

**THE BRITISH TOY & HOBBY ASSOCIATION
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT
AWARD 2016**

BRITISH TOY AND HOBBY ASSOCIATION
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD PRESENTATION

29TH JUNE 2016 AT GREAT FOSTERS HOTEL

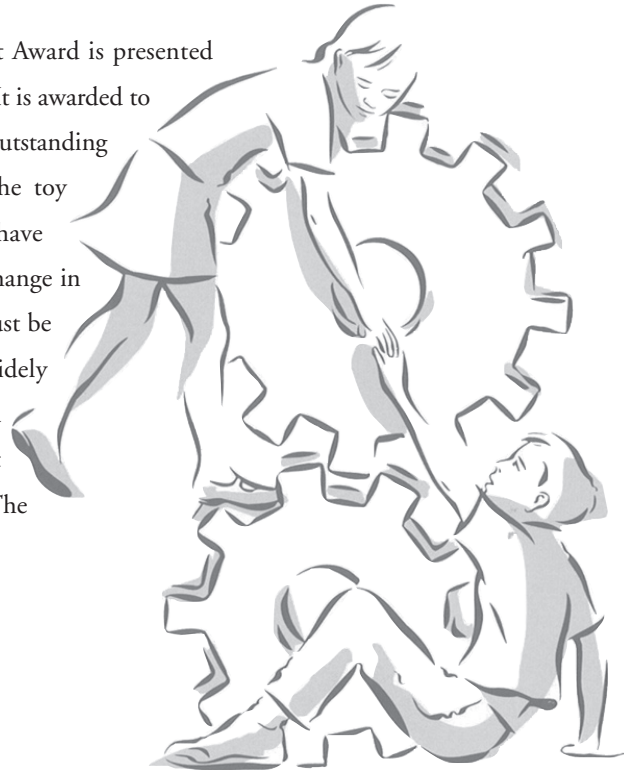
The BTHA Lifetime Achievement Award is presented only in exceptional circumstances. It is awarded to individuals who have made a truly outstanding and significant contribution to the toy industry. Recipients must have facilitated positive and sustained change in the toy industry as a whole and must be inspirational achievers who are widely acknowledged to have made a fundamental and beneficial impact on the sector over the long term. The presentation is being made to;

Richard King

Joe Kissane

Kiran Shah

Jon Diver



RICHARD KING

Richard was born in the East End of London in 1945, at the end of World War 2, and considers himself to be a true cockney. His first recollections are of playing on the street in Bow where every third house was bombed out and covered in rubble.



Richard's grandfather drove a horse drawn fire engine and also had a stall in Christie Street Market where, as a small child, Richard got his first taste of trading. His father Louis was a highly intelligent individual, who could debate virtually anything with the experts in their field, but who was unfortunately forced to leave medical university in order to support his family; he too had market stalls, his in Roman Road market. By the time Richard was about 13 his father had moved onto a wholesale business and opened a gaming club and a bookmaking office. Richard took over the market stand and his dad used to drive him there on Saturday, helped him unload the goods and then picked him up at the end of the day. He was without doubt the youngest stall holder in the market!

Richard left school at 15, after taking his O' Levels but not expecting good results, for a job in the sales department at a North Sea engineering group in the City. However, after just three months he decided to quit for two reasons; firstly, he was not earning in a week what he had been earning in the market in a day and secondly he had surprisingly passed 7 of the 8 GCEs he had taken – failing the only one, German, that he had expected to pass and which he went on to master sufficiently well enough to conduct business entirely in that language as well as French – a great benefit over the next few years at international trade shows.

He decided to go to Watford College of Technology to gain a diploma followed by an HND at Manchester College of Commerce, both in Business. He paid his

way during these formative years with many part time jobs, from selling ice-cream from a Walls trolley, to being a sou chef to Sir Winston Churchill's ex chef at a 4 Star restaurant. When he finished college he took a job with a cousin who was expanding his business and needed some help in what was commonly known as the "Swag Trade", trading close outs, excess and liquidated stocks. A trade considered a necessary evil by the toy industry, but not much loved!

They were trying to develop a regular business and Richard's cousin, Laurie King, built relationships with plastic and hardware companies. Richard took the opportunity to go to the Far East in 1969 and was helped greatly on that first trip by Philip Shayer who has remained a good friend ever since. As the company developed Richard was rewarded with a 5% share of the business. They sold out to a public company, with the shares going through the roof. Luckily Richard sold enough to buy an apartment before "the inevitable collapse"!

Richard's cousin could not get on with a public company regime and left, leaving Richard to become a very young Managing Director and a main board director. However, by 1974, Richard had had enough and started up a new company, with a partner Sydney Barnet, called Fergabrook. The product range was based on the clearance business, with some importing lines, and they concentrated on building long term relationships; they regularly had Ronson Lighters, Colibri lighters, Timex watches, Foster Grant and Polaroid sunglasses, as well as many other popular houseware brands.

