



Talking
to...
**DEREK
BELL**

Derek Bell, GPS Colour Graphics, was recognised for his contribution to the industry at the 2017 Irish Print Awards. The Lifetime Achievement recipient tells Irish Printer how it all began

How did you get involved in the industry?

I left school at 15 and my father got me a job as a cutter and line ruler in the Educational Company. After a year or so working there, my father secured me a job in a commercial print firm as an apprentice. I served my six years there and learned my trade.

Why the interest in the print sector specifically?

My father was a printer and his father was a compositor so you could say it was in the blood. I had been in and out of William Finlay Print as a child so even at that stage, I was familiar with the trade. I learned a great deal from my father, it was just the two of us working in The Commercial Printing Company. After about two and a half years he unfortunately had a heart attack and passed away. I ended up running the department for a few weeks until they got another experienced printer which was good experience for an 18 year old. I finished my time there and moved to Finlay Packaging where I worked for a couple of years.



Derek receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award from Award's judge Freddie Snowe

Was it always your intention to start up on your own?

It was. Before I attempted to start my own company, I got some more experience in newspapers and I also went back to Finlay's for a couple of years. In 1970 I set up my own company. That particular venture was somewhat short-lived as the building was burned down during one of the bombings in Belfast. On the 1st of July 1973 I started up again on University Street with an A4 machine which gradually led to the purchase of an A3 machine. It went from there.

How did the business progress?

We moved to a larger house on the Ormeau Road and stayed there for about five years. In 1983, I acquired a company called Mayne & Boyd Ltd and so moved into that new 10,000 sq ft premises. It was so big I thought we'd never be able to fill it but we did. In 1994, we amalgamated with Nelson & Knox and once again moved to their 25,000 sq ft premises. That seemed like a huge space but we managed to fill it again! Today we're in a 125,000 sq ft premises.

How involved are you in the business today?

These days I go in to see how things are running. My son, my two daughters and my son-in-law are involved so it's still very much a family business. As I always say, the staff at GPS love me to go on holiday and hate to see me coming back!

You've seen a lot of changes in the industry over the years

I'm 74 now so yes, I've seen the industry change dramatically. As I said in my speech at the Irish Print Awards, when I started in the Educational Company, paper was delivered by horse and cart and every ream was carried off and stacked by hand. The machinery is like Star Wars now compared to what it was like years ago. As a litho printer things were a little different back then; to get an image for litho, it had to be a previous letterpress printed job. You took a photograph of it and a plate was then made for a litho machine. Nowadays the customer supplies made up pages.



Derek and the GPS team at the Irish Print Awards

Do you think those advances in technology have led to less staff being employed in the industry?

People have different skills sets now. Back when I entered the industry, it would have taken a couple of hundred people to make 100 B1 plates. Now, the same job can be done in an hour with just two people ready to take the finished plates to the press. Today, skills lie elsewhere. We currently have about 80 people in the company.

During periods of economic uncertainty, were you worried about the business?

I've always worried about the business closing down so I've always tried to do things more efficiently. I never felt the need to downscale the business and actually, during the most recent recession, I actually upscaled. The recession was good for us business-wise. We found that some of the less competitive printers closed their doors and their customers ended up coming to us. Thanks to the quality of our service, they ended up staying with us.

What do you attribute your success to?

Luck! As well as that, I have a competitive instinct. Even when I was an apprentice working at a commercial printer, I didn't wait until the normal start time to switch on the machine. I was always eager to get going as soon as possible. If I can do the job faster or more efficiently than someone else, that's what I'll do and that's what I've tried to instil in the people I have working at GPS.