



*“I’ve enjoyed being part of this family and it’s been a real highlight to see how the business has progressed.”*

## On farm opinion

# A career well crafted

**What separates a job from a career? While a job pays the bills, careers are built over years, with learning and craftsmanship poured into them. As Amazone’s Simon Brown retires, CPM finds out what’s shaped his time with the firm.**

*By Melanie Jenkins*

**When thinking about the leaders of large companies, chances are for anyone on the outside they’re an unknown figure, yet many in the agricultural community will have had a very different experience with Amazone’s recently retired managing director, Simon Brown.**

A recognisable individual, many will testify that Simon makes time for anyone who wishes to speak to him, willing to share his wealth of knowledge and experience. But after an impressive 40 years with the firm, Simon has (almost) set aside his toolkit to enjoy a well-earned (part-time) retirement with his family, while keeping an oar in the water by continuing to work a day a week for Amazone.

“I’ve had a lot of different roles within the firm – there’s no aspect of the company I’ve not tried or been involved

with – and this has eventually lead to becoming managing director,” he says.

So what paved Simon’s way into a job as a field service engineer and then up to managing director of one of the best-known implement manufacturers? It was a chance encounter with the farm manager of British Steel’s local farm at a cricket dinner aged 13, which saw Simon take his first foray into agriculture. “He asked what I was doing the next morning and invited me to come milking – that’s how it all started. From then on I was hooked and spent every hour I could farming.”

### Degree switch

After enrolling to study agriculture at Harper Adams University, Simon took his pre-college year out to milk cows at a different farm, but when this didn’t quite work out as he’d hoped, it almost resulted in him looking at careers elsewhere.

“It made me realise I didn’t have sufficient interest in livestock farming and I even wondered if there was a career in agriculture as a non-farmer. Luckily Harper had launched a course in agricultural engineering and I realised this was just my cup of tea so I switched to this.”

After completing his course, Simon joined East Anglian Ford dealers, Dalgety Eastern Engineers, but shortly after saw a job for a service engineer advertised in *Farmers Weekly*. He took a punt and it turned out to be Amazone in its earliest form in the UK.

“I started in October 1982 and was part of a team of just three UK employees.

We didn’t have an office, instead working out of my boss’ garage with spare parts located on a farm in Wiltshire.”

Prior to this, Amazone’s UK presence had first been facilitated by Curtis and Padwick which imported Amazone and Claas machines, followed by Taskers of Andover which was part of the John Brown Engineering group. When Taskers looked to leave agricultural machinery, Amazone took on its UK stock in 1983 and launched Amazone Ltd.

Before that launch in Britain, Simon



*After working for Amazone for 40 years, having undertaken almost every job possible in the company, Simon Brown has retired.*

worked for part of a year in Germany, embracing the opportunity to learn the language and immersing himself in the kit Amazone produced. "I loved living in Germany and would have liked to have spent more time there, but it wasn't easy because of having a family back home."

On his return to the England, Simon looked after field service and parts while Amazone Ltd. took over a disused World War II air hangar near Hungerford called Cuckoo Copse. He then dropped the parts aspect of his role, focusing solely on service as the business grew at a fast rate.

"We grew in number and turnover dramatically during the early years and by 1990, when I'd effectively completed seven years of 'spannering', a sales opportunity arose covering Yorkshire down to the Thames."

Although this meant a move from Hungerford to Grantham, Simon took the chance and it paid off – he still lives there now. "It was a lucky move because at the time we were looking for a service depot and the firm ended up buying land just south of Doncaster in Harworth. So the move meant I ended up with a doorstep office. Latterly, after the purchase of nearby Orchard Farm, I supervised the build and commissioning of their state-of-the-art training, research and product support facility which has plenty of space for outside demonstrations."

Simon reminisces about how in those early days his 'working day' used to end – he'd return home and then have to ring everyone who'd left messages either on his answer phone or with his wife during the day. "The working day didn't stop when you arrived home, and in some



*Launched at Stoneleigh in April 1983, the ZA-U 1001 was the machine that put Amazone firmly on the map.*

ways mobile phones changed all of that."

## Night school

In 2002, Simon moved from sales back into service to become the service manager, working from the Doncaster depot. "This is when I decided to attend night school to achieve my O-Level, AS and A2 in German. Because I was dealing with the factories more, it was both useful and more respectful to converse in the native tongue of the teams I was contacting so regularly. It was invaluable to learn because I still help with the German marketing side of things now."

Around the same time, the original managing director of Amazone's British subsidiary retired and his shares in the business were bought out by Amazone, meaning the firm

then owned the branch entirely. "The UK was Amazone's first exploration into having its own business outside of Germany, and this has now become a fairly common model in the multiple countries where there are subsidiaries."

At this stage, the firm was importing Krone machinery and dabbling with Strautmann kit and Elho bale wrappers. "We wanted to be able to supply the dealer with a full line of arable, grassland and livestock equipment – and this worked to a degree, but by 2008 Krone split away and we went in our own direction, which coincided with dramatic developments in the product line-up such as the move into producing passive soil tillage kit, broadacre drills and self-propelled sprayers," explains Simon.

