





# OLLY'S OPUS

PROFILE: **MAGNUS GROUP**

**Olly Magnus has only been at the helm of his family firm for just over 18 months, but he's already more than doubled its turnover and lifted its headcount. So what's his secret?**

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**Commercial Motor**

"My dad told me he would be leaving me nothing, and he was good to his word!" says Olly Magnus, CEO of Ipswich-based Magnus Group, with a wry smile. But this lack of inheritance wasn't going to stop the hard-working entrepreneur from taking the helm of the company that bears his surname, taking it back into family ownership, and turning around its fortunes. In fact, Olly believes that having to use his own money to buy into the company, rather than simply being handed it on a plate, has worked to his and the company's advantage.

"If I had inherited the shares, and come in as CEO, I wouldn't have got any respect," he explains. "But instead I invested my own money in this business."

But before we find out how this came about, here's some background. Olly's father Paul founded

Paul Magnus Transport in 1973, and pretty soon its green trucks were a common sight in East Anglia. In the 1990s, as the fleet and warehouse capacity grew, so Paul sold 40% of the company. This marked the formation of the Magnus Group.

Olly's involvement with the company began in 2000, when at the age of 27 he landed an office-based warehouse job. "When you work in a family business, you're either fast-tracked, or you're not, and for me it was the latter," he recalls. "My dad certainly didn't want to be seen to be favouring me!" Olly stuck at the job for two years, before using his hard-earned savings to travel to Australia.

When he came back to Blighty it wasn't to return to his old job – in fact at the time he had no intention of ever working for the Magnus Group again. Instead, together with a friend, he set up a freight forwarding company. Built from scratch, this was a resounding success, ultimately achieving a £15m annual turnover.



Then in 2018, at the age of 71, Paul Magnus died, leaving his 40% share of the business to Olly's stepmother. Paul's death coincided with Olly falling out with his own business partner, which together created an opportunity: should he sell his own company and use the money to buy his father's business partner's 40%? It certainly wasn't an easy decision to make.

### TREADING WATER

"The company was underperforming, and had been treading water for quite some time," explains Olly. "And with my father's partner in his 70s, and other senior management in their 60s, even Stevie Wonder could see that there was no succession in place. I reckon I must have been the only person in the world who would consider buying 40% of it." But in July 2019, that's exactly what he did.

"You need to remember that although I was buying 40%, I was effectively getting 80%, as it was now back in the family," explains Olly, who fortunately gets on well with his stepmother.

Since then, Olly has purchased another 17% from the MD, taking his total to 57%. The other 3% belongs to a non-executive director.

**Making it happen:** Olly Magnus has forged his own path to the top of Magnus Group and is now shaping the way ahead for this growing business and its employees

Olly knew that to make a success of 'new Magnus', as he refers to the post-2019 company, he would need to make some major changes. But first he needed to get the employees onside. "On my first day I got all of the office staff together and explained to them that I didn't inherit anything, but instead invested my own money," says Olly. "I could have easily gone off, sorted my life out, paid for my kids' educations, and paid off the mortgage, but instead I chose to invest in this. I wanted them to understand that I believe in it – and so should they."

Olly describes new Magnus as being like a train. "If people want to get off the train, they are very

### WAREHOUSE GAMBLE

**Shortly after taking over,** Olly faced a huge business decision. The warehouse next door, which had previously been occupied by Canute Group, became available. Knowing it might be many years before the opportunity arose again, he decided to go for it. Then, shortly after taking the keys, Covid-19 hit!

"There were more than a few worrying moments," admits Olly, who faced the prospect of paying for an empty warehouse. But he needn't have worried, as it didn't take long to fill. The gamble had paid off.



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## TRAILER RESOURCES LIMITED

Playing a key role in Magnus Group's rebranding process is Trailer Resources Limited (TRL). So far the family-run contract hire and rental firm has supplied 40 trailers to the company, a mix of skeletal and Lawrence David curtainsiders.

The latter are 4.5m-high ENXL-rated pillarless curtainsiders, all specified with BPW axles, storage boxes and Electronic Brake Monitoring system with Asset Trackers.

In addition to featuring the haulier's new green and black livery, they also sport distinctive green straps, which were suggested by TRL sales director Ryan Jones.

"Some people said they would look shocking," laughs Olly Magnus. "But in hindsight I'm glad we went for them – it's all about being different."

Magnus describes Hemel Hempstead-based TRL as "a fantastic family-run business", and expects to order more trailers as the fleet continues to grow.



welcome to. But the train is going to a good destination. It's just going to take a while to get there," he says.

## SHAKING THE TREE

While the bulk of the staff embraced his vision, and the strong work ethic he quickly instilled in the business, during the first 12 months a handful of employees decided that new Magnus wasn't for them, choosing to alight the train. In an exit interview, one even admitted to leaving because they wanted an easy life! "Prior to my arrival there was little structure or accountability, but

now all of a sudden there was," Olly explains. "If you shake a tree, the good apples stay on. We have some fantastic people working here."

