

Success is no accident for GMG Contractors

Every day's a school day for Glasgow firm which has been at the forefront of training apprentices for 30 years

A Glasgow contracting firm that has put youth at the forefront of its business model for a quarter of a century is celebrating 30 years in construction this year, and is marking this important milestone with the opening of a new purpose-built training academy in Glasgow's east end.

GMG Contractors started life as a slating and plastering firm and has evolved into a multi-discipline main contractor, providing a wide variety of services to select clients. Some of the firm's specialist sub-divisions include roofing, screeding, Solar PV, external rendering and internal and external refurbishment.

Today, the company employs circa 140 people and has an ever-increasing turnover, which continued to rise even throughout the recession. The firm has built up a unique reputation for reliability and excellence. GMG has long been at the forefront of innovation in providing construction skills for the future, providing new models of apprenticeship training and working in close partnership with the education sector.

Through an on-going partnership with South Lanarkshire College, GMG have led a successful Modern Apprenticeship roof tiling SVQ Level 2 pilot in conjunction with SLC. This partnership involves the two organisations working together to ensure that roof tilers across Scotland receive the opportunity to gain professional qualifications that are directly related to their occupation in ways that meet



GMG founder and CEO, Gerry McGinn (centre), with some of the firm's 39 apprentices.

the particular needs of construction firms and the industry as a whole.

One crucial advantage of this approach is that apprentices spend just 10 weeks at college in their first year - rather than the usual 22 weeks - and then 10 weeks being externally validated on site using college validators, so ensuring the quality of their training and learning. They attend college during the harsh winter months which, given the Scottish climate, aligns with times that it is difficult to operate outdoors. This has a huge

impact on the ability of companies to support apprenticeships by dramatically reducing downtime by over 50% - which GMG see as a "game-changer" for the industry.

Having an on-site training academy marks a significant new development of this innovative approach in allowing GMG to complement college training by providing work-based training, validated by internal verifiers, that is more closely aligned to company and industry work schedules. This complementary approach was delivered through the constructive partnership with SLC, with both parties seeing the potential in changing the way Modern Apprenticeships in construction are delivered. GMG put eight apprentices on the pilot course in 2015 and all eight are now moving forward onto SVQ Level 3, while 16 GMG apprentices started SVQ Level 2 this year.

This partnership provides benefits for both the college and the company, as well as the apprentices: as James Martin, Associate Principal (Construction) of South Lanarkshire College commented, "Our College envisage this college/ construction company apprenticeship partnership as an in-

novative and vital way forward for the industry to bridge the skills gap. We were excited by the concept and it has proved to be not only a short term success but also a clear defined route for increasing apprenticeship numbers within all colleges."

You only have to spend ten minutes in the presence of GMG Group founder and CEO, Gerry McGinn, and other senior management members,

to realise this is no ordinary construction company. At 16, Gerry started a slater and plastering apprenticeship in Glasgow's east end. By the age of 23, he'd started his own business. That experience meant that the great potential of young people was not lost on him.

In total, around 21% of GMG's workforce over the past decade has been made up of apprentices, and the company has a current average operative age of 23. GMG prides itself in providing opportunities for young people from across Scotland, some of whom come from difficult backgrounds or left school with few qualifications. The most important aspect the company looks for in a potential recruit is a strong work ethic, more so than formal qualifications.



Annabel Ewing (Scottish Government minister), Peter Russian (Chief Executive, Investors in People Scotland) presenting two GMG apprentices with Investors in Young People Gold Award.



Apprentices being trained on roof solar PV installation at the current GMG training rig.

A hugely successful apprenticeship programme highlights the firm's commitment to young people. Currently 39 apprentices are involved in the scheme and every employee - including apprentices - is paid the Living Wage as a minimum. The firm's recruitment policy carefully combines young workers eager to learn with experienced tradespeople who can pass on their skills and good habits.

