

The climb to success

David and Sarah Trotter made their dreams a reality when they launched their business Squirrel Design Tree House two and a half years ago

David Trotter, founder of Squirrel Design Tree House, grew up in the Scottish Highlands, in the beautiful countryside near Inverness, where he put his practical skills to use from an early age. After a short service commission in the Army (serving in Northern Ireland and the Falklands) he trained to fly helicopters. He was then drawn into the commercial world of sales and then event organisation, working for companies in London and then Bristol. He met his wife and business partner Sarah, originally from Painswick, whilst they were both working in London. They moved to the West Country in 1994, and after a few years, decided to set up Squirrel Design Tree Houses, building bespoke tree houses and outdoor structures. They work from their home in Sopworth, where they live with their two children. He maintains his links with Scotland by performing his annual duties as an Archer – a Queen's Bodyguard for Scotland.

Tell me about your business?

Squirrel Design Tree Houses offers a complete design-through-build service, specialising in bespoke, inspirational tree houses and outdoor structures. It was set up largely in response to my disillusionment with my office-based job – high pressure for little return or satisfaction – and I had always dreamed that I would return to spending more time using my practical skills in a natural environment. With the continuing growth in the garden/leisure market, the move to more natural, outdoor play activities for children, we decided to launch the company after my previous employers suddenly went into liquidation. We have had to respond very quickly to the market – there was little time for procrastination. Sarah and I also have the perfect combination of skills: Sarah creates the illustrations that we present to the client at proposal stage and runs the office, and I work on the design consultancy and build stages. The business is at an exciting stage where our profile continues to grow ever stronger and we regularly receive excellent feedback from our existing and potential clients alike. Word of mouth is key to us. Whilst there is always room for growth, we are determined to do this organically, and maintain the personal approach that we are able to provide.

Where is it based?

At our home in Sopworth, near Westonbirt Arboretum.

How long has it been established?

I started building structures for personal contacts over four years ago, and Squirrel Design Tree Houses was officially launched two and a half years ago.

How many staff?

Sarah and I are Directors, and we sub-contract to specialist tradesmen to support me on the larger projects.

Who are your customers?

Families who want a special outdoor space, particularly for the children, to encourage the younger ones to use their imaginations and the great outdoors more, and to offer the older ones a private sanctuary of their own. There are also clients who are looking for some extra space with a difference – as an office/study/bedroom (with heating!). Our clients tend to have a good eye for the distinctive and for natural products, which differ from the standard product from a DIY store.

Turnover?

Around £100,000 a year

What is your inspiration?

Having experienced it myself, I am always inspired by the search for a better quality of life, reducing the pressures of the modern world. Everyone dreams of escaping at some point. Children are also a great source of inspiration – including our own two – and the obvious joy our structures bring them is inspirational in itself. Natural beauty can always inspire: we are often adding a different detail based on something we have spotted in the countryside.

Have any books inspired you?

Hideaways: Cabins, Huts, and Treehouse Escapes by Sonya Faure is a beautiful collection of naturally inspired structures from across the globe. Andrew Goldsworthy's various collections of stunning photographs of his outdoor sculptures – he uses only natural materials (leaves, twigs, icicles) which – unlike our structures – only last as long as nature allows! I also enjoy leafing through 'The Tree House book' by Peter and Judy Nelson – both traditional and contemporary slants on the tree house.

Your mission statement?

Nothing is impossible, whether on a project

or for us as a business. We aim to enable the client to create their own space – matching their dreams to reality – and to grow the business in such a way to maintain its integrity.

What is the key to your success?

We always listen very carefully to the clients. You cannot claim to provide a bespoke product without proving that you have focused on their requirements. We establish a partnership between our clients and us. Whilst we bring our own creative ideas to the table, this is no good if they do not fit with the brief. Our flexibility and approachability also help. Sarah and I work hard at keeping the communication good, both between us and with our customers. Reliability also counts for a lot: we do what we say we are going to do and when we say we are going to do it. It is also important to remain open to suggestions and advice. No business can survive without it.

Any influential advice – and did you act on it?

We were given very good start up advice by Business Link, which helped us focus and be in control of the business. We immediately got an accountant on board for a start!

Who is our business guru and why?

Sir Tom Farmer CBE and founder of Kwik-Fit. He says: "We're committed to delivering 100 per cent customer delight." He has built up a strong business on the basis of this. Your business is wholly customer lead, and we value the high levels of satisfaction amongst our customers and the good working relationships that we develop with them.

