



Celebrating 30 years - Paul Beaumont, Gina Halden, Martin Slater, Andy Beard and John Beaumont

It's a no to dancing girls!

This year, Greatdays Travel Group is celebrating its 30th anniversary. On 11 June, the tour wholesaler welcomed key clients and suppliers to a birthday dinner. Stuart Render took the opportunity to speak with Managing Director Andy Beard and discovered a business committed to both its staff and delivering a more efficient service to its clients

Back in January 2011 *Coach Monthly* reported on the appointment of Andy Beard as Managing Director of Altrincham-based Greatdays Travel Group (GTG). It was the first time that the wholesale and group tour operator had appointed someone to the senior management team from outside the family. Commenting on his appointment at the time, Chairman and founder, John Beaumont, said: "Andy came in as a consultant to look at the company and to make recommendations in terms of both organisation and direction. We liked what we saw. His experience is a snug fit with where we see GTG

going. The appointment is an exciting step forward to a period of growth and investment by my family in the travel business." Fast forward four and a half years and not only has the company moved into new offices but it has also benefited from a new focus on staff development. "When I joined Greatdays I was struck by the commitment and enthusiasm of the various teams," says Andy. "But it was also noticeable that the interaction between teams wasn't happening as I thought it should. Over these last few years I've introduced what I call the 'Step it Up' initiative. At the heart of this was one question. How can we do it better?"

Andy explains that there were three key objectives: diversification of the product; innovation; and creating the market through new products. "They were and are laudable objectives," he says, "but we won't achieve that unless every member of staff pulls together as part of the Greatdays team. No one person in this organisation is any better than anyone else – not Executive Director Paul Beaumont, not John Beaumont, not Sales Director Martin Slater, and certainly not myself. We're all the same. Over these last few years I've endeavoured to enthuse my colleagues to embrace that ethos. It's not been easy by any means, but we're pretty much there."

At the heart of all of this is staff training. Andy explains what's happened. "We spend a long time on the recruitment process," he says. "We appoint staff on passion and attitude. We spend around £50k a year on staff training. It's a significant sum, but it's absolutely worth every penny. Staff now go on one fam trip every two months or so. It takes time to introduce new staff to people we've dealt with for many years, but it's vital we do that. Our clients value the fact that they will deal with the same people, year after year. When I joined the business, staff turnover was around 20%. Today it's around 2%. The investment in staff is paying off."

A 2% churn might be a pipe dream for many businesses, but Greatdays has helped achieve the figure through a number of other staff-based initiatives. "Across the year we receive a host of gifts from suppliers," says Andy. "Anything we get, from a pen to a bottle of whisky, goes into a cupboard. At Christmas we hold a raffle and dish all the gifts out to staff." Greatdays also runs a programme of events and activities that Andy describes as 'special things'. "Some of these are for charity, some are just for fun," he says. "For example, one department might host a culinary day where they prepare food for everyone else. At Chinese New Year we might have fortune cookies, or we might have Pancake Day treats. Not too long ago we were lucky if there were three of these in a year. This year we're on track to have 23!"

Andy, an accountant by trade, has found the whole experience both challenging and hugely enjoyable. "When I first joined the company my life was ruled by numbers and structure. It's still an important part of what I do, but now I love the challenge of being entrepreneurial, of turning something into a product of value. "I've seen the Greatdays family business become a real team. Our finance and operations teams are mixing. They're speaking the same language. I'm so proud of what our people are doing. The passion and dedication is really good to see. Yes I can guide them, but this is all down to them. I like the 'shall we have a go at it?' mentality."

Andy says that all of this has played its part in improving the service given to its coach operator clients. "Coach wholesaling remains at the heart of what

we do," he says. "That's what we take into the next 30 years. We're expanding our programme of tours by train, air/coach tours, and cruises. In terms of industry issues, we're monitoring the rise in popularity of what I call the Groupon and Wowcher effect, and the consequences of an increase in use of social media. All-inclusive holidays are increasing in popularity in the wider holiday industry, so is that the route that coach touring will follow?"

