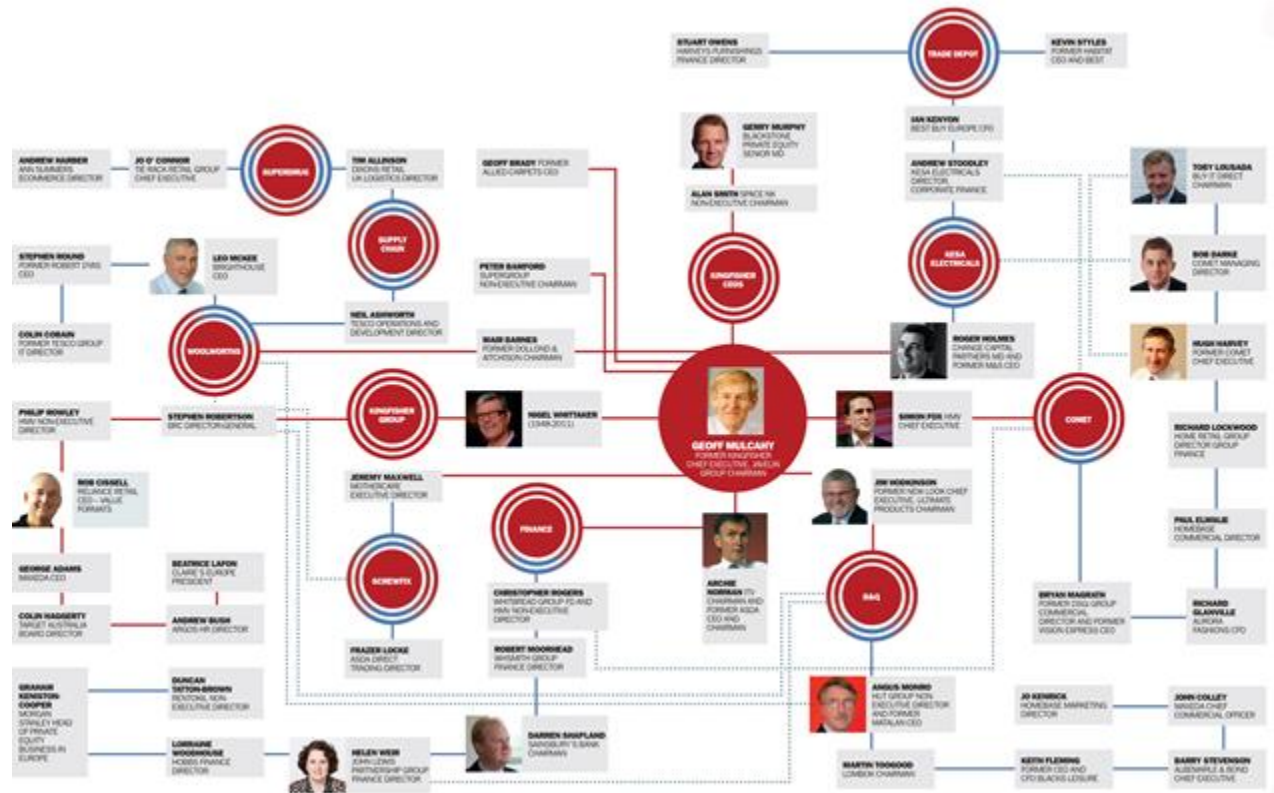


The Kingfisher family tree

18 April, 2012 - Charlotte Hardie



The retail empire that emerged in the early 1980s has produced some of retail's best-known names. Who are they and why was it such a hotbed of talent?

B&Q, Superdrug, Woolworths, Comet, Screwfix, Trade Depot... the sheer scale of the sprawling retail empire run by Sir Geoff Mulcahy for nearly two decades means you could probably fill an entire Retail Week issue with Kingfisher's glittering alumni.

Mulcahy may have had a taciturn reputation, but the dynamic retail stable led by him and his close team that included former Asda chief executive Archie Norman and the late Nigel Whittaker, both attracted and fostered countless names that went on to win much retail acclaim.

