entrepreneurialism'.

Although he is not yet well known outside his home town of Plymouth, Dawson is a legend in the south-west, where, starting out as a market trader flogging kit from a suitcase, he has since amassed a personal fortune in excess of £100 million through his rapidly expanding chain of superstores known as The Range. The feat is all the more remarkable in light of the confidence he shared round the table that he remained, at the age of 53, virtually illiterate. For MT, an opportunity to visit Plymouth's very own Del Boy in his back yard was too good to resist.

Despite what the brochures may tell you, the sun does not shine endlessly throughout the summer down there in Devon and Cornwall. We arrive at fog-bound Plymouth airport after a lengthy coach trip across Bodmin Moor from Newquay, whence WOW flight 103 from Gatwick had been diverted. Dawson is waiting outside the terminal with his Aston Martin Vanquish (RRP £163,600), registration CDS11. The Range is the epitome of lean, and Dawson has no press people. You can't e-mail him because, for him, reading

them isn't that straightforward. If you want to talk to him, you ring his mobile. And he picks you up from the airport himself.

We drive – surprisingly steadily with his steering wheel-mounted gear-changing paddles – to The Range HQ in nearby Estover. Plymouth is a large military city that has experienced more than its fair share of economic problems since the second world war. Its setting and surroundings are not without beauty, but it features heavily on various websites specialising in chav culture.

'There isn't a fat lot to do down here apart from the dockyard,' admits Dawson, a native Janner. 'When it comes to money, what I say is you either steal it, inherit it or win it. Other than that, you're buggered and you've got to go out and go to work.'

The Range HQ is pretty nondescript. I'm introduced to the bewildered-looking in-house lawyer in his bare cell of an office, recently brought in to cope with the avalanche of property deals. Dawson's staff have mostly got their heads down. He's especially keen I get to look at the section where he makes sure no supplier gets paid twice or before time.

We pass by logistics, where they've just taken the decision to abandon independent haulage contractors and buy their own lorries to serve their supply chain. They've bought four Man tractor units and 10 'backs', which are going to be very busy indeed racking up the miles from container ports bringing in merchandise ranging from candles through novelty loo seats to garden furniture sets.

'I'm going to be so proud watching those spankin' six-wheelers on the motorway with The Range on the side,' he says. 'Just as well they didn't listen to me deciding which ones to get because I'd have had the fastest trucks in the world with the biggest horns and widest wheels...'

Our sprint round the HQ finishes with a cup of tea in Dawson's office. Prominent on his desk is a small model of the Del Boy character's famous Reliant Regal yellow three-wheeler emblazoned with 'Trotters Independent Trading. New York, Paris, Peckham'. This is a reminder of where The Range and Dawson came from, except that he tramped the waterfront streets of Devonport and the Ho rather than south-east London and the Elephant.

There are a couple of modest leather sofas and a piggy bank. Dawson's mobile phone goes off frequently and on answering one call it falls to pieces. There is something engagingly distraught, even chaotic, about him. But you soon realise that this is because he has one of those brains that is thinking about four things at once. His mind is 40% on you, but probably more

closely focused on his next three big deals. The restless energy fizzles, and one suspects he must be a bit of a nightmare to live with.

He introduces me to his wife who, along with Dawson's two children, works for The Range. 'I met Sarah outside a pub 28 years ago where I was street trading. I sold her a watch. I thought: "My god, that looks rather nice". The watch was a tenner. I said because I liked her she could have it for £8.99. She only had a fiver. I had that fiver and it gave me an excuse to see her again. I saw her two months later and she was with some other chap. "That's four quid you owe me," I said. The rest is history, but it would have been cheaper to let her off the four quid...'

This might be a reference to the fact that Mrs Dawson is currently shopping for a mas near Antibes in the South of France. The Range was founded in 1988 in Plymouth's Sugar Mill business park. It's a value retailer not unlike WalMart, selling mid-price home and garden products. From the first shed in Plymouth it spread outwards to Exeter and Newport, until it now has 19 stores as far afield as Colchester, employing 2,300 staff and covering 35,000-50,000 square feet each. The plan is to increase the number of stores to 31 by next year. The business is making £140 million a year, from which Dawson makes 9%. This puts him at number 15 in MT's Top 100 Entrepreneurs in the UK this year.

Dawson has not escaped the notice of those who would wish to buy him out. 'I've got one trade buyer driving me mad; one venture capitalist who pretends he isn't one...' he complains. 'The banks want me to move on. The thing is, there's no shortage of money out there to buy things at the moment. Look at what Travis Perkins paid for Wickes [£950 million]. I couldn't get my head around that.'

