



SHELLPLANT – 50 YEARS AND STRONGER THAN EVER

As Shellplant celebrates its 50th anniversary of trading, Rachel Lambert talks to business partners John Fensome and Julian Payne to find out how the company has evolved over the last five decades.

2022

is a milestone year for Shellplant. The successful Northamptonshire based construction plant and equipment dealership celebrates 50 years of trading, proudly representing many leading brands within the industry.

The privately owned company operates out of Earls Barton, selling new and used equipment, as well as spare parts, all of which is supported by Shellplant's factory-trained on-site and off-site service and maintenance team. And there's more ... Shellplant is also a long-established supplier of



**JOHN FENSOME AND JULIAN PAYNE,
SHELLPLANT OWNERS
& MANAGING PARTNERS**

used equipment and spare parts, exporting to customers around the world. There's a lot to talk about.

The company has come a long way since 1972, however, its core values of 'highest quality products and service, as well as customer care' remain firmly etched in the

Shellplant business. Not ones to put themselves in the media limelight, I am delighted that Shellplant's owners and managing partners, John Fensome and Julian Payne, have agreed to this interview for Plant Planet. There is

a lot of friendly banter between the two partners, John being (I hope he doesn't mind me saying) a little 'more senior' than Julian. Both have a dry sense of humour, and I'm laughing before we even start.

John is a co-founder of Shellplant, having first registered the company in August 1972 together with another family stakeholder, who retired from the business in 2005. →

Shellplant originally started selling second-hand plant.

That direction has naturally changed over the years. Shellplant today is solely focused on new and used equipment sales.

As we talk, John is showing me some great photos dating back to Shellplant's early days, including one very amusing image of the first company van with the 'S' missing out of USED PLANT. He laughs about the signwriter to this day! I am intrigued to know how John got into the world of plant, bearing in mind that Julian

**“THE WINGET OPPORTUNITY..
SIGNALLED THE FIRST MAJOR TURNING
POINT FOR SHELLPLANT”**

didn't join the business until 1989. “My interest in the industry really evolved out of doing groundworks, initially having bought a couple of machines from Peter Jones of Star

Plant in Banbury, who incidentally was related to Julian. We used to run truck-mounted mobile compressors and would work

anywhere in the country. I'd also had the opportunity to buy some dumpers from Star Plant

which we exported to customers overseas.” But, it was when the Winget opportunity came along in the late 70's that signalled the first major turning point for Shellplant.

“It was our first introduction to Winget, a manufacturer who, nearly five decades on, we are very proud to still represent today.

It was also our first ever dealership agreement. So, off we set, offering

the full range of Winget products, concrete mixers, dumpers, reversing drum mixers and so on.”

**“HIGHEST QUALITY PRODUCTS AND SERVICE,
AS WELL AS CUSTOMER CARE REMAIN
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BUSINESS”**

Winget also sold CEL rollers at the time. But, in 1985, Winget (as it was) became insolvent, and Roy Sanderson (of Sanderson Forklifts) bought the entire Winget operation. →



“Roy then went on to sell everything to George Seddon except for about 100 CEL rollers which we bought and sold them all! A little later, we got Sanderson Teleporters and sold them too.”

“IT IS CRYSTAL CLEAR HOW WELL THIS PARTNERSHIP WORKS. A DOUBLE ACT TO BE SURE.”

The established Shellplant/Winget relationship remains as strong as ever to this day. The early distributorship for Winget, also led to Shellplant becoming a dealer for Dynapac, an especially high-profile name in the 80s.

While John is reminiscing, Julian is listening in with interest. John is full of amusing anecdotes and memories about the personalities he remembers in those early days of starting the business.

(I have decided that he is one of those people that everyone would like to sit next to at a dinner party because the conversation would be both interesting, and entertaining.)

Back to plant, the 80's marked rapid growth. During this decade, Shellplant had signed dealership agreements with Consolidated Pneumatic, known as CP, a big name in compressors (John remembers their famous CP 9 breaker), as well as Stihl and Norton Clipper. The 80's was also significant, with the young Julian Payne starting employment with Shellplant in 1989.

“I started in the Parts Department and was underpaid at £10,000 a year!” says Julian, laughing as he recalls trying to negotiate a higher starting salary with John. Julian had some experience of working in retail at the time.