It was during this period that Richard became friends with David Lipman as they kept meeting in waiting rooms when on sales missions. Whilst chatting one day, David asked Richard if he would be interested in buying a third of the company he was working for, which he did, leading to Richard's first interest in the regular toy trade.

A while after, an American agent called James Langdon offered David Lipman some product lines for distribution but wanted more substance and logistics behind the business and encouraged Richard to form a new company and play a central role in the management. They called the company Rainbow Toys which was formed as part of the Fergabrook Group. Fergabrook went on to be listed in the USM section of The London Stock Exchange in 1985.

JOE KISSANE

Joseph John Patrick Kissane was born in Inverness in 1952. Joe's mother was from Scotland and his father was from Kerry in Ireland. When Joe was 4 years old the family, including his elder sister Margaret made the move to live in England. After moving to England the family had two other daughters Geraldine and Mary. Geraldine the youngest of the family sadly passed away in 2014.



Unfortunately, at an early age and after a tragic road accident, Joe's father passed away. The family were devastated leaving his mother to bring up Joe and his three sisters on her own. It was his mother's strength, hard-work, commitment and determination which kept the family together during this tough period. At this time to help his mother Joe took on many weekend jobs during his school boy years from working in a local Fish and Chip shop, helping on a milk round to eventually obtaining a longtime weekend position working with his friend in their family butchers business. It was also during these developing years and without the steady influence of his father that Joe admits he became a bit of a rebel. He also knows he should have worked harder at school.

Perhaps luckily for Joe, he did find discipline in another area of his life as he excelled at sports; representing his school at football, badminton and even chess! His sports teacher encouraged him to use his energy in a positive way. He was involved in a school boxing club which Joe joined; going on to win numerous local

school amateur boxing tournaments. After leaving school Joe continued his boxing training but also developed an interest in martial arts.



He joined a local karate club training under the Japanese instructor 8th Dan Sensei Toro Takamasoa. After only 2 years training Joe was awarded his black belt 1st Dan, and went on to compete in tournaments most weekends. One of his closest friends to this day and who continues to train and teach is Ex Karate World Champion Eugene Codrington 9th Dan. Eugene and Toro along with another Sensei 10th Dan Eddie Daniels and very close friends were all very influential in Joe's love of the sport.

Joe left school at the age of 16 to take up a retail apprenticeship joining a privately owned retail chain of jewellery stores. Even though Joe had reached the position of assistant store manager he decided after 4 years, having achieved the National Association of Goldsmiths certification (NAG) and the Federal Gemmology certification (FGA), that this was not a career he wanted to pursue.

When he left he went on to hold various positions in different companies from selling sewing machines as a self-employed sales consultant to becoming one of the youngest store managers at that time to an electrical retail chain. He then joined Nabisco UK in 1975, a large FMCG company selling major brands such as Shredded Wheat, Ritz Crackers and many other well known brands. It was a great foundation for his sales career and resulted in him joining the Lego sales team in 1978 – his first job in the toy industry!

Joe progressed well at Lego under the guidance of Peter Boyle, the Sales Manager; a hard task master and a formidable terms negotiator. Peter understood Joe's commitment to Karate and helped whenever possible so he could continue to compete. In fact, it was whilst working for Lego that Joe achieved his ambition of

being selected to represent England; competing across Europe and the USA. He achieved the grade of Black Belt 4th Dan, became British and European Champion, and was also actively involved in teaching the sport. Along with a fellow instructor Mal Hudson they set up the Midland Karate Group “Belgrave Karate Centres” which Mal continues to run today. The time had come for Joe to either concentrate on full-time karate or pursue his career. Joe’s last competitive fight was at the English Championships at the age of 37.

In 1984 when Peter Boyle was offered the Sales Director role at Tonka UK Joe decided to join him as a National Account Manager, working alongside Dennis Horton and John Coulter. A few years later Tonka merged with Kenner Parker; the new regime did not suit Joe and in 1987 he made the decision to move on to Rainbow Toys...

KIRAN SHAH

Kiran was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1954. When he was two years old, his family moved to Arusha (now in Tanzania) where his father joined a business dealing in textiles and shoes; when he was old enough Kiran spent his holidays helping his father sell Bata shoes and became interested in business and trading. Arusha is about 50 miles from Mount Kilimanjaro, and the last major town before the Ngorongoro Crater and the infamous Serengeti. It was on these trips that Kiran acquired a taste for adventure at a young age!



