

JOHN EGAN



IN HIS SHOES

John Egan, Chief Executive of Dune London,
talks a career in footwear...

Words: Edwina Langley

'I'm the working class boy from Manchester,' says John Egan, chief executive of Dune London. 'I left school at 16 – that's what we did in those days.'

Now the second biggest shareholder of the company – a British affordable luxury footwear and accessories brand, worth approximately £100million – John credits his success to decades of hard graft, a nose for business and an inherent understanding of how to motivate people.

A whizz at Maths as a boy, he started out as a chartered accountant in the spring of 1976, working as a personal tax adviser. *'I found it really boring,'* he recalls. *'After a few years it became obvious my heart was never set on working in an office. I wanted to do something else, but I didn't know what.'*

An avid Manchester City fan, he applied to be the trainee manager of a sports shop, but when he turned up for the interview, he found out the position had been filled. He was subsequently introduced to a different role, a trainee manager position at a shoe shop.

Trueform, then owned by the British Shoe Corporation, sold one in every three pairs of shoes in the country. *'They had shoe shops everywhere,'* John explains. *'So I joined them and the interesting thing was, I absolutely loved it! It was so different. I was this young, energetic guy who liked meeting people, and there were so many things about the job that I liked.'*

Two years on, he was manager of four stores in the north-west. Ambitious for a new challenge, however, he left in 1981 to take on the role of store manager for Bally, the Swiss luxury fashion brand.

'I joined Bally as a store manager and then worked my way up through the business over the next 17 years to the pinnacle – which was global sales director in Switzerland.'

'Along the way I moved down to London, managed stores in the West End, became a regional sales manager and the operations director... From a shoe shop manager in Manchester to the global sales director was really something.'

Undoubtedly his greatest achievement was spotting an extremely lucrative sales opportunity. *'I came up with the idea of putting stores in airports. We opened the very first specialist store in Heathrow Airport Terminal 4. There were no other stores there except liquor and tobacco duty free shops. This was the time when the UK airports had just been privatised under the British Airports Authority. The store was a great success and we developed an airport business across the UK of £25million in 2 years.'*

His success caught the eye of the famous Swiss businessman, Swatch co-founder and Bally Chairman and CEO, Ernst Thomke. It was he who promoted John to global sales director in Switzerland. *'He was a father figure to me,'* John says fondly. *'He said, "John, I want you to come over to Switzerland, but before you do, I want you to go to Stanford for the summer".'*

John spent the next few months in the U.S. University's intensive management programme. *'It was a wonderful experience,'* he recalls. *'Stanford were so ahead of their time. They said the companies of tomorrow have got to have a social conscience, to be part of the community. It made so much sense to me. Since that day, every business I've worked with has done a huge amount for charity. At Dune we've supported the Teenage Cancer Trust and, at the moment, End Youth Homelessness. It's the right thing to do.'*

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John is a still proud wearer of Bally shoes. Indeed, one would imagine he might have stayed at the company beyond 17 years had not Thomke fallen out with Bally's parent company, Oerlikon-Buehrle Holding AG, and promptly resigned. John was forced out soon after.

His next role came following a telephone call from Don McCarthy, CEO of Shoe Studio, the footwear concessions business which owned such brands as Bertie and Pied à Terre and exclusive licence for US brand Nine West. *'It was the best decision I ever made,'* says John. *'Because two years later, we bought the business.'*

Together with Don and Stefan Cassar (who managed finance), the trio had, as John says, *'a fantastic run'*. In 2003, they decided to diversify and bought Rubicon Retail, which owned Warehouse and Principles to create a combined business worth £500million in sales.

By 2006, it was time to sell. The Shoe Studio was taken over by Mosaic Fashion, which then owned Karen Millen and Oasis. As part of the deal, John stayed on to oversee the transition, but left shortly after in 2007.

During this time, John was also made director of the British Fashion Council, alongside Stuart Rose. It was a role that entailed organising events, monitoring PR activity and generally ensuring the BFC remained *'front of mind'*. But John resigned in 2008 because, *'I was just too busy!'*

That, and he was about to sink his teeth into his next role: that of chief executive of Dune London.

'I had known Daniel [Rubin, founder of Dune London] because he was in the shoe business. When I joined, it was a £50million business aimed at women. I could see there was a huge opportunity to roll it out to department stores both here in the UK and internationally and introduce shoes for men. When I joined, Daniel said, "How are we going to get this business from £50million to £100million?"'

'In March the following year, we bought the old Shoe Studio business, which had gone into administration. Overnight the business more than doubled in size.'

With over 100 stores worldwide – including in India, South Africa and their second largest market after the UK, the Middle East – Dune London boasts profits of more than £12million. *'The profits when I joined were about half a million!'* John exclaims.

With a keen eye for trends and a passion for rallying the workforce (*'set targets, celebrate success'*), John wants to see Dune London expand more into the international market. *'We have a great opportunity to grow our global footprint as the competition in the affordable luxury market is open for the newcomer from London. Today online sales account for 30% of sales with the men's mix up to 30%. We see our men's business growing at double digit increases each season. It has also given us the opportunity to be a lifestyle brand with a product base across ladies, mens and accessories rather than just a shoe shop.'*

For the football fan from Manchester – who at 60 still plays the game each week – one burning question remains, why shoes?

'I went into it by coincidence,' John explains, *'but I just love the shoe business. Buying shoes is such an emotional experience. They have got to look great but also fit. They can complement an outfit and make you look wonderful and sexy. We try and instill enthusiasm and fun into our sales teams to create a wonderful experience. It's like finding Cinderella her slipper, that's why I love it!'*