

MIKE WROBLEWSKI – MANAGING DIRECTOR  
CENTURION FINANCE (LINCOLN) LTD



It was Christmas Eve and we were just leaving the house to do some last minute shopping, when I heard a faint, plaintive cry for help coming from my neighbour's garage. Investigating the source of the calls I discovered **Mike Wroblewski**, trapped - the internal house door had locked behind him and his 4x4 in the drive prevented the garage door from being opened by more than a

few inches. "Sorry Mike can't help but it looks like pizzas for Xmas Lunch" I said solemnly. "Might just get a Margherita under the door." I was in a position to strike a tough deal with one of Lincoln's most successful businessmen!

Born in 1946, **Mike Wroblewski** is the second son of a Polish refugee who had escaped from a German PoW camp, making his way to England in 1941 to join the RAF. After training in Devon he served as an instrument fitter at Faldingworth during the final years of the war. Demobbed in 1945, he settled in Lincoln and set up home in Carholme Road with his new wife, Kathleen who he had met in Devon.

Educated at City School, he left school with "A" levels at the age of 17 to join local solicitors Nelson, Jackson and Wright. His abilities were quickly recognised and he progressed rapidly, but he became frustrated by the attitude of the partners who refused to appoint him as an Articled Clerk, an essential step that would have enabled Mike to study law and achieve his ambition of becoming a barrister. Perhaps it was his entrepreneurial spirit that was at odds with the typically class-bound and conservative attitude of an old established firm of solicitors, for in his spare time he had established a hire car business, operating from his parents' home in Carholme Road. The uphill/downhill stigma was still very much in evidence in Lincoln - he recalls that he was always called Wroblewski by his superiors, whereas other juniors, who were better connected, were politely called by their first names.

He continued to operate his part time hire business and on one occasion he had to call upon his father's car to fulfil the vast number of bookings he held. In 1967 he was head hunted by a rival firm of solicitors in Nottingham and was offered a place at the London Law College with the prospect of becoming a partner in the company when he graduated. Aged only 20, his career was beginning to take off. He was a student at law school in London but his car-hire business, now located in rented premises to the rear of the Winning Post Service Station on Carholme Road, was expanding rapidly. Attending lectures by day, evenings were often disrupted by long telephone calls from his business manager in Lincoln.

Then in 1968 an extraordinary event changed the course of his life. The leaseholder of the Winning Post Service Station, Eric Wilson aged only 33, died of a heart attack. His business partner, a wealthy local businessman, asked Mike if he would take on the lease and operate the garage for him. A tough decision to make – should he continue his studies and follow his ambition to be a criminal lawyer or follow a career in business? Mike knew that there was a large untapped need for private and commercial vehicle hire in Lincoln so the decision was made for him. Thus at the age of only 21, he chose the path of a business career.

The lease on the Winning Post was transferred to him by Fina – not without difficulties as the company normally would only grant a lease to a person over 25 - and West End Motors, operating from a 2 acre site to the rear of the service station, was born. "From that point" he said "I have never looked back"

West End Motors was an immediate success and expanded rapidly. The hire car fleet doubled and then doubled again with over 100 vehicles on the books ranging from Escorts, Cortinas and Cavaliers to the luxury cars such as the Princess and Chryslers Automatics. Commercial vehicles were added to the fleet with vans, low loaders and 4 tonners. The client list included the County Council, taxi firms and the police. To keep pace with growth he was joined by his younger brother Steve who took over the service station and the busy body shop and workshops. Within 10 years West End Motors had become the largest privately owned vehicle hire company in Lincolnshire. Mike was well on the way to making his first million.

As Mike explained, taxation at that time enabled a company to write off the cost of a vehicle within a year so it favoured expansion. Also with personal taxation at 98p in the pound there was little point in taking income from the company. The only way to make capital work for you was to diversify and invest into secure holdings such as land and property. The success of the business must be viewed against the economic and political climate of the time – a conformist attitude that distrusted entrepreneurs, particularly 21 year old whiz kids, a Bank Rate reaching 17%, massive inflation peaking at 25%, a fuel crisis, a miners strike and the 3 day week. Only a person with nerve and flair would succeed under such pressure.