At the tender age of 16, after completing his education to O’ levels, he moved to London to study Economics and Law at A’ level. He remembers going to Hamleys when he first arrived and thinking “this is heaven”. Little did he know that he was going to end up in the “heavenly” industry. It was whilst studying for his A’ Levels at Harrow College that he got involved with the Students Union as treasurer. The Council provided funding at the end of each term rather than the beginning, so

he had to find a way to finance the various functions organised by the Students Union. Off he went to a local bank, explained the situation, and discovered the best product ever invented – an overdraft!



Kiran liked music from a young age and, whilst at college, got very interested in live music; even now he goes to a gig at least once a fortnight. Music festivals were a must during the student days, and he still goes to a few each year but now with decent accommodation and hot showers! His favourites are the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland and Wilderness in Oxfordshire. He is also a regular visitor to Ronnie Scotts Jazz Club.

After completing his A' levels in 1972, he chose to study Accountancy. He got a job as a trainee accountant at the National Coal Board Superannuation Fund which was one of the biggest pension funds in the country. He soon passed his first exam, and decided that he ought to work in an accountancy practice to gain varied experience. He joined a small accountancy firm in central London. Soon after he joined, in 1974, the Government introduced the three-day week. However, one of the partners in the accountancy firm came in all five days, and as Kiran was the junior, he had to come in too. Preparing bank reconciliations by candlelight was not the experience he had been expecting.

Kiran soon passed the professional accountancy exams, and qualified at the “young” age of 21. He continued to work in accountancy practice for a couple more years, but had decided to pursue a career in commerce and industry. So, in 1977 he joined the graphics company Letraset as Financial Accountant. Not long

after he had joined, Letraset acquired a toy company, J & L Randall which traded as Merit toys (later it also acquired another toy company, Thomas Salter, and brought them together within its Consumer Products Division). Kiran was asked whether he wanted to go to the newly acquired subsidiary. He had one look at Merit's showroom and decided he would rather be at a subsidiary with products than at a head office with numbers. So in 1978 he moved to Merit Toys, along with another Letraset colleague, Glen Davies, who became MD. At Merit, Kiran met Connie Conrad, a veteran toy man, who taught him a lot about the industry, which helped immensely as Merit's product range needed refreshing, and apart from his financial role, Kiran was involved in product development.

A couple of years later, Letraset announced that they wanted to divest the Consumer Products Division and all companies were for sale. Glen Davies and Kiran decided to acquire Merit via a management buy-out (MBO) in early 1981, but the buy-out was tough. Kiran had manually prepared a month by month four-year forecast on 14 column analysis sheets - computers and Excel spreadsheets had yet to be invented – in order to approach several merchant banks, but to no avail. MBOs were a relatively new concept and bankers struggled to grasp it, so Kiran had to adjust the forecasts most evenings, well into the night using a pencil and an eraser. His work paid off and eventually the buyout was arranged by Letraset agreeing to deferred consideration.

The British toy industry was rapidly changing in the 1980s – independent retailers were declining, major retailers were increasing market share, and character merchandise was beginning to grow. Kiran and his fellow directors at Merit recognised this change and decided to develop products based on TV characters.

The first licence Merit signed was Postman Pat, the second was Thomas the Tank Engine and the third was Fireman Sam. With the move to licensed merchandise Merit's turnover grew rapidly and by 1988 Torquil Norman of Bluebird Toys approached to acquire Merit and it became a subsidiary of Bluebird. Kiran left Merit at this point, and briefly became a consultant before joining Rainbow Toys...

JON DIVER

Jon James Diver was born in South London in 1964. Both Jon's parents were in the Police force, but his Mum left the force to look after their five children. Jon is the second eldest, he has one brother James, and three sisters Jane, Liz and Ruth.



Jon's Dad served for over 30 years in the Metropolitan Police Force, working his way up through the ranks until he finally made the position of Chief Superintendent. During his career he handled many high profile cases including The Spaghetti House Siege in September 1975, The Balcombe Street Siege in December 1975, and the Iranian Embassy Siege in April 1980.

Jon attended Wimbledon College before heading to Epsom College to study Civil Engineering. Whilst at college Jon pursued his love of golf and, as well as playing, he caddied at the local golf club. It was during this time, in the late 70's that he met and caddied for Richard King.

Whilst spending one of many occasions looking for Richard's golf balls they discussed Richard's business, and the launch of the 'A Team' product line. It was a conversation that led to Jon joining the toy industry whilst still at college by working in the warehouse at Rainbow Toys.

Jon emulated his father by working his way up; from his part-time warehouse job to becoming a full-time Assistant Product Manager, which eventually led to his current position of Joint Group MD of the Character Group. Today he has also become Chairman of the British Toy and Hobby Association.