An impressive 96% of apprentices taken on by GMG have become tradespeople and 85% of those who leave the firm return to work with them. The retention rate of apprentices is phenomenal, with GMG stressing the reason they want to stay is because they feel part of the company and feel well treated by the business.

The company provides apprentices with a full set of tools and a £500 interest free loan - written off after three years service - to enable them to take driving lessons. Not only do they receive all the relevant PPE on starting, they also receive GMG hoodies, sweatshirts, T-shirts in the summer and body armour in the winter. This is all worn as a badge of honour, something the management is proud of. Gerry explained, "We're proud of the fact that, whatever challenges they face, they're coming to work in the morning, starting early, going home safe - living regular lives. They're learning a trade and so will be able to earn and pay their way all their lives. And if they show ambition, and want to develop further, we'll back them 100%".

As a business, GMG is equipped to carry out both new build and refurbishment projects. The company has developed private builder, local au-

thority, MOD, railway and housing association frameworks. One high-profile job was the external refurbishment upgrading of the Grade A-Listed Wemyss Bay Railway Station. A recent example of what GMG delivers is the £1.3 million refurbishment of 24 flats in Cumbernauld for Sanctuary Housing Group, which has shown clearly the synergy between high quality work and the presence of young people. As Peter Martin, Sanctuary Group Development Director, comments, "GMG are an SME who have worked for our company for a long number of years. The quality of work they produce is always to the highest standard and they excel in completing work on time and on budget. The most impressive part of what they do is the number of trainees and apprentices they employ and their willingness to create more

opportunities for young people when you employ them. I would highly recommend this firm both for their work and their commitment to investing in the young people who will be the future of our industry."

GMG is also a MCS-approved Solar PV installer. Last year the firm started the first Scottish-based housing association/private developer joint venture integrated roof solar PV installation. The company takes its environmental responsibilities seriously and actively works with utility bodies and advises on ECO2 and HEEPS incentives. GMG's service offering extends to arranging energy performance certificates.

Over the years, GMG has continued to develop and add to its range of services. It is now in a position to take on even higher value contracts and

works with many of the UK's leading housebuilders and construction firms. Over 90% of the firm's work is repeat business. Central to GMG's success is an innovative approach to their internal organisation, utilising a real-time database system that tracks site statuses, works in progress, stock levels, labour allocation and build forecasts. All of the company's site supervisors have been allocated with smart phones and iPads to improve communications.

GMG maintains an internal level of stock holding which, in conjunction with its own transport, gives the business greater flexibility. This combination of reliance on technology and on quality apprenticeships is at the core of the firm's business model. Health and Safety is at the forefront of everything at GMG, highlighted by the fact that the company has won eight consecutive RoSPA Gold medal awards and employs its own professional health and safety adviser. The business was highly commended for its bespoke health and safety system by the Independent European Certification auditors.

While operating across Scotland and the north of England, GMG also has a strong commitment to its local community and to giving something back. The business is passionate about the local community and believes strongly in helping people fulfil their potential and providing steady employment in an area that is often in the headlines for the wrong reasons. GMG sponsors local hospices, youth projects and sports teams, including Caltan Athletic, a football team initial-



The award-winning Wemyss Bay Railway Station refurb.



GMG refurbished 24 flats in Cumbernauld for Sanctuary. The photograph below shows what the flats looked like beforehand.



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ly set up to help recovering drug and alcohol addicts by providing a positive focus. A claim to fame is that the firm's logo appeared in the first Train-spotting movie as Calton Athletic – complete with GMG-sponsored strips - featured in one of the film's first scenes. Some of GMG's employees are former Calton players.

There is little doubt that GMG is leading from the front when it comes to the issue of addressing skills shortages in the Scottish construction sector. The firm had the foresight to predict industry trends and challenges and, even at the height of the global financial crisis, continued to recruit apprentices and invest in the future.

The training academy builds on the success of GMG's existing apprenticeship and training schemes. Two of the firm's current supervisors came through the GMG apprentice programme while the youngest college roof tiling lecturer in Scotland, Gary Reilly, aged just 27, came through the firm's apprenticeship programme and now teaches at Glasgow West College.

