

PROFILE

CORNERING THE MARKET

A family construction firm with nearly 200 years history shows how continual development and innovation can bring success and longevity.



DAVID JONES

Rob Withers aims to make The Withers Group one of the UK's top three subsidence solution providers, "by working harder and smarter to meet the demands of customers".

It is an attitude that has served the family run building and subsidence repair company well for four generations, since the current managing director's great grandfather John set up a building repair business using a hand cart 195 years ago.

While the traditional values of respect, fair-play and sensible pricing – coupled with a "do your best" ethos – are at the centre of all activity, the firm has carved a reputation for ambition and innovation.

When John's youngest son, Douglas, took over, he extended the services into painting and decorating and became adept at repairing war-damaged chimneys.

Next to pick up the mantle were brothers, John, Douglas and Roland. They recognised the benefits of working on a contract basis and provided general repair and maintenance services for local councils, housing associations, churches and architects.

The turning point for the business was in 1974, when building societies insisted on having subsidence as an insured peril.

The Withers brothers predicted

there would be a lack of providers in this field, so worked with surveyors and engineers, gaining knowledge in underpinning techniques. This ensured the firm was well placed to cope with the claims surge after the 1976 drought. At the peak of that event, Withers employed around 20 underpinning gangs, plus supervisors and engineers.

Rob Withers joined as a site supervisor in 1980, following siblings Richard and Anne, with a National Diploma in Building & Construction and two years' experience with a London based construction company.

Keen to use the latest techniques, Withers embraced the new "pad and beam" solution, digging holes 3m apart with high level reinforced concrete beams to connect them.

By 1985, the company had stopped general building work to concentrate on foundation and subsidence repair. As one of the few specialists, its lead-in time to start works was in excess of four months. 1986 and 1989 saw more droughts and further developments in understanding subsidence. Rob, Richard and Anne became shareholding directors in 1990.

As the market continued to mature, so did the need to innovate. Customers wanted more economical solutions and in 1992, Withers started using mini piling.

Rob Withers explains: "This solu-

tion was ideal for domestic properties as it works within restricted width, height and access areas."

In 1995, the decision was taken to split the business. Richard concentrated on the property development market, while Rob focused subsidence repair solutions, including superstructure work (such as resin bonding and reinforced brickwork repairs). Anne managed the administration, book keeping and accounts.

Up until that point, most of Withers' subsidence work had been carried out for insurers, via surveyors and engineers.

But between 1995 and 2000 there was a shift in market dynamics when insurers appointed loss adjusters and project managed networks. Suddenly the trend was for insurers to take greater control of their claims.

To survive in this newly consolidated market, Withers mirrored the tactic. The insurance market was moving towards a national procurement model, so in 2004 Withersnet was launched.

"Withersnet is a national network of repair companies and offers insurers, loss adjusters and engineers 24/7 access to a network of supplier partners, subscribing to shared service standards and values," Rob Withers says. This streamlines the handling of what are traditionally lengthy and costly claims, he adds.

First to sign up was Capita and others soon followed. In 2005, Withersnet appeared on the Department of Trade & Industry website as an example of best practice in supply chain management and was highly commended in the technology category of the British Insurance Awards.

Technical innovation also continues. A-Void is the firm's latest development. Launched in November last year, Rob Withers believes "the environmentally-friendly, low cost subsidence solution will save insurers around a third of their claims costs and dramatically reduce the amount of material left in the ground".

He explains: "In clay subsoil areas that are prone to heave, collapsible steel fabricated support 'chairs' are used to create a void in the ground, replacing traditional solutions involving ground beams and compressible cell-core polystyrene sheets.

"These removable and re-usable chairs are a major step forward. The cell-core sheets we use in a year equate to three times the height of Big Ben and twice the height of the London Eye."

Succession planning often languishes at the bottom of a firm's priority list – but as history dictates, not at Withers. With around 100 staff, the next generation is already being groomed to take over. 