Jon worked alongside the likes of Richard Highfield, David Lipman, Jim Langdon and Colin Lisle, on projects such as Dempsey and Makepeace, Street Hawk and Air Wolf and was championed throughout his career by Colin Lisle, who he says made him the toy person he is today.

THE RAINBOW YEARS...

Richard King was Chairman of Rainbow Toys and was helped by Colin Lisle - they were a formidable combination; demanding loyalty and commitment but in return they were great people to work for. Jon joined Rainbow Toys in 1982, working in the warehouse whilst still at college and then became a full time Assistant Product Manger. Joe joined Rainbow Toys in 1987 as a National Account Manager (eventually becoming their Sales Director). A year later, following the merger of Rainbow Toys and Wembley Sportsmaster, Kiran joined the finance and administration side of the business. They all hit it off right away, with similar personalities and a love of pranks; it was the start of a friendship and working partnership that has survived nearly 30 years.

Colin and Richard decided to set up a new business within the group called Toy Trade. They asked Jon and Joe to be part of the set up but neglected to tell them they were the only two employees with Jon managing marketing and Joe managing sales. It was a great opportunity, but as with all new companies it was tough. They had to open new accounts for the predominantly FOB



business and they spent a lot of time travelling to Hong Kong. That didn't mean they didn't have fun though! During one Harrogate Toy Fair, Jon and Joe finished setting up the stand and went "out to dinner", which resulted in returning to bed in the early hours. Jon was doing a major product presentation for Colin that morning and was so hungover he slept in. Colin was less than amused until Joe came up with a story telling Colin that he had been very unfair. Joe explained to Colin that Jon had been so ill in the night he had to be taken to hospital with confirmed food poisoning but had still insisted on getting out of his sick bed to not let Colin and the company down. It turned out to be a great Toy Fair and when they eventually told Colin the truth (weeks later) he thought it was hilarious.

Over the next two years the company ran into financial difficulties, and in 1990 Colin Lisle moved on to become a partner of Intertoy, alongside friend Jim Langdon. Richard, Joe, Jon and Kiran decided to break away from Wembley Rainbow with a buyout of the toy part of the business, in order to start a new venture, Toy Options Ltd.

CHARACTER FORMING...

Toy Options was formed in April of 1991 in the snooker room above Richard's garage, where they would stay for the next six years. Alongside this "London Office" they rented warehouse space in part of an old mill in Oldham – the same building that they are still in today, but is now owned. Richard was "the boss", overseeing the operation, Joe was the sales team, Jon the marketing team and Kiran looked after all admin and finance, but with each able to step in for the others when they needed to. They remember those early days in Richard's smoke filled snooker room as exciting but difficult.

It was a brave time to start a new business, just as a recession had started, and it

immediately impacted the business. Soon after they commenced in 1991 Kiran secured a banking line for the new business with BCCI, only for the bank to close soon after which left them without a credit line and a looming end to the business just as it began. As luck would have it Kiran had been at a party the previous week and had been introduced to a contact that might be able to help. Kiran and Richard met him at the weekend after BCCI closed and by Monday they had the financial support needed.

At the start Jon and Richard worked hard to secure the product lines and supplier support, whilst Joe and Kiran spent the last quarter of 1991 meeting their top customers to agree terms in order to set up the business in 1992 – there were no Christmas festivities that year as they worked through the holidays to ensure they were ready for the new year. As a small start up enterprise, with a small product range, it was no easy sell but by the end of '92 the company was turning over £5 million thanks to Micro Machines, Talking Action Figures, and a range of LCD games and learning aids.



From 1991 to 1997 the “London Office” remained in the snooker room run by “the four”. Philip Richardson, who had worked alongside Joe at Lego and Tonka and a firm friend, was the first salesman employed by Toy Options to look after Ireland. Mike Rowe joined the team as Sales manager, in time to start at the 1992 London Toy Fair, going on to become Sales Director until his retirement in 2015, and helping Joe to build the sales team in Oldham from mid 1992 onwards.

In their early years the Hong Kong office was run by an agency, Li and Fung, headed by Henry Chan. During these years they started, as they meant to go on, by building strong alliances and friendships with their key suppliers; Galoob, Toy

Island, Prime Time Toys, DSI, Cap Toys, Trendmaster and Larami (Super Soakers). Woolworths' own-label inflatables, designed in-house by Jon and the Far East team, made up a large part of the turnover. By the end of 1994, just three years into the new enterprise, they had grown the business significantly - with a growing team of people and an impressive turnover of £18 million, helped in no small way through sales of Biker Mice From Mars products.