These developments resulted in the firm supporting both a separate service manager and product manager, so Simon took on the role of brand manager which he did solely until 2018 when he also became managing director. "The business wasn't large enough to support two individual roles, so I did both, but now these have separated."

The ethos at Amazone's heart has been one of looking after its employees and taking a personal approach to getting to know its team members and their families. "It was like this when Heinrich Dreyer first founded the firm and it's still the same now, four generations later. We're down-to-earth grafters and like people who follow that trend, meaning staff retention is good.

"I've enjoyed being part of this family and it's been a real highlight to see how the business has progressed. When I joined Amazone, it turned over



*Amazone is already pushing automation through its partnership with Agxeed with the technology potentially able to appeal to different areas of agriculture.*

► €80M, and last year this was €804M, while in the UK it's gone from taking £300,000 in the first year to well over £30M last year, so there's been a fairly incremental increase in the business."

Beyond this, he feels privileged to have seen numerous developments to both kit and technology. "Some of the advancements I've witnessed are already long in the tooth such as GPS and variable rate spreading, which were first introduced in the 1990s. But every year technology achieves more and the capabilities of the kit increases – it's fascinating to see what it can do and how well farming takes this all on board."

## Embracing change

Simon recounts one instance at a farm in Norfolk where a 20m pneumatic boom spreader was being introduced. "It was the first computer controlled, basic forward speed-related spread rate machine, back in the days of AmaTron I. The tractor driver stepped out of the cab, said it was beyond anything he'd be able to cope with and left. The farm manager and I looked at one another and didn't know what to say. But this is the only time I've ever come across a driver who wasn't keen to embrace new technology."

At the other end of the spectrum, he recalls a one-man-band farmer in Barnsley who looked after 202ha by himself until he passed away, aged 93. "He ran John Deere and Amazone machines and did all of the work himself. Up until the day he died, a few years ago now, he was running the newest technology with a high-tech sprayer, mapping on his spreader and drill and a combine that could do everything."

Of all the new machines Simon has



Amazone's Simon Brown steps down as managing director in 2024, passing the baton to Matt Smith.



Spreading technology has advanced significantly in the past 40 years, with machines now able to adjust for wind speed and direction, modify spread at headlands and utilise spread pattern radar.

seen developed, he's most impressed by how spreaders have advanced. When he first joined the firm, the 24m spreader was just being introduced. "While I was working in Germany, I helped to build the first prototype ZA-U 1001 and brought that to market. To see how spreading has developed in that time and to understand what it can do now is incredible.

"We've gone from the days of just having twin disc spreaders to being able to adjust for wind speed and direction, modify spread at headlands, utilise spread pattern checking radar and can work up to 54m tramlines. And this technology is available in machines that cost £30,000-£40,000 when your fertiliser bill could be £1M. Working in tangent with GPS this technology is what'll drive efficiencies and help justify the continued use of fertiliser on crops."

He feels that the role GPS has played – and will continue to play for the industry – can't be understated. "It's revolutionised farming, whether you're running an Amazone machine, a combine or a baler. Whereas the plough originated 5000 years ago, seed drills in the 1800s and spraying in the 1950s, none of these processes have altered that much from the foundational principle, but how we control these systems and handle the inputs and resources at our disposal has."

And just as some aspects of technology are similar now to how they've been decades past, so too are the experiences of farmers. "Amazone's founder Heinrich, kept a diary most days that detailed issues experienced by agriculture. This ran from the late 1800s to the 1920s and recorded the price of things such as pork and milk, the weather and how many machines the company was making. And the issues faced then were aspects such as hail and flooding, so nothing much has actually changed in the cyclical fortunes of farming.

"The challenges experienced come and go, then come back around. We have good and bad years and every 10 years in the past 40 of my career there's been a downturn, but things then improve again. These hiccups have helped to shape farming to a degree, driving efficiency, machinery developments and purchases," he observes.

Simon believes that it's Amazone's philosophy of investing during these tougher times that's helped the firm to prepare for when better periods come back around. "Money is spent on R&D and production rationalisation investment which can be anything from new robotic welding systems, to sheds and factories.

"Constantly investing money back into the business has meant we don't have to lay people off and then, when money is flowing back in again, we already have machines that are right and ready for this."

So far as future challenges go, Simon views the next great frontier as automation. Already being pushed forward by firms such as Amazone, he sees the various levels of sophistication of the technology appealing in different areas of agriculture, and even envisions that it could stem the depletion of medium sized farms and see a return to smaller scale management.

But without doubt, he feels that yield will remain the greatest driver in how the industry progresses. "If we're to feed more people with less, then improving yield is the only way to do so. We can't lose sight of the fact that we have to feed the world and this is going to be a huge challenge.

"But I don't think there's any business that operates on such a personal level as farming does, where the cross-industry contact ranges so widely and such close friendships from all walks of life are formed. It's made for a great career and if I won the lottery tomorrow, I'd go out and buy a farm." ■