“Having enjoyed myself at college, my father said, ‘if you don't get yourself a job by Monday, you're

working with me,’ so I hastily went out and got a job at TESCO. Oddly enough, I worked for the man who ultimately became CEO of TESCO. If I'd have known that I might have stayed as part of that team!” jokes Julian.

The banter about whether Julian was in fact overpaid or underpaid continues. I can see the rapport between the two men, and it is crystal clear how well this partnership works. A double act, to be sure.

There were, at this time, just a handful of people working for Shellplant; only about half a dozen when Julian started with the company. It wasn't until May 2003 that Julian officially became John's business partner, saying “he wasn't allowed in before then!”

“If you had called us then, and asked for Parts, Sales or Service, I would have answered the phone and said, ‘how can I help?’” says Julian. John is nodding in agreement, confessing he did the same thing!

In 1994, Shellplant became a Barford dumper dealer, and ultimately one of the most successful Barford

dealers. When Barford went with JCB in 2005, that agreement came to an end, but the dumper void was swiftly filled by Ausa, who had been patiently waiting in the wings.

“I think Martin Bell of Ausa was practically outside our office waiting to walk in and get us signed up as an Ausa dealer,” recalls John. “Mick Chown, one of our fitters who is still with us today, went to Spain on several occasions to assist their Production team with modifications to get the machines right.”

Shellplant emerged as one of Ausa's most successful dealers for three years running and the relationship remained intact up until 2011, when the opportunity to become a Thwaites dumper dealer came along. →

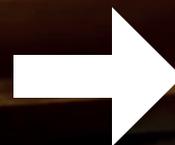


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“Having an iconic dumper manufacturer such as Thwaites approach us was a real feather in our cap at the time,” says John.

“A real flagship brand to add to our collection.”

But, rewind the clock back to the 1990’s when another very important relationship started and one that is positively flourishing today. Shellplant had been approached by Kubota to become a dealer and in 1997 officially signed the agreement.

Both John and Julian agree that they believe this to be “the best piece of paper Shellplant has ever signed,” reflecting on the day when Bob Osmond and John Woodward came to the office to set the formal agreement in motion.

“They set us the target of selling 30 Kubota excavators in the first year, on the basis that the previous dealer had only achieved 7 units in 12 months. We rose to the challenge and sold 52 in our first year.

Having Kubota on-board has been a real gamechanger for us, as a business and an immensely successful partnership.”

And it is a relationship that has gone from strength to strength. In 2011, Shellplant sold their 1000th new Kubota excavator. They then received a Kubota Gold Service Award in 2018, and in 2022, have celebrated selling their 5000th new Kubota.

Further dealership agreements ensued with the likes of Auger Torque. Shellplant already represented Atlas Copco following their acquisition of Consolidated Pneumatic. Around this time, Atlas Copco also acquired Dynapac and then went on to float a new company. That company was Epiroc, and when this happened, Shellplant automatically became an Epiroc dealer which Julian
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considers to be “the best hydraulic breaker on the market.”

Another big name to join the Shellplant stable was of course Bomag. That was in 2017.

The list of premium brands continues. One of the most recent dealership agreements has been with Merlo, in 2020. Shellplant made an impression from the outset, being awarded Dealership of the Year in their first year of trading.

“This was a great privilege. Merlo benefits from a technically advanced product range, which we are very pleased to represent,” says Julian.

He adds: “We have always set out to represent top quality products, the best brands. If we

don’t believe in what we sell, then we simply won’t take it on. We have always made it our priority to back up quality equipment, with an exceptional service. We are very proud of the reputation we have built up which is why we are fortunate to have been approached by so many leading brand manufacturers.”

“SHELLPLANT MADE AN IMPRESSION FROM THE OUTSET, BEING AWARDED DEALERSHIP OF THE YEAR IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF TRADING”

Julian continues to say: “Service comes down to people. We have a great team of people at Shellplant and these factors combined, have also helped us develop and retain many loyal longstanding customers. →



We have traded with M&J Engineers since the late 80's/early 90's through to the M&J / Charles Wilson amalgamation, and J Murphy / Murphy Plant have been a customer of ours since 1997."

While the large names in the industry are extremely important, both John and Julian are quick to stress how much they value and respect the numerous loyal 'local customers' from smaller family-sized businesses.

"IT'S NOT JUST THE TWO OF US - IT IS A REAL TEAM SPIRIT HERE"

"Essentially, Shellplant is a family inspired business and we have the luxury of having an extended family; from our team here at Shellplant, to our customers and suppliers. Many customers really have become our friends. We never want to lose that connection."

