



**GORDON MCQUILTON**  
SPECIALISED ORTHOTIC SERVICES

SECTOR: HEALTHCARE



From his garden shed, Gordon McQuilton started with £300 to create a pioneering healthcare business responsible for helping thousands of disabled people live more comfortably.

As he prepares to finally leave Specialised Orthotic Services after 36 years, he shares his remarkable journey.

### RETHINKING THE FUTURE

After leaving school at 15 with no qualifications, an apprenticeship with Rolls Royce had seemed a smart career move for Gordon McQuilton. Then one day, a new machine was loaded into place at the jet engine workshop in Derby, replacing the work of 40 men at a stroke. That's when Gordon knew it was time for a rethink on his future.

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COMPANY NAME

Specialised Orthotic Services

LOCATION

Burton-on-Trent, UK

FOUNDED

1981

BUSINESS ACTIVITY

Medical support products

ANNUAL SALES

c£7M

SOLD

January 2015

REASON FOR SALE

Retirement

ACQUIRER

Drive Medical

**bcms**

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WHEN I FINALLY  
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IT'S GOING  
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FOR ME.

“There were 600 of us in a machine workshop, and we all learned on manual machines. When they showed us what the machine could do, I thought it won’t take many of them to replace all of us, and began to rethink my future career.”

## A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

Within days an unusual job advert caught Gordon’s eye. An engineer was needed for a government-funded research project at Derby hospital into orthotics – supportive products to assist disabled people in everyday situations.

“I was shown around and there was no one else there,” says Gordon, “but I could tell from the machinery that my skills would be useful.”

The team’s first task was to research and test existing orthotics products on the market – they found hardly anything available. The project also had to find a way to assess patients for custom fittings without adding to their trauma.

Gordon says: “We were experimenting with a load of polystyrene beans in a beanbag, with a vacuum pump. Eventually, we worked it out, and this is the main method still used around the world today.”

The research completed, the Department of Health asked the team to prepare to publish the findings to encourage new commercial development, though he admits it was more a slow dawning than an epiphany.

## GRASPING THE OPPORTUNITY

Gordon recalls: “I thought the government was mad to spend all that money researching this and then give it all away, offering it for free to the commercial sector. I realised that there was a significant opportunity to begin a business providing a service for this specialised form of seating, and launched in June 1981.”

## ‘WE WERE PIONEERS’

Gordon started Specialised Orthotic Services (SOS) from his garden shed and with just £300 in the bank.

After two years, SOS moved to a 1,500 sq ft industrial unit and

began hiring staff and developing a comprehensive product range.

“It was exciting,” Gordon reflects. “We were pioneers. I started to develop other products and the focus was on innovation. I have never been money focused, and we were fortunately able to generate cash from the beginning.”

As Gordon scaled up the business, SOS emerged as the UK market leader in this niche. It was also generating cash, and as he approached his 55th birthday, Gordon began thinking for the first time of an exit.

“I thought if I’m not careful, I would still be running my own business at 70 years old, trying to sell it.”

He turned to his accountant, but the process didn’t work out and it took another five years before Gordon appointed BCMS to handle his sale, in March 2013.

He remembers: “I got the feeling that BCMS really understood how important this decision is for a sole owner. I felt that this time it was going to work.”

## THE CHALLENGES OF A SALE

But running a business at the same time as trying to sell it is one of the greatest challenges for entrepreneurs.

“It started off quite low key,” says Gordon, “but as the process goes down the track, I was meeting with all these interested parties while trying to keep everything confidential.

“You have to be really careful how you handle communications dealing with sensitive information around the sale. With emails and mobile phone technology it’s easy to inadvertently send information to the wrong location.

“There were one or two occasions when I accidentally sent a file to the office printer instead of my home one. So I had to drive to work late in the evening and retrieve the documents while there was no one else there!”

## NO LONGER IN THE DRIVE-ING SEAT

After many meetings and serious interest from four bidders, in late 2014 Gordon – aged 63 – finally agreed to sell to respiratory and mobility group Drive Medical.

“Although Drive let us get on with things, I noticed that staff were having conversations I wasn’t aware of. That was quite difficult to deal with, but I just reminded myself that I don’t own it anymore.

“You move very quickly from being the focal point within the business to just being this guy who’s going to leave soon. It’s curious seeing people reposition themselves, but you have to accept it.”

The terms of the sale meant Gordon had to stay on for three years, with deferred payments known as an earn-out linked to ongoing company performance. At the end of the second year, Drive appointed a new Managing Director, and Gordon has been working closely on the transition before he leaves.

## TIME TO LET GO

With retirement firmly on the cards, Gordon is ready to take this big step and maybe splash out a bit after being initially careful with the proceeds of the SOS sale.

“I’m an active person, and I like to fish, shoot, paint and go hill-walking. But my wife’s been very good at preparing me for retirement. For Christmas, she bought me a set of golf clubs, some lessons and membership of a local club. She’s very much of the opinion that we need to move on.

“I realised that I won’t be free until I leave work on the final day. For me that’s going to be a very significant moment in my life.”



**YOU MOVE VERY QUICKLY FROM BEING THE FOCAL POINT WITHIN THE BUSINESS TO JUST BEING THIS GUY WHO’S GOING TO LEAVE SOON**

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