The then fast growing business needed more working capital and following a successful end to 1994 "the Four" took the decision to float the company on the stock market. They decided to take the company to the Full List of the London Stock Exchange (subsequently Character Group transferred to AIM in 2005) and planned to raise about £3 million. It turned out to be a difficult process as it was tough to find city professionals willing to take on a small float of a relatively new company. However, the flotation was a success and enabled the Company to bolster its balance sheet to drive growth over the following years.



The increased capital was invested, in part, in product lines for the following year which included the phenomenal successes of Buzz Lightyear, which went on to win the BATR Scarlet Pimpernel Award; and the Spice Girls Dolls, which made their debut in the hands of the girl group as they stepped off Concord (along with Buzz)! These, along with Micro Machines and Stretch Armstrong, resulted in a turnover of £30 million by year end 1996.



"The Four" report life as being very good for the next few years. During 1997 and 1998 they rebranded to become Character Options Ltd, won Toy Company of the Year at the Toy Industry Awards, opened their own office in Hong Kong,

moved from the snooker room into an office in New Malden (where they are today) and won the BATR Innovative Toy of the Year for C-Watch, which also appeared in the Dream Toys list alongside their Scooter Robot.



The business was turning over £41 million by the end of 1997 but there was no intention of standing still and the decision was taken to expand the business through acquisitions. Five businesses were acquired between 1997 and 2000; Downpace, a gift company that went on to acquire Southpark and Mr Bean teddy bear licences; Prelude, a licensed toiletries company; Q-Stat, a licensed stationery company; WWL, which was involved in watches, computer accessories and digital cameras, and acquired the Polaroid license for digital cameras; and the business of Really Useful Games, a games company with its own research and development team. The vision was to acquire companies in different markets that had strong character merchandise in order to be able to represent character licences across all categories. The strategy worked and by the end of 1999 the group's turnover had grown to £99 million.

With the team growing in Oldham, Joe took the decision to permanently settle at the Oldham office becoming MD of Character Options Ltd having travelled between the two offices over the intervening years. The fast expansion brought successes as well as failures. The first of the new StarWars films was screened in May 1999. Rights for StarWars merchandise were acquired for several of the companies within the Group. Although the merchandise sold well when the film was launched, the following Christmas's sales were disappointing, not only for Character but for most licencees. This caused severe financial pressure and 2000-2002 were termed "the cloudy years". An agreement was reached with Giochi Preziosi (who were looking to expand to the UK) for them to acquire a substantial shareholding in Character. This shareholding was then subsequently acquired by

3i in 2006. When 3i decided to exit their holding in 2009, the stake was bought by Character (via a share buy-back) together with the Four Founders.

During the “cloudy years” , the Group was rationalised and the non-toy companies were either sold off or closed, whilst keeping some of the lines and properties that fitted within the toy business. This was a particularly difficult time for “the Four” and led to soul-searching decisions as the restructuring meant that redundancies had to be made, particularly in the Oldham office; not something any of them wanted to have to do. Like everything else, they did it as a team. “The Four” spent most weekends together at Richard’s house planning what action was needed, and Joe and Richard spoke to the staff about what was going to happen. It was an experience none of them would want to repeat and it taught them a very valuable lesson going forward. Since that time they have kept staffing levels very tight to manage through the good times and the bad.

Turnover took a dip to about £60 million following the rationalisation, and “the Four” took time to refocus their attentions; rebuilding turnover by concentrating efforts on toy lines. By 2003 they had started to work with WowWee Toys, which led to the phenomenal success of Robosapien (and Roboraptor) that won them TRA Toy of the Year, Hamley’s Toy of the Year and a place in the Dream Toys list two years in a row. 2004 also saw Peppa Pig added to the range - their first preschool range to be developed in-house - which also won Pre-school Range of the Year 2007. Postman Pat was added in 2008.



A research and development team had been acquired with the purchase of the business of Really Useful Games. The R&D team allowed the company to invest

in their own product lines - expanding their offering to encompass manufacturing, marketing and distribution; it was at this point in the company's history that the business became recognisable as it is known today.

The mix of innovative partnerships and in-house development contributed to them winning awards over the following years for products such as Flytech Dragon, Cup Cake Maker, Go Go and Zhu Zhu Hamsters, Fireman Sam and Mike the Knight play sets, Teksta Robotic Puppy, Chill Factor Slushy Maker, Loom Bands, Little Live Pets and Minecraft Figures. They also won Best Licensed Toys and Games Range 2006 from BBC Worldwide, the Licensing and Product Design Excellence Award 2013 from Warner Brothers, and Product of the Year 2013/14 from Argos for Teksta. As well as having recognition for their products they have been awarded many accolades over the years for their business relationships; Supplier of the Year 2012/13 from Argos, Best Serviceability Award 2014/15 from Argos, 2015 Tesco Best Customer Support Team, 2015 Asda Account Manager of the Year and TRA Supplier of the Year in 2010 and again in 2014. Their successful products meshed with their desire to be amongst the best supply partners in the business helping them to drive the company turnover up significantly over the years, taking it back to £98 million by 2005.