But he's not selling. 'If you wrote me out a cheque for £200 million, I wouldn't take it.' Where would he be without his legendary struggles with the planners and brinkmanship with landlords? What would he do if he couldn't walk his aisles? He sees the current retail downturn – which he believes will last for at least another 18 months – as giving him 'more opportunities than ever. The time to expand is in tough times.' And, anyway, he loves the dosh.

'I have a personal drive to want more. Sometimes, I will take someone under my wing and tell them not to be afraid to be greedy – to be honest and say: I want more of that. I will have that yacht. I will have that aircraft. I want that. Be honest with yourself.

'I fancy doing a Philip Green,' he continues. 'It is part of the make-up. You want to be able to wave to everybody who said you did not stand a chance – in my case, my schoolteacher.' He admires Green above all other retailers, and bumped into him in Barbados one winter – Dawson was hugely

impressed by the fact that Green has three mobiles. Holidays, as you would expect, however, are not a time for rest and recreation. 'No. All the time I'm thinking, getting faxes, scheming. If it's £10 notes or £5 notes, I want to know.'

This may sound like an acute case of Founder's Control Syndrome. Dawson admits he probably cannot remain the sole nexus of the business, and the time is approaching where he'll be forced to hand over some executive power if The Range continues to grow at its current rate.

'I will increase the management structure,' he says. 'The time has come for us to have a big, serious managing director – The Conductor. It will allow me to dream, scheme and get on with it. But my eyes, ears and hands will still be there. I'll want the bad news as well as the good news.'

Won't this have to be an amazingly resilient and tough person to deal with him? 'Yeah. Probably somebody from the lunatic asylum. I want somebody who wants the excitement. I've got two or three big names in the frame already. It'll blow your mind.' Let's hope it doesn't blow the new MD's as well.

We shoot off down to the seafront for some lunch at one of his favourite fish restaurants. We pull up next to a Bentley at the lights. 'Blimey! Rare to see a Bentley in Plymouth. Must be a bank robber.' The restaurant staff allow him to park the Aston in a special padlocked car park. He points out a large mural of Plymouth life, which features him dressed as a Teddy Boy complete with quiff. Dawson is looking forward to the weekend, when he and his 1965 500 BSA ex-works motocross bike are competing in the mud near Totnes. 'I'm going there to win,' he says. 'Not second or third. I want to win.'

Motorbikes were his passion as a kid. He ploughed all his money into them and wanted to turn professional. 'My biggest dream was to be a motocross star. I lived and died for bikes. I wanted to be world-class, but I never had the talent. I couldn't accept just being OK.'

We move on to the subject of his children. Lisa, aged 24, is an assistant buyer on the trail of pictures and frames and arts and crafts ware. 'She's got amazing spirit and drive,' he says. 'She drives her boyfriend mad.'

His son Chris, 22, works in the garden department of the Plymouth store. He also has severe dyslexia. 'He is quiet and struggles with his confidence. I suppose with the two of them I have the Ferrari and the Old Austin. Both get you to the same place. The Austin will erupt later. He's five years away from being on fire, but you mustn't force it.'

After coffee, we're off to walk the floor of his Plymouth store. What's noticeable is that when the staff see him coming towards them, they don't shrink back and look busy, but smile and come up to him. We find his son over among the bedding plants. Lording it up a bit, Dawson ticks him off, reasonably gently, for some dodgy presentation of hanging baskets.

Entrepreneurs' kids hardly ever do what their parents did. They often don't need to. Dawson sees and acknowledges this. 'They've been brought up in a nice environment, so in some ways it's harder for them than it was for me. Any slight improvement was an improvement for me.' Even a pair of Y-fronts...

If all this comes over like a version of Monty Python's 'Four Yorkshiremen' sketch, that is misleading. He is not smug or self-satisfied, and is far too interested in the future to spend more than the minimum of time thinking about the past.

'People talk about having hard times,' he says. 'I suppose we had a five-star hard time. However, you can look back and say it was hard, but not knowing any different, you wonder if it was such a hard time after all. I knew nothing else. I can remember hiding under the table with my brother when a guy knocked on the door for the Provident cheques; my brother stood up, not being the wise one, and said: "My mother says we are not here".'

