

Business Weekly

THE BIG INTERVIEW: We speak to the founding director of long-running Darley Abbey firm Armsons

Picture: Geoff Girvan-Merryweather

'Historical school site has been our lovely home for 40 years'



Michael Armson outside St Matthew's House, where Armsons has been based since 1976.

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families that moved to Darley Abbey during the Industrial Revolution.

It remained the village's school until 1976 when a replacement was built nearby, enabling Armsons – set up by Derby surveyor Michael Armson – to move in.

"It's been our office ever since," said Mr Armson, now 70.

"The practice started in 1972 and we had offices in Derby for the first four or five years. We were outgrowing those when the opportunity to buy this building came up.

"It was a fairly good bargain and was in a reasonable condition. But we did spend a lot of money to alter

the inside of the building. We couldn't alter it externally as it's a grade-two listed building.

"It's very pleasant here. It's a lovely building in that it's very spacious and has high ceilings. Darley Abbey is a nice working environment anyway. It's like being in a village, yet we're only five minutes from Derby city centre."

Today, Mr Armson is one of three partners at the firm, which has a team of ten people and turns over about £750,000 a year.

Its range of services has expanded over the years and now includes project management, construction cost management and quantity surveying.

Over the years, Armsons has been involved in thousands of projects.

Mr Armson said: "A lot of the projects have been in and around Derby, as well as further afield. We've worked extensively with Derby College and were quantity surveyors and project manager for when the Roundhouse was restored. That was a huge project.

"We were also involved in the Joseph Wright Sixth-Form centre and have worked with local schools such as St Benedict, Repton, Foremark, Woodlands and Derby Grammar.

"We've worked with Derby City Council on Friar Gate Studios and are currently doing a big refurbishment of the buildings at Markeaton Park.

"Other projects include Derby Register Office and a lot of commercial buildings in Pride Park, of course.

"There's also Derbyshire County Cricket Club, which has just finished the first phase of a development project that we were involved in and we're now working on the second phase.

"We've also done supermarkets, theatres, hotels, sport facilities, healthcare and religious buildings.

"One of the major projects in recent years was rebuilding a Victorian church in Birmingham. It's not often you get to do that."

The company has also been involved in projects at Darley Abbey Mills, which have undergone restoration projects in recent years.

"We were quantity surveyors and project manager when the stables were renovated," Mr Armson said.

"It's really good to see these buildings brought back into use as they were derelict since the mid-

1950s. It was a very worthwhile project to get involved in, especially as they're only a few minutes walk from here.

"The area's now a thriving business hub. There's a business spirit and I think it's growing. It's an impressive place to be.

"We had visitors from London and we took them for a meal at Darleys. They were very impressed at being able to sit out by the weir."

Despite his clear fondness for Darley Abbey, Mr Armson admitted he had considered moving the firm to be more visible in the heart of Derby.

"We have occasionally been tempted to move to modern offices as there is quite a bit of maintenance involved with this building," he said.

"But we're comfortable here and it's a pleasant, nostalgic environment with the park close by.

"It may happen in the future. If we did move, we would make sure something else happens here to preserve it.

"A visitor centre, perhaps. We should probably shout more about the Derwent Valley site."

CV: MICHAEL ARMSON

MICHAEL Armson was born in Derby in September 1944 and educated at Derby School, which ran for eight centuries prior to its closure in 1989.

He left school at 17 and joined Derby architects TH Thorpe & Partners, based at 41 Friar Gate, which is now the Pickford's House museum.

In 1967, at the age of 23, he went to work for a firm of surveyors called Povall Flood & Wilson, which led him to working in Manchester and Leicester.

Two years into his stint at the company, he left in order to return to Derby and he rejoined TH Thorpe & Partners.

In 1972, he left the firm a second time, this time to set up his own quantity surveying company, Armsons.

The business started in Derby and moved to its current building, the former St Matthew's School, in Darley Abbey, in 1976.

Today, Michael is one of three directors at the company following the appointments of Stephen Fernie and Ian Cooper in 1997 and 2004 respectively.

Michael has a son who lives next door to Armsons, in Brick Row, and a young grandson, who winds the firm's clocks once a week.

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