

# Queen's Awards for Enterprise

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## Show of strength for global sales

The UK needs its exporters to fire on all cylinders if the chancellor's ambitious targets are to be met, writes *Brian Groom*

Exports may so far have been one of the disappointing elements in the UK's economic recovery, but this year's winners of the Queen's Awards for Enterprise demonstrate that plenty of companies can achieve the quality of services and products needed. If only more can be persuaded to make the leap.

From a Scottish seafood producer to a maker of pinpoint anti-armour missiles, and from the deviser of a brush that painlessly untangles hair to a supplier of human tissue for research, the winners of the awards – first handed out in 1966 – provide ample evidence of businesses' ability to innovate and sell their wares worldwide.

The 2014 list, published to mark the Queen's birthday yesterday, contains 162 business awards mixing FTSE companies with private businesses and foreign-owned subsidiaries.

Awards are given for achievement in three categories: International Trade, where there are 110 winners; Innovation, with 39 awards; and Sustainable Development for benefiting the environment, society and the economy, with 13. There are also eight Enterprise Promotion awards to individuals for efforts to encourage entrepreneurship.

Next year brings the 50th anniversary of the scheme's creation by royal warrant. This year's number of winners is slightly below the record of 209 awards in 2012, but the core remains the dozens of often unsung smaller companies for which the awards provide important recognition.



Exports take wing: Bristol-based Airbus Operations is among 110 companies to receive an International Trade award

"Companies that are growing, innovating and championing UK business overseas deserve the recognition that these awards bestow," says Vince Cable, business secretary. "With more than 100 International Trade winners this year, it is clear that Britain is emerging as a leader in selling its quality services and products throughout the world."

Britain's trade gap in goods last year was £108bn, almost unchanged from 2012.

The deficit decreased slightly in the three months to February 2014, but

only because falling imports outpaced a drop in exports.

George Osborne, the chancellor, announced this month that the Bank of England would support export finance for the first time. In the Budget, he said he would double investment in a scheme that allows UK Export Finance, the credit agency, to lend to overseas customers who are buying goods from UK companies.

Mr Osborne is in danger of missing his target of doubling the UK's annual exports to £1tn by 2020. The Office for Budget Responsibility expects exports

to grow only 2.6 per cent in 2014 and thereafter by an average of just under 5 per cent – less than half the rate needed to reach the chancellor's target.

The awards demonstrate the UK's strength in sectors ranging from off-shore technology to drug discovery, fashion, food and drink, digital television software, education, healthcare, ceramics, aerospace and architecture.

The successful businesses range from large companies such as car-maker Jaguar Land Rover and Veolia Environmental Services, the waste

handler, to smaller enterprises such as All3Media International, a distributor of television shows and formats, Frugi, a manufacturer of organic children's clothing, and Orangebox, a maker of office furniture and self-contained "acoustic pods".

"The fact that small businesses can share these honours with large household names illustrates that they are the backbone of our economy and deserve to be recognised as such," says Matthew Hancock, skills and enterprise minister. "I would encourage every UK business to consider entering next year's historic 50th anniversary awards."

Other winning businesses range from enterprises with as few as five employees to the FTSE 100's Johnson Matthey, the maker of catalytic converters, which wins a Sustainable Development award, and BT Group's technology, service and operations arm, which wins an Innovation award for developing a hub that interconnects telecoms companies.

FTSE 250 winners include Berkeley Group, the housebuilder, which wins a Sustainable Development award, and Renishaw, which receives an Innovation award for microscopes that investigate physical and chemical structures.

Judges said the standard of entries was high, with 20 per cent of entrants winning an award. Eighteen of the winning companies have 10 employees or fewer, while 135 have fewer than 250 employees.

Among the smallest companies, Dorset-based Permavent, with five staff, wins an Innovation award for slate and tile roof designs that improve weather resistance and longevity.

At the larger end, Airbus Operations, a manufacturer of aircraft

Continued overleaf

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### Double winners

Two companies are recognised for both overseas trade and innovation

### 'Virtual biobank' exploits a gap

Tissue Solutions is go-between for medical samples

### Walking tall

Nikwax's products keep water at bay for enthusiasts of the great outdoors

### Confidence boosters

Networkers help fellow women to business success

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## Queen's Awards for Enterprise

# Answering academic questions brings results

Double winners *Andrew Bounds* profiles OptaSense and HVPD

Britain's universities continue to be a source of talent that drives innovation and overseas sales. Two double winners serving the energy industry have benefited from academic research and its application by businesses.