What about his father, who was clearly a key factor in shaping Dawson's life? Thomas Dawson spent a while in the navy, but once shorebound seems to have ducked and dived as a bit of a geezer. 'The first thing I ever sold was ice-creams outside a pub. I was seven,' says his son. 'My old man made me sell 'em. Then I sold a bag of peaches and he made me shout: One and six! One and six! Two for three shillings!, which is like saying: 50p! 50p! Two for a pound! They were all laughing at me. So I got attention.

'My dad wasn't bad at selling. He'd usually had a drink or two before he started. I can remember when I should have been at school he'd take me in the back of the shooting brake filled with fish, cockles and mussels... He sold crabs that weren't cooked properly. I remember one walking across a pub and a woman screamed. He said: "You can't get any fresher than that, madam." He was very sharp, but he didn't do a great deal, unfortunately. He should have been a comedian.'

How bad was his drinking? 'Bad enough for him to have to give up work. He chose to drink. It was different then – working-class people would go slurping all their wages in the pub.'

We drive on past his school – Plymstock – as the kids are winding their slow

way out. A few cheer as his car bowls past. 'I really struggled there. I struggled with the classes and I struggled with discipline. You weren't dyslexic in those days – you were just a dunce, a remedial. I was put in special classes and kids are cruel, they take the mick. I can remember the teacher announcing at the beginning of the year: "Chris Dawson will be going into the backward class". You struggle to think they'd say something like that today.'

His reaction to this was to start trading stuff while he was still at school, anything he could lay his hands on. As a result, he was making £5-£10 a week from his deals when a grown man would be taking home £12.

Finally, on our Plymouth tour, he wants to take me to the council house where he grew up in the suburb of Hooe and where his 81-year-old mother, Elsie, still lives. He says she has no real comprehension of his or his brother's success and still keeps her stored cash in a teapot. (His brother is also wealthy, having made a fortune in shipping, and now lives in South Africa.) We drive into a perfectly respectable but modest estate with small houses and gardens. Mrs Dawson's house looks the smartest.

For the first time that day he shows signs of vulnerability and of not being in control. Dawson has a dilemma. He can't face just driving past without saying hello to his mother, but he clearly doesn't want to take me inside. He probably doesn't want his mum being gawped at by a stranger – which is understandable.

He settles on the bizarre solution of pulling his vast throbbing car over at the end of her path and ringing her on his mobile. 'Mum? You in there...' After a few minutes she comes to the front door, but he stays in the car. They have a brief kerbside chat. I wave from the passenger's seat and she looks slightly baffled.

He is 54 next birthday and was born on Christmas Day. ('They saw me and said: Jesus Christ!') A conversation about this reminds me of what differentiates entrepreneurs from the rest of us. Everyone I've ever met who was born on Christmas Day says it's grim because your special day gets lost in the seasonal activities, and, more importantly, you don't get your fair share of presents – the proper ration of Christmas plus birthday gifts.

Dawson begs to differ – 'No, you get a lot more presents that way,' he claims. People like him have a restless sense of optimism because in everything there is opportunity. The glass is always half full rather than half empty; they never accentuate the negative.

So how does he define what he's got and what makes him that bit different

from normal people? 'I suppose I'm the kind of person you could throw into the middle of a field or a bombsite on a Monday with the arse hanging out of my trousers and by Friday I'd have some sort of business going.' He'd be bobbing and weaving, scheming and trading, making a margin...

Back in London – after a still fog-blocked Plymouth means a trip back across Bodmin Moor to Newquay, where our taxi driver (from Prague) gets lost – I telephone psychologist Atkinson. So was Dawson indeed one of the two around the table who were the real entrepreneurial McCoy? 'Definitely,' says Atkinson. 'I spotted him a mile off. You wouldn't want to get stuck in a lift with him.'

I disagree. There must be few dull moments in the company of Dawson. When it comes to the E word, he is, as they say, the Real Deal.

Four tough challenges for Dawson

- 1 Managing the rapid expansion of The Range with almost no senior management
- 2 Coping with the serious retail downturn in the UK without suffering blood-loss
- 3 Avoiding personal burnout or exhaustion, although this does not seem likely
- 4 Avoiding traffic police and Gatso cameras in his 0-60mph-in-4.4secs Aston Martin

Dawson in a minute

1951 Born 25 December, Plymouth. Educated at Plymstock school, leaving with no qualifications

1966 Trader on the streets and in the markets of Plymouth

1988 Founds The Range superstore

2004 Turnover of The Range chain estimated at £140 million.