



There's a real buzz about retirement

What was supposed to be a hobby has grown into a business that is all about giving something back to the community. Mark Douglas and Debbie Robinson share the buzz of excitement about their new venture with **Chris Pyke**

Retirement is meant to be about taking it easy.

And if you decide to take a break from business, then that is what you are meant to do.

But for Mark Douglas and Debbie Robinson at Bee 1 they are busier than ever.

Mr Douglas recently retired as the head of NatWest bank in Wales. He stood down earlier than planned as, with just two years left, he felt his legacy was going to be that of closing high street branches.

Ms Robinson, a director at the recycling company Derwen Group, decided to take a break to pursue a determination to become a yoga instructor and spend more time on her new profession.

The pair, who have been friends for years, found that with time on their hands and their shared interest in beekeeping, and as qualified beekeepers, they started exploring and talking about business opportunities.

It is not surprising this “hobby” soon turned into a full-blown operation.

Yet, at the core, the new company is about giving something back, about helping communities and helping businesses to support their local communities.

It is helping companies with corporate and social responsibility (CSR).

It does this by focusing on the environment, biodiversity, education, community, health and wellbeing, including mindfulness.

And it all centres around bees.

Over the next few months the business will be honed, and staffing levels increased, but the core of the business will not change.

The CSR side of the business is helping companies meet their responsibilities.

It creates tailored corporate packages, and



Mark Douglas Founder of Bee 1 at Blaengwrach Primary School talking to pupils about honey bees

provides bee hives and colonies for eight schools of its choice. Due to health, safety and welfare considerations, the hives are kept at registered apiaries, including Mr Douglas’ and Ms Robinson’s farms, but the schools can keep track of their bees using a listening and recording device from the Pencoed-based Raspberry Pi.

Through its network it has engaged contracts with, among others, the Newport-based Niche Independent Financial Advisers, civil engineering firm Jones Bros, Monmouthshire Building Society, Metro Bank Cardiff, when they open in Cardiff, and Castell

Howell, Crosshands.

Bee 1 has forged links with Cannock firm Buzbees Premium Tonics, which uses honey to sweeten its tonic water.

Monmouthshire Building Society will shortly be announcing that it is donating one of its eco packs to every school in Monmouthshire as part of its 150-year celebrations.

The relationship with Cross Hands food business is continuously growing.

What started as a corporate package has grown into a business relationship. A partnership that also includes Alan Sugar.

The honey from Bee 1 is used as the sweetener in Buzbee’s tonic – as opposed to sugar. Buzbees, which is looking to rival Schweppes and Fever-Tree with its tonic, has Lord Sugar as a significant investor.

“[Buzbees] approached us on Twitter, they loved what we did with schools and asked us to supply them with honey,” explains Mr Douglas. And as a result of that collaboration, we have connected them with Welsh honey suppliers, and they have now produced a Welsh tonic made using Welsh honey and Welsh water.”

Castell Howell is now supplying Buzbees Premium Tonics – a drink that has, since Bee 1’s involvement, become an all-Welsh product.

The partnership with Buzbees has led to another project.

Using material from Derwen Group’s recycling facility, based at Neath, Bee 1 has now secured grant support from Neath Port Talbot Economic Development Discretionary fund to manufacture wildflower “bee-bombs”.



Blaengwrach Primary School pupils



Debbie Robinson, co-founder of Bee 1

"Wildflower meadow seeds are bees' food resource," explains Ms Robinson.

"When you scatter wildflower seeds a large proportion are eaten by pests, but if you encase them in clay pellets it protects them and increases their chances of survival.

A pilot batch of bee-bombs were made for Buzbees, which gave them away as a gift package at a Liverpool gin festival.

These "bombs" were made using an old cement mixer.

Through utilising the Bee 1 team, free tonics were supplied to HotPodYogaSwansea.

This has led to WD Lewis Ltd, Groundhog Ltd and Cardiff University stocking the drink.

Cardiff University is involved in yet another project of Bee 1.

The company is working with Prof Les Baillie and the team at Pharmabees within the university to develop a beeswax wrap.

Cardiff University has a research student working for the next 12 months on a beeswax wrap to replace Clingfilm in the food industry.

These wraps are seen as more hygienic and can also be reused, reducing the amount of Clingfilm that is thrown away.

As soon as the research and development is completed, Bee 1 will sell this product commercially.

This brings the company back to Castell Howell, which is very serious about introducing it to its Celtic Foods division as it looks to replace plastics.

As the pair lay out the many strands and opportunities the "hobby" has presented them with it is clear it is growing faster than either anticipated.

Their contacts, as well as their drive, have shown not only one gap in the market but many.

With all aspects having sustainability, responsibility and bees at its heart it is no wonder Ms Robinson admits waking up at night in a cold sweat thinking about it all.

But from helping companies meet their

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corporate and social responsibilities, and the requirements of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, to teaching children about bees, as well as helping increase the food source for our pollinators, and creating a tonic that has lower calories, the business will be making a real difference, and that is truly what Bee 1 seems to be all about.



Looking after the bees