Part of the reason is the fact it was ahead of the times. Norman describes it as being "built on very strong management teams at a time when retail wasn't famous for good management". Mulcahy - who started out as a management consultant - agrees. "When I got into retail, it was all run by big personalities," he says, citing former Burton boss Sir Ralph Halpern, Habitat founder Sir Terence Conran and former Tesco boss Lord MacLaurin among them.

"I once asked one of these big retail personalities what I had to do to become a great retailer and was told I had no hope whatsoever because I had an MBA and that they had all started off by banging the

tills at aged 16. At Kingfisher we were the first to professionalise it,” says Mulcahy. It had in place formal performance management processes, for instance, which at that time was almost unheard of.

Many attribute the fact that Kingfisher was such a good training ground to one factor; Mulcahy himself. This, of course, he disputes: “It was nothing to do with me, it was to do with them.”

Much effort, he says, was put into identifying good people, developing them, and giving them responsibility early on in their careers. To help them find the very best people, Kingfisher had its own resident psychologist, Peter Samuel. Mulcahy says the business always wanted people who liked people, people who respected people, and people with ambition, “but not all these ego types”.

Often described as a workaholic in the extreme, Norman says Mulcahy was “like a dog with a bone”, which proved infectious. He explains: “You’d come in at 7.30am on a Monday morning and Geoff would be sitting at his table, fretting about the issues, and rather irritated that everyone else hadn’t yet turned up.” Mulcahy wasn’t always the easiest of bosses, either.

He had a reputation for intervening across numerous reporting lines, not everyone agreed with his widespread use of management consultants and he was forever pushing for more, but he earned the utmost respect.

Mulcahy describes his commitment to Kingfisher as simple enthusiasm for the task at hand, but this enthusiasm no doubt had an effect on those around him. “The way to make a success of anything is to enjoy doing it. If you enjoy doing it you tend to put a lot of hours into it,” he says.

Eyes on the competition

All retailers are obsessed with competitor activity, but Mulcahy arguably more than most. He would think nothing of flying off to the US on his weekends to assess the big-box competition across the pond and this drive undoubtedly rubbed off on his colleagues - it had to - without it, employees would be quickly exposed. British Retail Consortium director-general Stephen Robertson says: “The last thing we wanted was the chief executive saying ‘Have you seen what Home Depot is doing?’ and us not having an answer. We became very good at spotting what others were doing and using it to our advantage.”

Mulcahy’s quest to improve on what already existed also created a driven, ambitious workplace. All those interviewed for this feature agreed that he and his top team were never truly satisfied. “He created a culture of relentlessly looking for new possibilities and that led to innovation,” says former Marks & Spencer chief executive Roger Holmes, who spent seven years at Kingfisher, rising to chief executive of Kesa Electricals.

“Geoff was never quite content and there was always a willingness to try new things,” he recalls. Probably unsurprisingly, it could be a tough environment in which to work. Holmes describes it as “performance oriented” in the extreme. Norman adds: “People that didn’t go on to great things have been airbrushed out of history.” But this was an energetic place with a story to tell and that helped attract the best people.

Robertson says: "I remember being shocked when I arrived there at how much swearing went on. The great thing about it was you felt you were at a place where things were happening. There was an energy about it that drove people to achieve great things."

HMV non-executive director Philip Rowley also recalls being seduced by the culture that Mulcahy, Norman and Whittaker had created. He initially had no interest in leaving his job at EMI, but was soon persuaded otherwise. "It became very clear to me that this was a very different kind of place," he says. "You had the extremely sharp intellect of Geoff and Archie, and Nigel was the oil on the wheels. I thought 'I'm really going to learn a lot from these guys'."

Rob Cissell, chief executive of value formats for Reliance Retail, adds: "Geoff recognised young talent and was prepared to support and develop it. We were his 'big bets'. He was a great leader and all of us who were given our chance by him believed in him with a passion."