Greatest success?

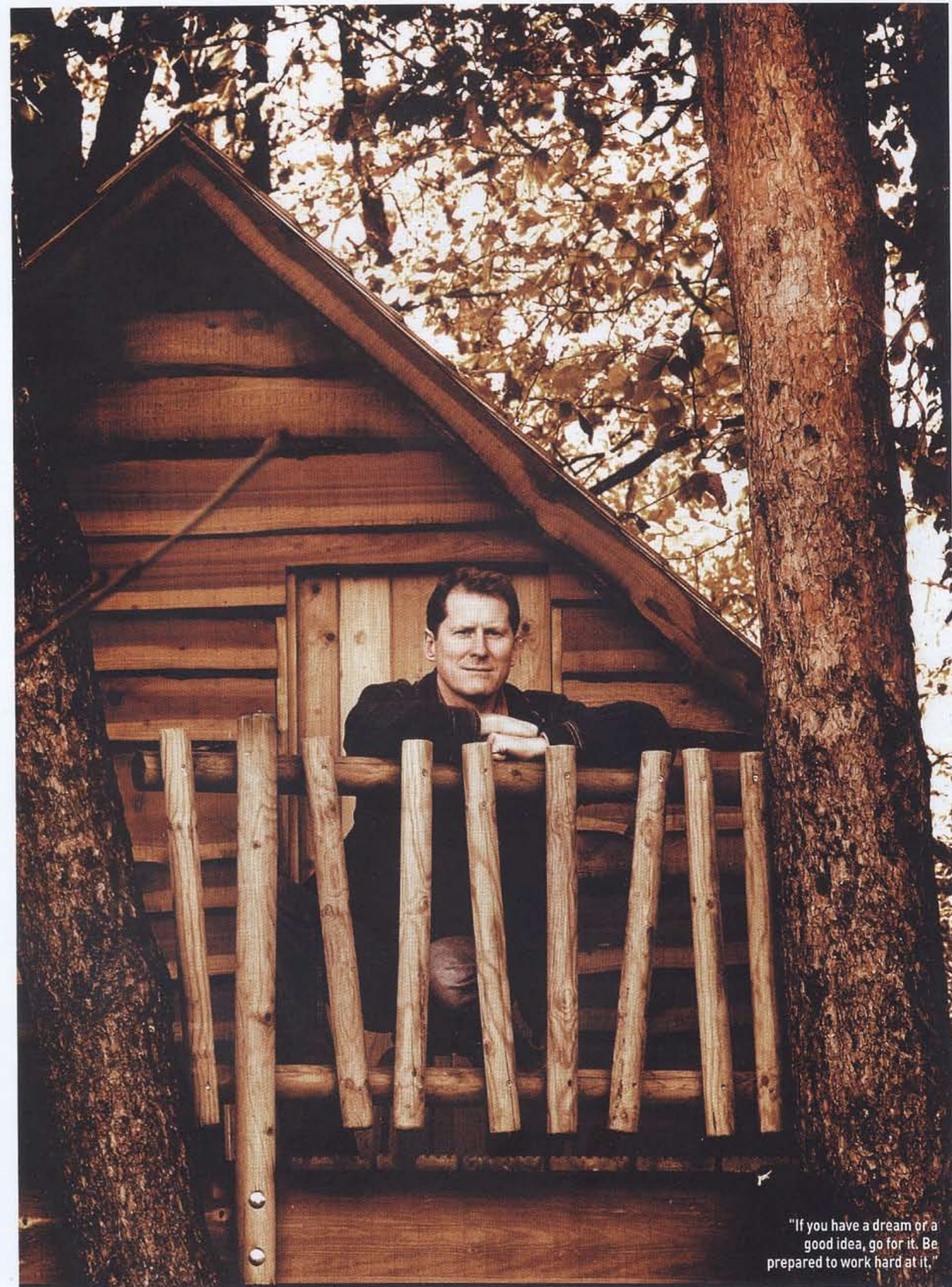
Getting the business up and running by ourselves, and the incredible improvement in quality of life and job satisfaction. For Sarah in particular, the business fits around her commitments to the family and the flexibility this creates is ideal. Discovering that we can work together to manage a professional and efficient business is a success in itself.

Squirrel Design Tree Houses

Telephone: 01454 238967 and 07947 023244

Fax: 01454 238965

Email: enquiries@squirreldesign.co.uk



"If you have a dream or a good idea, go for it. Be prepared to work hard at it."