High Voltage Partial Discharge (HVPD), founded in 2006 by two PhD holders, provides test services and partial discharge test and monitoring technology to a global client base. Prompt detection of faults in high voltage insulation provides an early warning before catastrophic failure or an explosion.

It won awards in both the International Trade and

Innovation categories, as did OptaSense, a division of Qinetiq, the listed defence contractor that was once the defence research arm of the UK government.

OptaSense converts fibre optic cables used for telecommunications into



Magnus McEwen-King: 'edge in listening technologies'

"audio CCTV" by picking up and interpreting sounds. It is being increasingly used in the oil, gas and rail industries. Its sensors, held in a box the size of a standard PC, can detect when someone is trespassing on a railway, or a leak in a pipeline up to 40km away.

Magnus McEwen-King, managing director, says OptaSense is also growing in the fracking industry, as the technology can detect the flow of liquid and any seismic activity during hydraulic fracturing, which blasts open rock deep underground to release gas.

OptaSense, based in Farnborough, Hampshire, began trading in 2007 and serves more than 40 countries. Around 90 per cent of sales

are overseas. Qinetiq has said it expects OptaSense to reach £100m turnover in the next two years. The division has 160 employees.

It has also invested in a development site to demonstrate its technology. Mr McEwen-King says it has an edge over its competitors because its algorithms can interpret what the sound is, given Qinetiq's 50-year history in sonar and other listening technologies. "Others can hear, we can answer the question of what they are hearing," he says.

Five of its competitors are British, one Russian. "Acoustic sensory technology is very British technology, coming from the Optoelectronics Research Centre at Southampton Univer-



sity," he says. "We have PhDs from there and so do our competitors.

"We have got about 50 per cent of the market. There are 1.1m km of pipelines with fibre next to them. Only 23,000km has been fitted with sensors. There is a nascent market there."

HVPD is also pushing at

an open door. It has almost quadrupled overseas sales over the past three years. Exports have risen from 80 per cent of total turnover to 90 per cent, with almost half the sales from emerging markets. It has more than 300 customers in 90 countries. The company opened a

**Testing times: 90 per cent of HVPD's turnover is exported, to 90 countries**

second office in China last year and now plans to extend its presence in the Gulf region and North America through local offices. HVPD has particular strength in oil and gas and offshore renewable industries. It recently completed its largest ever order for equipment with the Saudi Electric Company and sends engineers from its UK team into the field to train others on the use of the equipment.

The founders of the Salford-based business, which employs around 40, are Lee Renforth and Ross Mackinlay. Mr Renforth has a PhD from Manchester University and was sponsored by the National Grid, which runs the UK's electrical infrastructure.

Mr Mackinlay studied physics at Lancaster University and took a PhD at Oxford university. He worked at the Cheshire-based Electricity Council Research Centre, which became EA Technology when the industry was privatised in 1989.

They set up the business when they realised there was growing demand for testing as renewable energy increased the number of smaller scale generating plants worldwide.

### Tissue Solutions 'Virtual biobank' exploits a gap

A list of the wares available from Tissue Solutions, Glasgow-based winner of a Queen's Award for International Trade, is not for the squeamish.

Staples of the seven-year-old business include such items as cancerous human tissues, brain samples from Alzheimer's sufferers, skin, blood, urine and even fresh faeces.

Tissue Solutions sources and supplies such samples for use in preclinical research as part of the development process for new medical treatments. Getting hold of the samples that lab researchers need can be a complicated and difficult process, says Ann Cooreman, chief operating officer and company co-founder.

"We found there was a gap in the market for a service like that," Ms Cooreman says.

So far business has been good. Tissue Solutions is profitable, and turnover reached £1.79m last year, up from £625,000 in 2010. The company has global reach, supplying clients from the US to Japan.

Acting as a go-between or "virtual biobank", Tissue Solutions takes requests from researchers and then looks for hospitals and existing biobanks that can supply the samples required. These mainly come either from surgical leftovers or cadavers.

Many samples come from Russia via the US, but all have guaranteed consent, meaning that the donor or a family member has agreed that they

can be used internationally for commercial medical research.

There is an international black market in human body parts, but Ms Cooreman stresses the importance of guaranteeing ethically acquired samples and the company's determination carefully to vet its suppliers. "We've been audited and we wouldn't hesitate to audit somebody else," she says.

The complexities of acquiring and confirming consent, as well as ensuring clinical standards of collection, mean that even a relatively straightforward sample of urine from a healthy person could cost more than £50. "You would think that it is nothing to give a urine sample, but if you add it all up it comes to quite a bit of staff time," says Ms Cooreman.

Finding and securing samples featuring specific diseases can be more complicated, with some costing hundreds of pounds each.