The in-house R&D team developed toys that would help Character Options to become a UK success story. Following the success of Peppa Pig they won the popular Doctor Who licence and started to develop the range that would prove popular both at home and overseas and would lead to numerous awards over the



next two years; TRA Toy of the Year 2006 and a Dream Toy for the Doctor Who Cyberman Mask, Boys Toy of the Year 2006 and Boys Collectable Toy 2007 for Doctor Who figures and a Dream Toy 2007 for the Doctor Who Dalek Sec Hybrid Voice Changer Mask. Her Majesty's Armed Forces joined the range in 2009. This was the first time a company had negotiated a tri-service agreement with the armed forces. It was Jon's brainchild so they felt he should be the face of the brand – literally – all be it an airbrushed version!

As the company grew it was important to “The Four” to maintain the family feel of the business. It was during the early years, with the team stepping in for each other, that their ethos developed that still holds true today, 25 years later! They believe in ensuring that there are no egos in their team; allowing forward minded people to speak for themselves without worrying about giving honest opinions; listening and supporting the team and allowing them to grow within the company.



It obviously works as 80% of Character's employees have worked for the company for between 5 and 22 years, with 61% working for them for between 10 and 22 years! “The Four” say this is one of their greatest achievements, one they are very proud to shout about! They say “we have a great team of people that work very hard, are loyal, honest, but more importantly very good at what they do. Forgive the cliché but we are like a family. We are certainly a team that works very hard, however we also actively encourage the team to play hard too!”. This is a belief they obviously take to heart themselves - one trip to Hong Kong saw Jon and Joe out on 21 consecutive nights for customer dinners which “Jon and Joe started but only Joe finished”!

They believe much of their ongoing success is down to the capable and loyal individuals that make up the strong and committed team they have around them. Some of the team from over the years deserve particular mention; Bev Cummins started as a clerk 22 years ago and is now Trading Manager; Dennis Lee, Far East Financial Director has been with the Group for 18 years; Colin “Number One” Rossiter, who has been General Sales Manager for 18 years; and David Bramford, who was also a General Sales Manager, and was promoted to Sales Director in 2015 when Mike Rowe retired, joined 16 years ago - “two of the best in the business”; Steve Tull, QA Director for 17 years; Colin Fox, Marketing Manager for 13 years; Gerry McLoughlin, Operations Director for 18 years; Alasdair Dewar, Product Development Director for 15 years; Victor Wong, Director of Engineering in the Far East for nearly 14 years; Kevin Belcher, International Sales Manager for 11 years; Mike Rowe, Sales Director for 23 years before retiring; Michael Hyde, MD of Far East Operations and Group Board Director for 11 years; Mark Dowding, who worked on the flotation in 1995 and later became external audit partner before joining as CFO 4 years ago and is now Group FD; and Jerry Healey, who joined 12 years ago and was recently promoted to the Main Board as Group Marketing Director (Jerry also worked alongside the four founders in previous companies, and in total has been a colleague for closer to 18 years).

The importance of having this strong and committed team has seen Character through the ups and downs of the business over the most recent decade of the company’s history. As the company developed into a larger scale business, turnover increased and strategy has become more brand led. Today they are trying to do more with less; more turnover – less lines! Their vision these days is to select and develop long term lines and brands that have the heritage to become evergreens, interspersed with their own in-house development, whilst still hitting the curves of big crazes– a winning combination many will be envious of!



They try to have a core of branded toys with longevity such as Scooby Doo, Peppa Pig, Postman Pat, Ben and Holly, Fireman Sam, Little Live Pets, Minecraft, Teletubbies, Teksta and Chill Factor, supported by innovative, novelty and craze products. Their relationships with their creative suppliers is as important as ever, more recently that encompasses Moose Toys, Blip Toys, Tech 4 Kids and Craze Art but spans back over the years to include Cepia, Jakks Pacific and Simba.

They put their success down to being focused, application of sound judgement, making quick decisions, thinking the same way and most importantly acting together as a team! That does not mean they necessarily agree on everything, but in true Character style if that happens they support the individual backing the idea – of course, if it isn't a winner he is not allowed to forget it for a while either! They believe their winning formula is due to maximum innovation in their own brands and of their partners, and keeping on top of their marketing and development – with perhaps a secret ingredient that helps them to help pick the winners – that, unsurprisingly, they choose to keep to themselves!

The Character team are not known just for their canny knack of picking winning products, but also their charity work and socialising – and of course their pranks, many of which are unprintable - but we found a few!