Highs and lows

This remained the case until Mulcahy stood down in 2002. The company was not without its ups and downs. But the lows - Kingfisher's failed bid for Asda among them - never detracted from everyone's incessant drive to innovate, achieve, and trample on the competition. There is no doubt that Mulcahy's leadership has helped nurture generations of talent - proof, if ever you needed it, that being an outstanding retail chief executive goes far beyond just a healthy balance sheet.

KINGFISHER'S HISTORY IN BRIEF

Kingfisher began life in 1982 after buyout of Woolworths by Paternoster.

- With the deal came what was then only a small chain of B&Q stores
- Sir Geoff Mulcahy joined as chief executive and kick-started the expansion of the Kingfisher empire
- It acquired the Comet electricals chain in 1984 and Superdrug in 1987
- In 1998 B&Q merged with French DIY retail brand Castorama and in 1999 it opened the first B&Q store in China
- It also bought French electricals chain Darty in 1993 and Screwfix in 1999
- By 2000, Mulcahy and his team had decided to shift the business to become a DIY specialist
- Woolworths was demerged in 2001, the same year as it sold Superdrug
- Comet was demerged in 2003, leaving a home improvement business that has continued its international expansion

Some of Kingfisher's finest

- **Geoff Mulcahy** Kingfisher chief executive from 1984 until his retirement in 2002.
- **Nigel Whittaker** corporate relations director. Spent 13 years at the business, in roles including B&Q chairman and corporate affairs director.
- **Archie Norman** ITV chairman and former Asda CEO and chairman. Joined Kingfisher in the 1980s, becoming group finance director. He left in 1991 to join Asda.

- **Geoff Brady** Non-executive director DaimlerChrysler UK and former CEO Allied Carpets. Left Kingfisher in 1999. Became trading director Big W.
- **Peter Bamford** non-executive chairman, Supergroup. At Kingfisher 1984 to 1987 - various merchandise management roles.

Kingfisher CEOs

- Alan Smith Non-executive chairman Space NK.
- Gerry Murphy Senior MD, Blackstone private equity.

Kingfisher Group

- **George Adams** CEO Maxeda. At Kingfisher from 1993 until 2008. Became CEO, Kingfisher European development and UK trade.
- **Rob Cissell** CEO Reliance Retail. At Kingfisher 1996 to 2006. Became Kingfisher group commercial chief executive.
- **Stephen Robertson** BRC director general. 1993 to 2003. Became group director of communications.
- **Philip Rowley** non-executive director, [HMV](#). At Kingfisher 1998 to 2001. Became group finance director.
- **Colin Haggerty** board director, Target Australia. At Kingfisher 1997 to 2002. Became Kingfisher retail director.
- **Andrew Bush** HR director, [Argos](#). At Kingfisher 1993 to 2005. Became Kingfisher group organisation and reward director.
- **Beatrice Lafon** President, [Claire's](#) Europe. Became strategic marketing controller. 1993 to 2000.
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Finance

- **Christopher Rogers** Whitbread group FD and non-executive director, HMV. Joined Kingfisher 1988. Became finance director and commercial director, [Comet](#).
- **Robert Moorhead** group finance director, [WHSmith](#). At Kingfisher 1991 to 2001. Became director of finance.
- **Darren Shapland** chairman, [Sainsbury's](#) Bank. At Kingfisher 2000 to 2002. Became FD [Superdrug](#).
- **Helen Weir** [John Lewis Partnership](#) group finance director. At Kingfisher 2000 to 2003. Became Kingfisher FD.
- **Lorraine Woodhouse** [Hobbs](#) FD. Became head of investor relations. At Kingfisher 2000 to 2004.
- **Graham Keniston-Cooper** Morgan Stanley head of private equity business in Europe. Spent six years at Kingfisher, becoming head of business development.
- **Duncan Tatton-Brown** Rentokil non-executive director. At Kingfisher 2001 to 2008. Became Group FD.

Kesa Electricals

- **Roger Holmes** MD Capital Change Partners and former CEO [M&S](#). At Kingfisher 1994 to 2001. Became chief executive of Kingfisher Electricals.
- **Ian Kenyon** CFO, [Best Buy](#) Europe. At Kingfisher 1994 to 2002. Became FD Kingfisher

Electricals

- **Andrew Stoodley** Director, Corporate Finance at Kesa Electricals plc. At Kingfisher 2001 to 2003. Became acting FD, Kingfisher Electricals.