In a recent guest blog post for the Glasgow Science Centre, Morag McFarlane, company chief executive and other co-founder, said the most challenging jobs came when supplying a certain type of sample for the first time.

"Today I started my quest for kidney tissue and bloods from donors with lupus, an autoimmune disease and from a source of fresh intestine from people suffering from ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease," Ms McFarlane wrote.

Mure Dickie

### Darcast Crankshafts Casting around for new ideas

Not many small UK manufacturing companies can claim to have taken business from ThyssenKrupp.

But Darcast Crankshafts, a West Midlands cast metals company which was part of the German steel and engineering group until 2004, has now replaced it in supplying Ford with some of the crankshafts used in its engine assembly plant at Dagenham in Essex.

Darcast, which was once part of Birmid Qualcast, a famous name in British manufacturing, employs around 120 people at a factory in Smethwick in the heart of the Black Country, famous for its metal bashing.

Sales last year were £30m, and have grown by double-digit annual increases since Leonard Bransby bought the business – apart from 2008 at the onset of the global financial crisis.

Casting, where molten metal is poured into moulds, is normally used for large car parts. But for new models with high torque requirements, carmakers have increasingly used forged steel, a process using heat and pressure to manipulate metal, which is stronger.

However, when taking over Darcast, Mr Bransby set out to see if casting could compete by matching the tensile strength of the traditional forged steel product.

"When I picked up the company in 2004, it was not a sparkling jewel. But I realised there was no point in us being a me-too castings company. We had to differentiate ourselves," says the Darcast chairman and managing director.

"To compete in traditional castings, we would have had to become a low-cost producer, which was not very realistic being based in the UK," he says.

Darcast's breakthrough technology – the result of a £3m research programme by metallurgists and technicians – has won the company a Queen's Award for Innovation. The process involves converting base iron into a new high-strength spheroidal graphite iron, then using shell-moulding to make the castings.

The proportion of Darcast's sales – around 45 per cent – destined for export has actually declined but only because Ford and other UK-based manufacturers have become customers, thus helping to stem the trend of overseas sourcing of car parts.

Darcast also supplies Volkswagen, as well as making parts for off-road vehicles for Fiat and for Perkins Engines, the Peterborough manufacturer that is part of the US Caterpillar group.

John Murray Brown

### Travel Counsellors Bespoke service is just the ticket

"Stack it high and sell it cheap" has been the mantra of high street travel agents for years, says David Speakman, 67, founder of Bolton-based Travel Counsellors. It is a formula that he turned his back on two decades ago when he set up a bespoke personal travel service now used by 450,000 people a year.

Bolton, a relatively deprived northern industrial town, is not the most obvious base for a travel business selling holidays through 1,300 professional travel agents based at home. The more prosperous London and the southeast would have seemed a more logical launchpad for a highly personalised business targeting "cash rich and time poor" customers.

However, Travel Counsellors is growing its sales at a double-digit rate at a time when increasing numbers of traditional high street travel agents have been run out of business by fierce competition from internet travel sites. Last year Thomas Cook, the industry leader, underlined these competitive pressures when it axed around a fifth of its high street stores and staff.

Travel Counsellors' international operations are growing even faster than its UK operations. Having won the Queen's Award for Innovation in 2003, the company has now picked up an award for International Trade for continuous overseas sales growth. Last year, 29 per cent of its £385m sales were generated overseas compared with 7 per cent six years ago.

The company dipped its toe overseas in 2005, opening in Ireland. It uses a franchise model, with each of its agents running their own travel business. In addition to providing centralised IT support and marketing advice, it spends a lot of time coaching its agents on the company's ethos as a trusted and impartial adviser.

"We hang our hearts on building relationships," says Mr Speakman. The business model has been rolled out in the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, Canada, Dubai and, most recently, Belgium. It now has close to 500 travel agents overseas (nearly a third of its total), and 60 support staff. South Africa is its biggest overseas market, and the company was recently voted Best Travel Company in the Netherlands in the annual Dutch travel awards.

When Mr Speakman started in the business in the 1970s, travel agents had a near monopoly on access to booking systems and control over prices. The internet changed all that, not only allowing consumers to bypass traditional travel agencies by self-booking holidays and flights, but also offering much wider choice.

While the era of high street travel agencies may be nearing its end, it is by no means the end of travel agents who can provide a trusted and personalised advice, says Mr Speakman.

