

SMALL BUSINESS FOCUS

After trying a few jobs, the tide turned when I learned to dive

Each week we ask businesses key questions. Here, we speak to Douglas Leask, MD of international marine contractor Leask Marine in Kirkwall

How and why did you start in business?

I was born in Kirkwall and raised on the outskirts of the town, very close to the shore, where I spent as much of my time as possible. The sea really got into my blood. School was Kirkwall Grammar, but I did not enjoy it and escaped as soon as I could just before my 16th birthday.

I went to work on a family farm and was paid the usual family wage.

Following that, I went to work in the Orkney cheese factory, which paid better but it was not for me. I was like a caged animal there.

I decided to learn to dive as one of my friends was making a good living diving for scallops and it looked right up my street.

I learned to dive in 1983, packed my job in and became a scallop diver. Two years later, I successfully applied for a grant from the old Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) and went to the dive



SEA STORIES: Douglas Leask, managing director of Leask Marine, in front of the MV C-Odyssey at Kirkwall Harbour

school in Fort William to become a fully qualified commercial diver – a great step forward.

On returning to Orkney, I set up a diving business with two friends and started working on the new harbours then being built by Orkney Islands Council. I also gained my vessel master's certificate.

How did you get to where you are today?

For the first 18 years, most of my time was spent working on the harbour projects, though

we also provided diving holidays in Scapa Flow and elsewhere in Orkney and Shetland.

In 2003, the renewables industry started up in Orkney. I believe in making the most of every opportunity, and the European Marine Energy Centre's new wave and tidal power sites proved to be a major opportunity. We built up a fleet of small and medium-sized workboats and numerous commercial diving teams to satisfy growing demand and, in 1998, I

registered the business as Leask Marine.

Today, it is a world leader in wave and tidal marine technology and a major supply chain service provider. We started as "three men in a boat" and now have more than 40 men and six vessels of various sizes.

Who helped you?

The HIDB grant helped me get my first foot on the ladder to success and the Royal Bank of Scotland has been a huge support to us. Highland and Islands Enterprise was also a huge help in 2011 when we built our first new ship, the MV C-Odyssey.

A business like Leask Marine can be complicated at times and membership of the Federation of Small Businesses gives us access to help and advice whenever we need it.

Last, but certainly not least, my wife, Karen, and three daughters have supported me hugely over some very challenging times.

What has been your biggest mistake?

Buying a Spanish ship

in 2015. The details don't matter – but never again.

What is your greatest achievement?

Building our 26m (85ft) Multicat to my design in 2011. It has proved to be of great help to wave and tidal developers as the industry has grown, and it has worked

"We started as three men in a boat and now have more than 40 men and six vessels"

all over the UK and as far afield as the Baltic. Not bad for a boy who left school before his 16th birthday.

If you were in power in government, what would you change?

I would do what the oil and gas industry has done and thin out the dead wood in parliament. There are far too many MPs.

What do you still hope to achieve?

Continue to grow the

company. We now have an office in Pembroke and want to use our experience and knowledge there.

What do you do to relax?

Until late 2016 I had only ever read two books in my life. I have now taken up reading as a hobby and read eight books in the past 12 months – all fiction, nothing heavy. **What are you currently reading, listening to or glued to on the TV?**

I'm currently reading *The Watcher* by Brian Freeman.

What do you waste your money on?

My three daughters – but it's a real pleasure to invest in the future.

How would your friends describe you?

As a hard-working family man, I hope.

What would your enemies say about you?

I don't think I have any but I guess it wouldn't be fit to print if I did.

What do you drive and dream of driving?

I currently drive a Discovery Sport and have no dream vehicle really, unless it floats.



The Leask Marine-owned vessel the C-Odyssey returning to Kirkwall Harbour