Olly leads by example, and is always one of the first in and last out. But he stresses that this doesn't mean "drinking coffee and dossing around all day." He says: "I'm here to work hard, to grow this business. I am a massive believer that everything starts at the top. If I'm walking around the car park kicking an empty Coke

can around because everything is shit, and people see that, well, shit falls down a hill!"

If you were to ask Olly what axle ratio Magnus Group specifies on its new DAF XFs, he'd probably look at you blankly. But that's because he doesn't need to know. One of the first things he did in his new role was to recruit a team of experts to make exactly those decisions for him. Key appointments included head of transport Martin Gomersall (ex-Bartrums Group), head of warehousing Mark Oakley (ex-PD Logistics) and head of freight Matt Hope (ex-Coastal Global Logistics). "I'm no expert



in transport, warehousing or forwarding, but they are,” says Olly. “Your best investment is people. If you bring in good people, you get results.” All three men have been made directors, because Olly wants to “sit around the table with people I respect, and who respect me.” Joining them in the boardroom is a non-executive director, who according to Olly, brings



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something different to the table. “I’m a big believer in outside in,” he says, explaining that not being so close to the company allows this director to see things in a different light. “He sees things we don’t see as he’s not involved in it day-to-day, so is always asking ‘Why are you doing that?’ And quite often, stupid questions are the most sensible questions.”

### PAYING DIVIDENDS

This build-from-the-top-down approach appears to be paying dividends, with successes in all three sectors. For the first time in years warehousing is profitable, the newly added Felixstowe freight-forwarding arm is the fastest-growing part of the business, and all of a sudden the company has a fleet of trucks it can be proud of (see box opposite).

Among the sweeping changes introduced was a rebranding exercise. Olly is big on first impressions, and he reckons the unloved look of the head office, with its faded and dated signs, certainly wasn’t giving off the right vibes. “One of the first things





# TRUCK FLEET

**The Magnus Group** currently runs 57 trucks, consisting of 45 artics and 12 rigid. By Olly's own admission, the fleet still includes a few "old dogs" inherited from the previous regime. But the company is currently "flushing these through the system" as it orders new trucks featuring the black and green livery. Traditionally it ran a mixed DAF, Scania and Volvo fleet, but since Olly has been at the helm, it is only ordering new DAFs. The trucks are supplied and maintained by DAF dealer Chassis Cab, which is literally located next door. "I know the guys, they look after us, and the location is perfect," explains Olly.

Also on the fleet are 14 LNG-powered Volvo FHs, which are dedicated to one specific contract. "The customer was looking to increase its green credentials, and we were happy to oblige," he says.

According to Olly, it's not only good to refresh the fleet from an image point of view – he's well aware that smart-looking vehicles act as great mobile advertisements – but also because the drivers deserve decent vehicles. "We have some fantastic drivers working here, some of whom have been with us for 30 years," he says. "Drivers are the best sellers of a business, and it's important to look after them. They have just had a pay rise, and I'm planning to raise their wages to a higher level as soon as possible."

## FAMILY AFFAIR

**One of Olly** Magnus' best recruitment moves has been making older sister Emma Lightfoot HR manager. "Emma is the hyper-intelligent member of the family, so it was great to get her on board," he says. Prior to her appointment, HR was carried out part-time by the accounts team. "Everything used to be a bit back-of-a-fag-packet," he reckons. He says the new role is working well, although admits to feeling slightly guilty that she's so busy, describing her office as being like a revolving door.

As for future Magnus family recruitment, Olly has a son and daughter, but says he won't be pushing either of them into the business. "If they want to come into the industry, then that's totally up to them," he says. "But one thing I would never do is bring them here and push them through the ranks, because it's better to gain the experience elsewhere, and besides, they wouldn't get the respect of people here. Nothing should be handed to you on a plate. I think earning your own reputation is hugely important."



**Close-knit team:** Olly Magnus and sister Emma with their parents in the late 1970s

I did was start painting," he says. "When my dad started the company the trucks were green, but over the years everything become boring and white. So I brought the green back," he says, pointing to the walls of the boardroom we're sitting in. He also changed the company logo, although this isn't as new as you might suspect. That's because the green 'M' that now adorns everything Magnus is actually the same 'M' that featured in his father's original 1975 Paul Magnus livery.

It has been a little over 18 months since Olly bought into the Magnus Group, and in that time a lot has changed. The headcount has increased by a third, turnover has more than doubled, and the staff have a much brighter and more secure future. "If I hadn't invested, the business might not be here now," says Olly, who describes the old Magnus as lacking drive and ambition.

"It's hard work, a lot of responsibility and pressure, but I love it. I'm so proud of what we have achieved, and it makes you wonder what we'll be able to achieve in another 18 months."

At the start, Olly told us his dad didn't leave him anything, but as our interview draws to a close he changes his tune slightly. "In actual fact I suppose he left behind a company with almost 50 years of history that was worth investing in," he says retrospectively. "In fact he left me a legacy." □