William Hall

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# Queen's Awards for Enterprise

## Networkers raise confidence of women in business

## Show of strength for world markets

### Enterprise Promotion

Running their own companies has helped two advocates hone their advice, says *Chris Tighe*

Women's networking event at Middlesbrough Football Club in 2000 set Ann Stonehouse on a route that led to her winning a Queen's Award for Enterprise Promotion yesterday. "The ladies I connected with at that table I'm still in contact with," says Ms Stonehouse, who has become well known in her native Teesside as an advocate for enterprise and entrepreneurship, particularly among women. "That event gave me the confidence to realise there were other businesswomen out there." She is not alone in identifying lack of confidence as a key issue that can curb female entrepreneurship. Another of this year's

Enterprise Promotion award winners, South Wales-based Christine Atkinson, makes exactly the same observation. "Lack of confidence is so pervasive," she says. Ms Atkinson, head of the Women's Entrepreneurship Hub at the University of South Wales, where she is also deputy director of the Centre for Enterprise, says the combination of lack of confidence and stereotypical attitudes can lead women to be "ghettoised", choosing business areas such as crafts and complementary health where there is intense competition. "They need to make sure they aren't moving into a really low paid area of work," she says. "It's quite hard to stand out and go against the tide." Ms Stonehouse believes some of this confidence gap results from the time many women spend out of the workplace for family reasons. "They become somebody's mother at home," she says. "They lose their own path." But, she adds, once they start networking with other



Christine Atkinson: women can become 'ghettoised'

women, who share contacts and provide support, "it's a very quick transition". Both women have personal experience of running their own businesses. Ms Stonehouse had set up her own company, offering accountancy services to small businesses, just before she went to the Middlesbrough FC event. She still runs Willowbank Accountancy alongside her voluntary

networking and mentoring commitments. She became a director of Women into the Network, a northeast England initiative that held the Middlesbrough event she attended, and in 2009 she founded Assist Women's Network, a Teesside-wide body that she chairs. She is also very active promoting young enterprise, for both sexes, runs seminars at university and further education college level on accountancy, tax and enterprise and has recently founded a new group, Women Support Women, linked to a charity helping women at the social margins. Ms Atkinson ran her own consultancy business, Praxis, which focused on equality-related training and research, before moving in 1999 to the University of Glamorgan - now part of the University of South Wales - to take up a post researching the personal and business support needs of women in South Wales. This focused her on providing assistance to potential female entre-



Ann Stonehouse: women are good at seeing 'big picture'

preneurs, mainly from disadvantaged areas. The Women's Entrepreneurship Hub, which she set up in 2008, combines research, policy and practice; with £5m funding from the European Social Fund and the Welsh government, it is researching the underlying causes of gender pay inequalities. She also founded the Vale Women's Business Network, which supports women starting

businesses and has run training courses for women at all levels of work. Both women believe female entrepreneurs also bring particular qualities to the role. "Women tend to be much more realistic about their business and idea and what they can achieve," says Ms Atkinson. Ms Stonehouse says women are good at seeing the "big picture" and can be more objective. "Men can be very driven." Women, she says, are less likely to take risks. But, she adds, both need the "risk gene" to succeed in business. Female entrepreneurship is developing, says Ms Atkinson, although she feels progress has been "painfully slow". "It seems there's still quite a way to go." However, in one area which has often been tricky for women, Ms Stonehouse has seen change; many of her male business clients are now involved in childcare because their wives are working. "I find a lot of men now saying, 'I don't work Friday because that's my day as dad.'"

### Continued: Queen's Awards overview

wings; Caterpillar UK, which makes backhoe loaders; HCA International, the hospital group; and ISG, the construction services company, all win International Trade awards. Willmott Dixon, the construction company, and Northumbrian Water, the utility, receive Sustainable Development awards. MBDA UK, part of the pan-European missile developer, wins an Innovation award for converting an anti-tank missile into a dual purpose weapon for use against snipers, mortar teams, improvised explosive devices and fast-moving vehicles. Foreign-owned winners also include Allstate Northern Ireland, which provides IT services to its US insurance parent; it receives a Sustainable Development award. Denmark's Daniamant gets an Innovation award for designing a range of marine lifebuoy lights, while Japanese-owned NGF Europe receives one for designing glass cords used to reinforce timing belts in the automotive industry. London Tradition, based in east London, is among the more colourful winners. It receives a trade award for turning the humble duffle coat and other "heritage coats" into luxury items, hand-cut and hand-finished by craftspeople, most of whom are British Asians living in Tower Hamlets. Gold-i, a specialist financial trading technology company, wins an Innovation award for developing a suite of products that have disrupted the global retail foreign exchange and derivatives trading market, giving retail brokers the same execution and risk management tools as their institutional counterparts at a fraction of the cost. Metalube, a specialist lubricant producer based near Manchester, wins an award for the second year running, this time an Innovation award for a synthetic grease for protecting overhead power lines. Award winners are visited by a royal representative and given a crystal bowl to mark their achievement. They can use the Queen's Award emblem in advertising, marketing and on packaging for five years as a symbol of their quality and success.