The decision to develop a bespoke skills academy is a major commitment by the firm – and one it expects to pay dividends over the long term. The on-site facility will allow GMG to co-ordinate regulated, job specific training and provide its young workforce with bespoke training packages. GMG plans to develop further SVQ L3, L2 and L1 courses with local schools and colleges. Both accredited in-house and external trainers support staff in their continuous development, creating the best of both worlds for skills formation and development. The firm believes that by teaching its own operatives, they can be selective over what areas to concentrate on and each apprentice will have a CPD (Continual Professional Development) programme tailored to their own abilities. The training academy will speed up skills development, bringing apprentices on more quickly.

There will also be immediate business benefits of having an on-site training academy, which will allow GMG to provide further tuition to staff on days when the weather results in work being postponed. As college lecturers visit apprentices on-site for



GMG apprentice Jon Laidlaw with cabinet minister Roseanna Cunningham.

the validation stage, the company maximises the productive time of apprentices while maintaining the quality of their training.

The growth and sustainability of the business has a lot to do with the success of its training programmes. As far as GMG is concerned, every day is a school day. Partnership is crucial to GMG's objectives in skills formation, including working closely with organisations such as CITB, NFRC and Skills Development Scotland. GMG has worked closely with CSkills and Skills Development Scotland to help deliver the best possible training approach to provide the next generation of Scottish construction workers with the talents required to help the sector thrive. This will not only benefit GMG's business but the industry as a whole.

Given the challenge of actual and predicted skills shortages in the construction sector, the opening of the new training academy is timely. Through its membership of several associations, including NFRC, SBATC, FIS, MCS, PAS 2030, Constructionline and CHAS, GMG hopes to use its experience and insights to influence the industry positively in its approach to skills and to youth. GMG's approach and experience shows the potential to align apprentice, business and sector benefits, and the company

erational realities. Significantly, the training centre can, over time, provide support to other local businesses and tradespeople to train apprentices and update trade skills, enhancing skills formation for the industry as a whole".

The company also hopes to influence government support for the future skills needs of the sector and the career needs of young people, arguing that investing in young people and their skills is not just good for business, but also good for the economy. Research from the Centre for Economics and Business has highlighted that for every £1 spent on apprenticeships, the national economy gains £21. The future success of the construction sector, and its economic impact, depends on supportive policy and investment, and on the willingness of businesses to provide high quality apprenticeships to take the sector into the future. Appreciating what young people have to offer is at the heart of GMG. Gerry said,

"There are a lot of advantages to having youth in your business. You get that craic back, all that banter. And they're workers. They want to earn a living like everyone else. When someone says boys don't want to work, it's like a red rag to a bull to me. That's nonsense. What they need is an opportunity. When they get that chance – to be taught a trade - they grab it with both hands."

GMG's approach also generates benefits for the sector. As Professor Patricia Findlay, who leads the University of Strathclyde's Innovating Works initiative, notes: "Having a bespoke training centre with on-site staff will allow the company to deliver skills accreditation to their apprentices, in conjunction with local colleges, in ways that align with op-

hope that their experience helps other businesses in the sector in choosing to offer quality career opportunities to school leavers.

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people, including Business Insider's Youth Investment awards in 2014 and 2016, and in GMG becoming the first Scottish construction company to be awarded IYYP (Investors In Young People) in 2015, followed in 2016 by an IYYP Gold award for Training. Little wonder then that the firm has earned praise from leading politicians and academics for the role it has played in helping young people from every walk of life, including disadvantaged backgrounds, sustain secure employment. As GMG step into this important

new phase of its development, its approach will be anchored in the elements that have ensured the company's success and growth to date: simultaneously investing in young people, investing in the safety of all staff and stakeholders, working in partnership within and beyond the construction sector and continuing to think creatively about how to enhance the lives of their staff, the success of the business, the development of the construction sector and the benefits that this can bring to society.

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