Andy explains that Greatdays continues to work with coach tour operators to find ways for low-number holidays to run.

"Cancellations are in no-one's interest, so it's good to be able to report that cancellation rates are down," he says.

The dancing girls

The meeting with Andy takes place at Chapel House, the refurbished Methodist chapel that Greatdays moved into in March 2014.

Executive Director Paul Beaumont takes up the story. "We'd been in our original offices just up the road since 1992," he says.

"We needed additional office space for expansion, IT and training as well as additional staff and client parking. We acquired Chapel House in August 2013 and started a major refurbishment the following month. It's been a £1m investment."

Paul explains that Chapel House opened as a Wesleyan chapel in 1884, merging with the Methodists in 1933.

"It stayed as a chapel until 1966, became a cash and carry for two years, and then a leather goods factory," he says. "In the mid 1980s it was converted into a business centre housing 26 little offices. In 2013, with the recession taking hold, it was put up for sale. During the refurbishment six original church chairs were found under the old stage. These now

take pride of place in our reception." Once the refurbishment was complete, Greatdays invited the local Methodists to come in with their old photos and memories. These have been collated into a fascinating history of the building. Today, a tour of the building reveals where the Boys Brigade used to meet, and where pantomimes were performed.

One of Greatdays staff, Julia Wardman, who works in the finance department, was baptised in the Chapel in 1964.

"The 7,000 sq ft of Chapel House has given us the room to expand," says Paul. "As we look ahead to the next 30 years, we now have a firm foundation upon which to build the company."

But there's one fact about the new building that could really put a damper on the whole project. "We were looking through the original deeds for the building," says Paul, a big grin appearing across his face.

"The deeds, which date from the end of the 19th century, state that there can be no dancing girls, no gambling, and no alcohol. We won't be able to test out one of our new packages then!"

For more information about Greatdays, go to www.greatdays.co.uk



John blows out the candles on the anniversary cake



John Beaumont – an emotional speech



Jeremy Pinnock and Joanne Julien representing Just Go Holidays



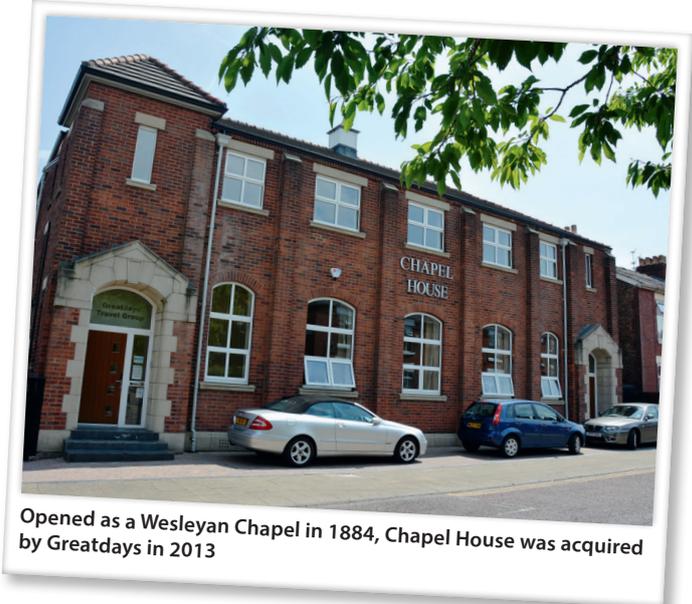
Marian Green and Jane Neenan from Elite Tickets



Master of ceremonies, Paul Beaumont, Greatdays' Executive Director, welcomed guests to the anniversary dinner



Wendy Hannam And Hayley Brigham from Redfine BDL Hotels



Opened as a Wesleyan Chapel in 1884, Chapel House was acquired by Greatdays in 2013



Six old church chairs that were found during the renovation have been refurbished and now take pride of place in the reception



The spacious interior of Chapel House