Tony Trickett was a charming and well known face in the industry, but very easy to wind up. There was no internet in the days he worked for Character, instead everything was done by fax. Anyone faxing Tony was asked to draw a black line down the middle of the paper so when he received his fax it had a black line on his copy. This went on for over a week and Tony even stripped his fax machine down to fix the issue only to find he couldn't put it back together!

A Character sales person from the Midlands, who thought he was the snappiest dresser in the company, let it be known that he had dropped his business card into

a competition to find “The best dressed man in Birmingham”. Mike Rowe went into full flow, even opening a bogus post office box so the salesman could communicate with the competition organisers (or so he thought). To win the “prize” he had to have his picture taken at a well known Birmingham landmark. The salesman sent in his picture to the “competition PO Box number” all suited and booted in a brand new suit. The following week was the regular monthly sales meeting at Character. When the sales guy turned up every other attendee was wearing a t-shirt with the competition picture of the salesman on the front, showing him outside Birmingham airport all suited up in his new business suit!

Finally, it would not be right not to mention the prank played on Joe Kissane. Character were making Doctor Who figures when Kylie Minogue made a guest appearance on the iconic BBC series. Joe was excited when he got an email from the BBC asking if Character could make a special one-off Kylie figure. Joe went into overdrive to get the prototype done over the next three months and as a reward he was asked by the BBC if he could present it to her personally at the Ritz Hotel. Joe, thinking all his birthdays had come at once, turned up at the allotted time to the room given on the instructions - only to be greeted by a small man in a bath robe! Joe hotfooted it down to the concierge to sort out the problem, only to be met by a stony silence. It was during his flustered and increasingly panicked explanation of his mission that he turned around to find his colleagues laughing at him through the hotel window – it only dawned on Joe that it was an elaborate prank when the chant of “you should be so lucky” reached him!

The company philosophy from the start was always to organise events they could share, not just with their retailer partners, but with their friends throughout the industry, even competing companies; a philosophy which was almost unheard of back in the early ‘90s. They have maintained that ethos throughout the history of the company for both their charity work and their social events.



They have all committed to charity work throughout their time in the toy industry, wanting to give something back to children and their families; even through the tough times. The main three charities they support are the Variety Club of Great Britain's Golfing Society, the Fence Club and the Toy Trust. They started organising an annual golf day in 1993 and looking back they laugh at the fact that they managed to organise such a successful golf day whilst in the struggles of starting the business with hardly any money! The two-day golf event was run for many years and was arguably the best day in the business. One or two Sunshine coaches were donated at each golf day. This tradition still goes on, even without the golf day, with more than 20 Sunshine coaches having been donated to date. None of them are shy about getting involved in charity work, but it is certainly true that if you want the Character team to raise money you just need to ensure there is some golf involved - and they will ensure members of their team arrive!



Over the years Character Options has raised a huge amount of money for charities through their own in-house initiatives; and that is in addition to their active roles within the toy industry charities. Joe has been a member of the Fence Club since 1994 and is current Charity Secretary (since 2005) and past Chairman of the Fence Club (2007). The 46 members of the Fence Club raise approximately £100k every year for children's charities in the UK and Ireland as well as delivering toys to more than 80 charities, hospices and children's homes each Christmas. This is actioned by the hardworking team at the Oldham warehouse and is all voluntary on their part. Jon has cycled to raise money for the Toy Trust and OI Lentille Trust which supports education in Kenya. He has participated for many years on the BTHA

Toy Trust Committee as well as being an active participant in the yearly sporting fundraisers (although not always on his bike, there have been rumours of train journeys being involved when lost on the Isle of Wight!). Richard and Kiran help a lot to raise the funds, but prefer to leave the physical work to Joe and Jon!



As well as supporting the industry's charity organisations, Character Options has supported the wider industry through Jon Diver's participation on the British Toy & Hobby Association (BTHA) Council; as Chairman of the Toy Fair Committee; and in 2016 he becomes the Chairman of the Association.

A little known fact is that two out of the four could have become International Film Stars. Believe it or not Richard starred alongside James Coburn, Sophia Loren and O J Simpson (at a time before "the glove fitted") in the Michael Winner directed film Firepower. Not to be outdone, Kiran's one and only blockbuster appearance was alongside John Wayne and Red Buttons in Hatari, directed by the venerable Howard Hawkes. Alas neither Richard nor Kiran managed to gravitate to speaking parts and these promising careers in the arts were very short lived. They were obviously better suited for life in the toy industry.

FAMILY LIFE...



