

Monarch's choice

OT's Emily McCormick speaks to DO Roger Pope (pictured) about his journey into optics

IT WAS an advert in a local paper which sent this composed independent down the optical pathway.

Roger Pope was five years out of school with a number of O-Levels under his belt when he applied for a trainee dispensing optician position with AE Newbold in Bromley, Kent.

Successful in his application, Mr Pope went on to train and work at the practice for three years prior to qualifying. "I did it the hard way," the smartly dressed independent says with a smile. "I worked full-time at the practice as well as day release. Then, due to your practical experience, you were qualified."

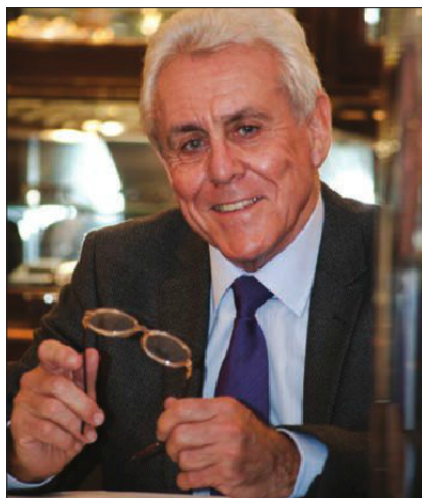
Discussing his previous employers is like listening to a 'who's who' list of optics, with past colleagues including ex-ABDO president Bill Macdonald and current FMO chief executive Malcolm Polley.

Not one to stand still, Mr Pope progressed quickly through the ranks, spending time at practices in the West End's Sloane Square and Wigmore Street, before being promoted to showroom manager at Hamblin's at the age of 29. Stepping across into the business side of optics, he became a manager and then area manager at Keeler, before opening Roger Pope & Partners in 1987.

During Mr Pope's time in Wigmore Street he became familiar with more complex dispensing prescriptions from Harley Street. It would be a further 11 years after his promotion at Hamblin's that Mr Pope branched into ownership.

Changing faces

Opting to open a practice in central London, behind one of the city's busiest shopping streets – Oxford Circus – might not seem like an obvious choice for many independents, yet there was method in the selection and Mr Pope has run a successful niche practice in



New Cavendish Street for two and a half decades.

Mr Pope was 40 when the idea of branching out alone was 'put to him'. He explains: "I'm not very good at corporate and I felt Harley Street was a unique area where you needed special skills.

"Speaking to consultants at the time, they were getting worried that there were fewer dispensing opticians in the area to cater for their requirements."

Not one to sit back and watch, Mr Pope took action: "I asked if they felt there would be some merit in me starting up my own practice and they said they were keen.

They wanted that personal touch because they were seeing old companies that they had had relationships with changing and being bought out."

Nowadays, while the practice still deals with referrals from Harley Street ophthalmologists, its customer base reflects a balance between those referrals and wealthy clientele from across the UK, and the globe, who visit the opticians after hearing about its high standard of customer service and high-end, individual frame offerings.

"It's hard to analyse the practice's patient base," the owner of the solely private patient practice says: "Referrals could be



regular customers now and they would be part of our reminder system." Taking an educated guess, he adds: "When we first started, it was probably around 50/50 in terms of referrals and other customers, now it's maybe 70/30 as people come back to us."

The practice

The unique two-storey practice, which has a dedicated children's area and an on-site laboratory, is fitted with Edwardian display units previously owned by a local medical instrument manufacturer.

The team comprises of five full-time DOs, which Mr Pope says "could be seen as something of a luxury," with a further two receptionists, a practice manager, two optical technicians and an optometrist completing the team.

Opticians to The Queen

Unable to not enquire about the DO's appointment as 'optician to the Queen', Mr Pope remarks: "I think our name came up through a consultant we had worked with and then a mystery shop was carried out." Having supplied the Queen with spectacles for more than 12 years to date, making visits to Buckingham Palace when called, Mr Pope was issued with a Royal Warrant in 2006 – with the award renewed two years ago.

Commenting on the honour further, Mr Pope puts it simply: "I think it shows that you have reached a level of excellence that is recognised."

Part 2 in the next edition of OT