Profits from the company were invested in property as a buttress against inflation. In the mid 70s he acquired a number of business properties in Lincoln and caused a stir when he purchased a block of 23 properties in Mill Road at auction for £25,750. The price of the properties purchased from the Lincolnshire and Humberside Arts, reflected the low rents – less than £100 a year – paid by the sitting tenants. The community of artists and members of the eastern stage theatre group who lived in Lincoln's "Little Chelsea" were afraid that their new landlord would modernise the properties and put up the rents which they could not afford. A spokesman for the community said that "low rents were more important than mod cons – it doesn't worry us that we don't all have a bathroom because we share" Mike as always ahead of the times, reassured residents by offering them the "right to buy" and providing mortgage facilities.

Acquisitions continued and in 1980 he purchased Walkers self-drive in Skegness. Early in 1981, he purchased the Centurion Garage at Dunholme together with 5 prime business properties in Silver St from the Guardian Royal Exchange. He caused a sensation in Lincoln when he took over the old established West's Garage in the High St for a reported £750,000. West's which held the Renault dealership, was not well placed in the centre of town and Mike controversially, transferred the agency to Dunholme and sold the property which had been in the family business for 98 years. Mike's reputation as a business tycoon was such that his car had only to be seen at a Lincoln garage and fevered speculation would spread throughout the business community. Mike had arrived and his reputation as an astute businessman established.

1981 was a very busy year and in the autumn, he sold West End Motors to SHS of Retford for a seven figure sum. Thus after a year of hectic takeovers, he began to consolidate his business interests based at the Centurion Garage at Dunholme. After 13 years of hectic activity, working 16 hour days, 7 days a week he now had time to relax. He afforded himself a few visible luxuries, a Rolls Royce and a Porsche graced the drive of his house in Burton which he had purchased in 1977. But by 1984 he was getting bored. He missed the challenge and the excitement at the cutting edge of business and with the conservative government under Margaret Thatcher favouring the entrepreneurial spirit, he established Centurion Finance.

The new company provided private finance for businesses in Lincoln looking to expand. Loans were more competitive than those offered by banks but Mike could be choosy with his customers to minimise risk. As Mike explained "You may have a brilliant product but you have to understand money to make it a success". The company now had a strong cash flow and backed by a useful property portfolio, it could make further acquisitions in the property market. In 1986 the company purchased Aquis House in Silver St and over the next 10 years, Mike built up a blue chip portfolio of properties across the country from Scotland to the South West of England. His standards are exacting before purchasing; a blue chip tenant with a long lease ensures the security of the investment. Recent acquisitions include the Parcelforce depot off Whisby road and a 13000sq ft building for the Post Office on an acre of land in Spalding, this together with other property representing an investment of over £5m.

In 2003, after 45 years in the motor trade, Mike finally changed gear and sold the Centurion Garage to the Whitehouse Motor Company and moved his offices to a brand new development at the Point in Lincoln. Conveniently his accountants, Nicholsons, have moved their offices to the adjoining block.

We paused in our interview at his new spacious offices for a cup of coffee and talked on a more personal level. "You have been very successful in business but have you any regrets?" I asked. "My biggest regret is that I have never married and had children" he said. "I had a long standing relationship which broke up a few years ago but I have yet to meet the right person". "The problem is that I am a workaholic – my work is my hobby and I suppose I have been neglectful of personal relationships" he added. "Who has been the greatest influence in your life?" I asked. "I think my uncle who owned a garage in Devon, created my interest in motoring" he said "I used to drive an old 1936 Morris of his when I was 12" Despite his reputation as a property tycoon, Mike is the reverse of the cigar smoking, flashy stereotype. Yes, he has a Ferrari and a Porsche in his copious garage, but relaxation is a walk in the fields in jeans and sweater with his faithful Jack Russell, Dorris.

But what of the future? Aged 59, Mike remains the sole shareholder of a company whose property portfolio is now valued in the £10s of millions - last year the gross profit of Centurion Finance was £350,000. But as Mike is at pains to point out, there is a big difference between gross and net worth. No company can stand still so it is possible the next step will be to float the Company on the stock market - there would certainly be a strong local interest in the shares. And he has had many approaches from venture capitalists.

It would also give him more time to enjoy life in retirement. He plans to buy a property in Portugal and he has just imported a Ford Mustang from the USA which he will drive on the continent. However, Mike is very much "hands-on" and it is difficult to see him answering to shareholders and a board of directors. Maybe I should have struck a harder bargain when I released him from his garage!