## Green ethos aids success in great outdoors

### Nikwax Sustainability is key for the waterproofing company

When Nick Brown left university in 1977 with a degree in social anthropology and linguistics he was unsure what career to pursue. He found the answer in his favourite pastime - mountain trekking and the great outdoors. Unhappy with the waxes then available for leather boots and encouraged by a shopkeeper who agreed that the available products were not right, he developed his own waterproofing compound. In the decades since, Nikwax has established a leading position in the market for waterproofing products for the outdoor market. Still based in the small East Sussex market town of Wadhurst, the company employs 125 people in the UK, US and Poland and has an annual turnover of £10m. A three-times previous winner of Queen's Awards for International Trade - 70 per cent of sales are outside the UK - this time it is a winner of a Sustainable Development award. It

rejects the use of harmful raw materials such as PFCs - perfluorocarbons - and flammable solvents. In its production processes it recycles waste, harvests rainwater and has invested in solar power. It runs workshops with local primary schools on science and sustainable business. It is this ethos that Mr Brown, now 59 and managing director of the company he founded, is keen to maintain. Son Luis, with a degree in environmental science and international development, works in the business with the aim of continuing family ownership. Nikwax's commitment to sustainable production and products has an ethical underpinning but it also has very practical financial implications. "The nature of the change in climate over the past 10 years has been dramatic," says Mr Brown. "We get long periods of drought and then periods of deluge in the northern hemisphere, where we sell our



These boots are made for walking: Nikwax products keep the water out

Harmful raw materials such as perfluorocarbons are not used

products. The unpredictability of the weather means we have one or two good years and then a terrible year. This has become problematic for the whole outdoor industry." Up to now Nikwax has focused on developing waterproofing products that hikers and climbers can spray on to their outdoor clothing to renew the manufacturer's waterproofing. Products have also been developed to impregnate the fabric when the article is put in a washing machine. The company recently launched an improved product for waterproofing cotton trousers and wind jackets.

The challenge now is to develop more environmentally friendly products that can be used during the original manufacture of outdoor clothing. Fifteen of the company's 108 UK staff work in research. "Almost all outdoor jackets are treated with fluoridised water repellent that breaks down to leave residual materials in the environment," Mr Brown explains. "There is a massive move away from these materials in Germany and Scandinavia. Our challenge is to make products that can be used in the manufacturing process."

Charles Batchelor

### Aero Stanrew Accreditation drive and training help climb out of turbulence

Clive Scott, chief executive of Aero Stanrew, could hardly have got off to a worse start. A finance specialist, he took the helm of the Devon-based aerospace electronics business in July 2001, just weeks before the September 11 terrorist attacks struck the global aviation industry. He held his nerve. Thirteen years on, he co-owns the business with three fellow directors, and Aero Stanrew is specified on all Airbus and all recent Boeing manufacturing programmes, producing advanced safety critical electromagnetic components and electronics systems for tier one suppliers such as Rolls-Royce and GE. Turnover, aided by a recent diversification into oil and gas, has more than trebled to £18.5m and staff numbers more than doubled to 230. An export push in the past three years, meanwhile, has led to a 194 per cent lift in direct overseas sales, enabling it to win a Queen's Award for International Trade. India, where it previously had no presence, is now its biggest single direct market. As well as intensive market research - there are two business development executives, also co-owners, on the board - Mr Scott traces success to a training and accreditation drive during a lull in growth after

the 2008 financial crisis. "We had a very deliberate policy not to lose staff," says Mr Scott, who led a private equity-based £8.5m management buyout in 2012 when the former majority owner retired. With more accreditation comes more work from the big aircraft manufacturers and the benefit of their long time horizons and public order books. "We have that same seven-year visibility in sales," he says. Located in rural north Devon, Aero Stanrew works closely with its supply chain and a local college to ensure it has the skills and inputs to fuel its growth. It has taken on nine apprentices through a government scheme and plans to lift the share of apprentices in the workforce to 10 per cent. Mr Scott has also invested in himself, taking Aero Stanrew through to the regional finals of an HSBC "business thinking" competition for innovative companies. This included a business trip to Dubai with other SME executives and HSBC bankers, followed by a pitch for some free funding from the bank. "I got to bounce ideas off some very senior people at the bank," says Mr Scott, who three years on still regularly meets some of the other participants. "It was incredibly useful."

Virginia Marsh

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