



Peter Barker

My current position is managing director of a geophysical survey company called Stratascan Ltd. I employ 20 people - many of them graduates. We carry out shallow geophysical surveys all over the UK and Ireland looking for archaeology and other buried features such as fuel tanks, mine shafts and pipes and cables. We are also increasingly carrying out forensic geophysical surveys assisting the police in locating clandestine burials.

So how did I arrive at setting up a company doing such interesting work?

When I was in my early teens I spent most weekends helping my father on archaeological dig in and around south Shropshire where we lived. My stronger subjects at school were in the sciences so I ended up taking 'A' levels in maths chemistry and physics. Though I was keen to follow my father into archaeology I decided I would go into engineering which more suited my academic strengths so I studied civil engineering at college. I enrolled on a sandwich course which included working in design offices and out on site. During these periods I worked for Worcestershire County Council Highways Dept and for Slough Borough Council Engineers Section which involved me in carrying out measured survey to provide the base mapping for road improvement schemes and other minor works. I had learnt a lot of survey techniques from my father so I found the work relatively easy to pick up.

Upon leaving college I joined a firm of consulting engineers in Victoria Street in London. In the 19th and early 20th century it was important for the consultants to be close to Parliament to pick up work. Things though were changing and it wasn't long before we moved to the delights of Penge in SE London. I was soon off onto site looking for greener pastures – literally – when I was appointed assistant resident engineer on a rural sewerage and sewage disposal scheme in Surrey. It was on site that I decided I would prefer to be 'contractor' rather than a 'consultant'. As a result I joined a contracting company operating in the north west of England and north Wales. I had visions of climbing in Snowdonia every weekend but the truth was I ended up helping to build the motorway system around Manchester.

Sadly this company fell on bad times and I found myself unemployed when they went into liquidation. Though traumatic at the time, in retrospect, it was a good thing as it forced a career change. I set up my first company with a co-director who had also been made redundant as a result of the liquidation. This new company specialised in carrying out CCTV surveys of drainage pipes and quickly grew in size. It is still trading some 30 years later and currently employs over 200 staff. After three years of trading we set up another new company this time to manufacture the CCTV equipment we were using and to move into other areas of remote sensing including thermal imaging and covert surveillance.

This company developed many innovative products during the 1980's selling them through a worldwide network of agents. In addition to these agents we set up subsidiary companies in the USA and Singapore. One of our more interesting customers included NASA where we supplied a number of thermal imaging cameras deployed on the shuttle launch pad to check for hydrogen fires following the Challenger disaster in 1986.

I left the electronics company in 1990 to set up Stratascan allowing me to combine my knowledge of remote sensing and surveying to be applied into the fields of archaeology and engineering. We have carried over 1400 projects since starting with commissions in some very interesting places including The Tower of London and Hampton Court Palace.

I would advise anyone with good spatial awareness and an understanding of basic geometry and maths to consider surveying as a career. It combines working outside, travel and practical skills with computing and mapping skills and a knowledge of other disciplines such as building and civil engineering. It is demanding and exacting work but very fulfilling to see the final maps coming off the printer.

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