Screwfix

- **Jeremy Maxwell** executive director, [Mothercare](#). At Kingfisher 1997 to 2007. Became marketing director and ecommerce director, Screwfix direct.
- **Frazer Locke** trading director, Asda Direct. At Kingfisher 1999 to 2006. Became buyer - ironmongery and security, Screwfix Direct.

Woolworths

- **Leo McKee** chief executive, [Brighthouse](#). At Kingfisher 1986 to 2001. Became MD Woolworths.
- **Stephen Round** former [Robert Dyas](#) CEO. At Kingfisher 1991 to 2000. Became MD Woolworths.
- **Mair Barnes** Former chairman, Dolland and Aitchison. At Kingfisher 1985 to 1994. Became Woolworths MD.
- **Colin Cobain** former [Tesco](#) group IT director. At Kingfisher 1992 to 2000. Became Woolworths director.

B&Q

- **Jim Hodkinson** Chairman, Ultimate Products, former chief executive, [New Look](#). At Kingfisher 1982 to 1998. Became chairman and chief executive, B&Q.
- **Angus Munro** Non-executive director, Hut Group and former [Matalan](#) CEO. Spent four years at Kingfisher, became trading director of B&Q and Woolworths.
- **Martin Toogood** Lombok chairman. At Kingfisher 1990 to 2001. Became chief executive B&Q.
- **Keith Fleming** former CEO and CFO Blacks Leisure. At Kingfisher 1989 to 2005. Became finance director B&Q 2004 to 2005.
- **Jo Kenrick** Homebase marketing director. At Kingfisher 1999 to 2001 and 2006 to 2008. Became B&Q marketing director.
- **John Colley** chief commercial officer, Maxeda. At Kingfisher 1994 to 2001 and 2004 to 2010. Became commercial director, B&Q.

Superdrug

- **Jo O' Connor** CEO Tie Rack Retail Group. At Kingfisher 1998 to 2001 until Superdrug's demerger. Became commercial director Superdrug.
- **Andrew Harber** ecommerce director, Ann Summers. At Kingfisher 1997 to 2001. Became CTO Superdrug.com
- **Tim Allinson** UK Logistics director, Dixons Retail. At Kingfisher 1998 to 2001. Became southern regional distribution manager, Superdrug.

Supply Chain

- **Neil Ashworth** operations and development director, Tesco. At Kingfisher 1995 to 2001. Became supply chain director Woolworths.

Trade Depot

- **Stuart Owens** FD, Harveys Furnishings. At Kingfisher 2001 to 2009. Became finance and IT director, Trade Depot.
- **Kevin Styles** former Habitat CEO and Best Buy marketing director. At Kingfisher 2004 to 2007. Became MD of Trade Depot.
- **Ian Kenyon** CFO, Best Buy Europe. At Kingfisher 1994 to 2002. Became FD, Kingfisher Electricals.

Comet

- **Simon Fox** chief executive, HMV. Became Comet MD at time of demerger. At Kingfisher 1998 to 2006.
- **Hugh Harvey** Former Comet CEO. At Kingfisher 1996 to 2003. Became commercial director, Comet.
- **Bob Darke** former MD, Comet. At Kingfisher 1993 to 2000. Various, Woolworths.
- **Toby Lousada** chairman, Buy It Direct. At Kingfisher 1998 to 2003. Various, Comet.
- **Bryan MaGrath** Former DSGi group commercial director and former CEO Vision Express. At Kingfisher 1989 to 1993. Became Comet marketing manager.
- **Richard Glanville** CFO Aurora Fashions. At Kingfisher 1993 to 1995. IT Director, Comet.
- **Paul Elmslie** Commercial director, Homebase. At Kingfisher 1997 to 2004. Became Comet category manager.
- **Richard Lockwood**, director Group Finance, Home Retail Group. At Kingfisher 2000 to 2003. Became finance controller, Comet.

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