The success of the founding four has been possible with the support of their families...Jon met Suzanne, through the industry as Suzanne was a buyer for Woolworths and Tesco for many years. They have two sons Freddie and Will who both attend schools in Gerrards Cross and are keen sportsmen just like their Dad. Jon has continued his passion



for sport, playing golf as a member of The Beaconsfield Golf Club, alongside his son Freddie. He also watches his sons play football every week. Will plays football for Wycombe, and cricket for his county, and Jon also helps to train Freddie's Sunday football team Fulmer/GX Under 13's.

Kiran married Raksha in 1978 having met her a couple of years earlier whilst she was in her final year at Oxford University. They have a daughter Mona who works with a well-known investment house in London, and like her dad, has also acquired a passion for music. The family regularly go to gigs and festivals together and travel extensively; from the Ice Hotel in northern Sweden; to guerrilla trekking in Rwanda; to cruising from California to Florida via the Panama Canal.



Richard met Marci in Hawaii in 1972. Richard was on a R&R trip, having been working in the Far East for about six weeks and Marci, a Southern American, was on vacation, when they met at a beach bar. They hit it off right away. So much so, that when Richard returned to the UK he sent Marci a return ticket to visit him in London. She never used the return portion and in 1974 they were married! Richard never did get the money back for the unused return trip!

They have one son, Jordan, who went to college in the U.S. and then joined the National Guard and served in Afghanistan. Jordan is currently recuperating from a foot operation and Richard and Marci are looking forward to him returning to his management role at SeaSpray Resort and Marina, the retirement home in the Bahamas that the family bought for Richard's retirement plan!

Joe met his wife Bev at Character Options. Bev worked for the business in various roles from sales positions to being in charge of the sales admin and credit control department.



Joe made the fatal mistake of informing the other three that he and Bev were planning a quiet wedding on their own in St Lucia. However, before they left they were inundated with presents of toasters, kettles and any other small electrical appliance that one would normally receive as a wedding present. Unfortunately, they were all second hand and in 99% of cases were ready for the tip – thanks to Jon! Colin Lisle helped plan the arrangements in St Lucia and he and his wife Christine surprised the wedding couple by turning up to help them celebrate, becoming Best Man and Maid of Honour on the big day.

Bev decided to leave the company after 22 years, when the family moved to live in Harrogate in order to spend more time with their daughters. Joe and Bev have been married for 17 years and have twin 13-year-old daughters, Hannah and Olivia, who go to Harrogate Ladies College, and enjoy netball, lacrosse and swimming. They also enjoy skiing and are keen swimmers and recently gained their qualification as Open Sea Junior Divers.

TODAY...



They each bring something different to the table, Jon's unique skill at marketing and product design is a very special talent and not something one can be taught;

Kiran's skill with finance is incredible; Richard is a great thinker and problem solver and has an ability to assess difficult situations without panicking; and Joe brings his sales and management expertise, understanding of operations, well-honed people skills along with a good dose of discipline!

These days; Richard is "head of the beach" as non executive chairman; product development and marketing sits within Jon's

team; Kiran runs the finances; and Joe oversees the sales and operations from Oldham. They have taken the business from the four of them working out of the snooker room office to a company worth over £100 million, run by a senior team of 15-20 managers and directors; from China and Hong Kong to London and Oldham. 60% of their ranges are in-house developments and 25% of their business is international and growing, with markets in Russia, Australia, the USA and another 25 countries, with successful products such as Stretch Armstrong, Easy Nails, Weebles, Teletubbies, Peppa Pig, Scooby Doo and Doctor Who. Their international philosophy is to never be reliant on any one product in any one country and they plan to take that ethos forward as they establish themselves as an expanding global business – a truly British story of success.



Joe: "I have nothing but admiration and respect for my fellow recipients. It's been a pleasure and an honour to be part of our success, but to do it alongside guys you like as friends, makes it even more special. We think the same, have the same sense of humour, same values, and more importantly we are demanding, but very competitive and determined to be winners."

Jon:" I am honoured to receive this award together with Richard, Kiran and Joe. It is rare in life to have an enduring friendship like ours based on mutual respect and I have nothing but admiration for their dedication, honesty (sometimes brutal!) and continued inspirational support. It has been nothing but a ride of true friendship with three fun pals with the same goals and ideals."



Kiran: "I met Richard, Joe and Jon in 1988, and it was like finding my "long lost brothers". We got on so well, and it was just natural for us to get together to start Character in 1991. It is the best team I have ever worked with. Before I came to London, I was told the streets of London were paved with gold. It's true. The gold I have found is Richard, Joe and Jon."

Richard: "I don't have enough words to express both the comfort and fun there has been working together over so many years. Kiran has been there through every cash flow crises, of which there were many in the early days, and has never faltered. Jon has made that wondrous journey from the very bottom to the top of his trade. Joe is our best people person by far and has managed our operations with a great deal of expertise. Thank you all for your support and friendship over the years."



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