Customers are not just those based on home soil either. It is worth mentioning that since its formation, Shellplant was quite swiftly building a very healthy customer base overseas too, for used equipment and spare parts, exporting around the world. It is an area of the business that has blossomed over the years with customers in mainland Europe, including Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as New Zealand, Australia, Mexico, the Falkland Islands, Canada, Barbados, Malta, Africa and Lebanon.

"One of our specialisms and strengths has always been in used equipment. The standard of our used equipment, and the preparation undertaken, is second to none, and it's a very important part of our business. We have the knowledge and market insights to buy and value second hand equipment and we have built a

good reputation for the quality of our second- hand plant. Shellplant has bought some substantial packages over the years. We also have really good, trusted export relationships. It's a very successful part of our business, and we have been glad of this avenue during times of UK recession," says John.

Similarly, Shellplant has a thriving spare parts business, not just in the UK but also overseas. They bought the entire Barford dumper spare parts stock out in 2010 and continue to sell Barford dumper spares around the world.

John and Julian cannot praise their team of people enough, many of whom they have nurtured along the way to ensure that customers get the very best, most attentive service. It is a team that has naturally expanded as the business has grown. There are now many long serving employees at Shellplant, including Mick Chown

who was under 40 when he started as a fitter, and is now 74.

Another long server is Steve Weedon, Shellplant's lorry driver, who joined in 1993 and has just completed 29 years' service.

"We have generally known, or had some connection, with the people who have joined our team. Charlie Watson, our Service Manager, joined us in 2002 and Tom Haywood, our Sales Manager, started in 2007, having been with Yanmar," says Julian.

John is quick to add, that Janice who works in Accounts came to Shellplant to cover someone on maternity leave for six months and 24 years later, is still with them! Justyna, also in the Accounts department, came under the same circumstances and 5 years later is still at Shellplant!

So, do they have aspirations to expand further? →



“I believe we have grown to a level that we still enjoy, in the knowledge that we can look after our customers properly.

We want to always be able to offer the same personal care, and have the time to get to know who our customers really are, how their businesses operate, and how best to support them,” says Julian.

Julian also says that they would like to move to larger premises in the same area if the opportunity came their way.

“The road network here in Northamptonshire means we are ideally placed for Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and London. But we could do with a larger workshop space now to facilitate the growth we’ve experienced, and prepare us for what is in the pipeline for the future. As machinery becomes ever more technical, I can see the requirement for service getting greater. Specialist expertise and diagnostic equipment are becoming increasingly important, making it more difficult for customers to service their own machines. We have both the skills and equipment here.”

John and Julian are also making plans for employing and nurturing the next generation of Shellplant team members to futureproof their business.

“Julian started at the age of 20, and I would have been in my forties then, so we are definitely keen to recruit younger members to our team. The opportunity is great because who knows, they could potentially end up running the business,” says John.

Another area of growth is expected through eCommerce, with a webshop on the horizon for spare parts and some smaller equipment.

The Shellplant business is evidently thriving, so I’m wondering if they have any free time for hobbies and interests. John is a follower of horseracing, and enjoys spending time in Norfolk. Julian is laughing because he says he doesn’t have much spare time. When not at Shellplant, he is busy working on his farm at Ringstead, but he is quick to point out that he



gets a lot of pleasure from it.

They also get a lot of pleasure from supporting local sports clubs and charities, and are currently sponsoring Northamptonshire County Cricket Club and Northampton Saints Rugby Club. A longstanding donor to charities such as Macmillan Cancer Support, Shellplant has also recently donated £5000 to the Riding for the Disabled Association which Julian says does “some marvellous work”.

When asked what the secret is to such a long and successful business partnership, I smile as they both answer in unison, “being likeminded”. It is a striking response.

“Nine times out of ten, one knows what the other is thinking. Compromise and honesty are

also very important to making a partnership work,” says John.

I turn to Julian as he jokes, “I’ve had some wonderful ideas that John has said ‘no’ to, but we’ve mostly agreed! Above all, it’s not just the two of us – it is a real team spirit here. We enjoy the industry, and enjoy being with the people who work in this industry. It’s as simple as that.”

While banter is in abundance, what really shines through is just how much respect they have for one another, and especially for all the people who make up the Shellplant family. Shellplant may have 50 successful years behind them, but from where I’m sitting, the future looks equally rosy too.

**Happy half a century
Shellplant!**

