

## Business The manifesto

# Luck and the long and winding road that leads to the stock exchange and flotation

**Miles Costello** meets the head of HSS Hire, the tool hire company planning to make a splash in the City

**F**ortune, they say, favours the brave, which might explain the good luck that Chris Davies credits for his career to date and which appears to bode well for his next challenge. As the chief executive of HSS, he is preparing the second-largest tools and equipment hire group in Britain for a stock market flotation likely to value it at about £550 million.

He is preparing, too, to add one of the more interesting CVs to those boasted by the heads of the country's listed companies — born into a mining family, degree in genetics and developmental biology, four years driving a taxi in Glasgow, salesman, finance director — involving jumps in career and discipline that would terrify a lesser man and all apparently accomplished with a huge dollop of luck.

"I didn't plan a thing," he says, looking back on what is now a long career. "I'm still remarkably amazed on a daily basis that someone gave me a job."

"At university, I walked into the laboratory and there were about 150 animals waiting to be dissected — perhaps that's not very politically correct now, I know — and I thought to myself: 'I can't do this.' I don't mean I was squeamish, I could do the experiments, it's just that I realised that this was not what I wanted to do."

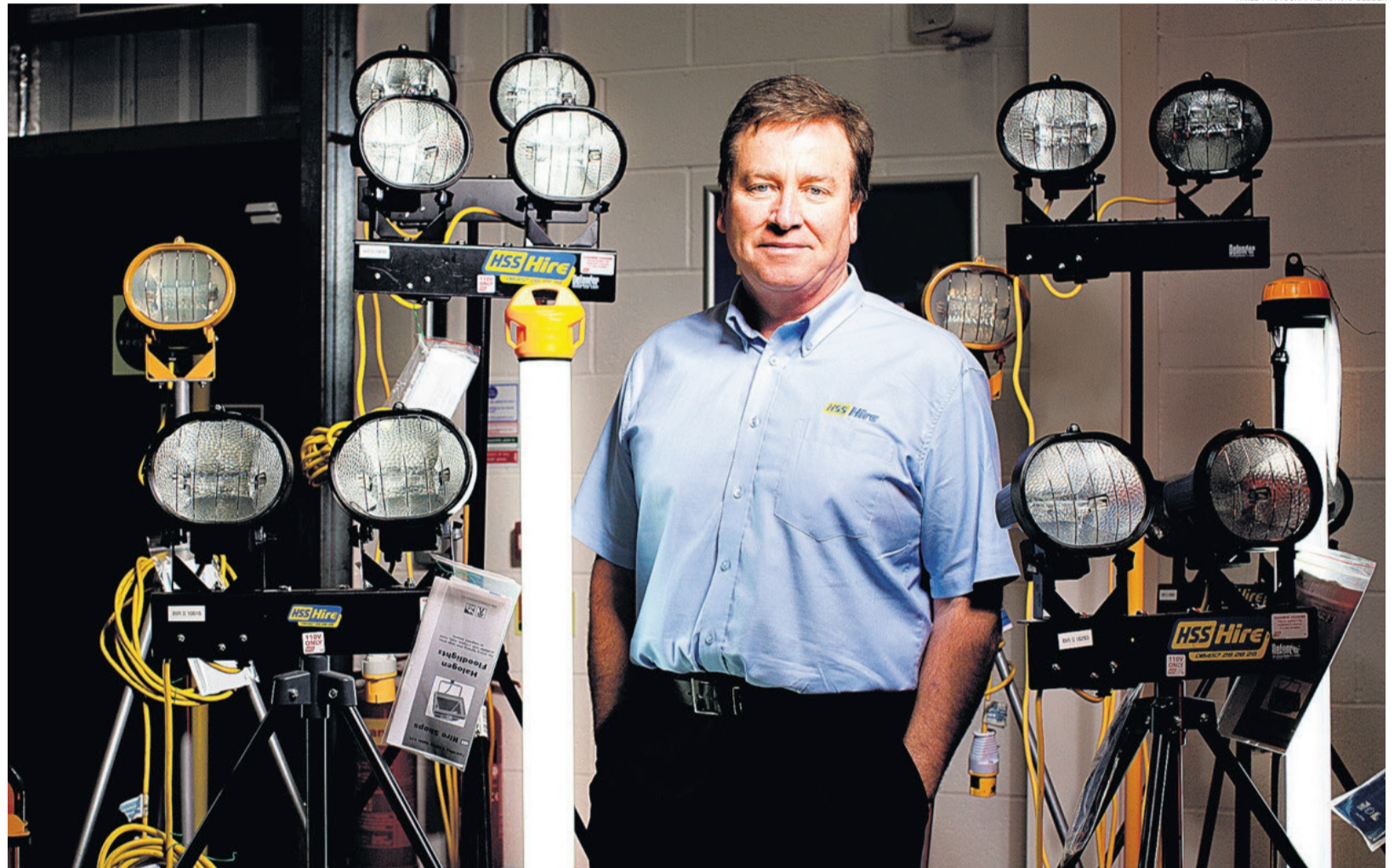
"Straight out of university, I started at a small builder's merchant. I really didn't have a clue. I thought that there was probably going to be another recession, that it might be bought up at some point."

It turned out that Mr Davies was pretty deft at selling plaster, bricks and hammers to people in the building trade and he flourished. He was also right that he was starting out in an industry that was consolidating. The company was swallowed by another, then another, eventually becoming Harcos, where he rose to become finance director — without, incidentally, being a trained accountant.

As the numbers man, he oversaw, in 1997, the sale of Harcos, which by then operated more than 200 sites nationwide and employed 7,500 people, to Jewson in a £320 million deal. This seems to have whetted his appetite for deal-doing and his years at HSS, where he has been the boss since 2006, are littered with acquisitions, including those of Apex Generators in Scotland and TecServ, a specialist in cleaning services.

He has stayed at the helm at HSS despite going through two changes of private equity owner, first when 3i sold the business in 2007 to the Aurigo consortium of Och-Ziff and Archie Norman, the chairman of ITV, and then in 2012, when it was taken over by

**Hunter Boot needed more than Kate Moss to survive**



Chris Davies is preparing a London listing for HSS Hire, merely the latest challenge in a career path that has stretched from driving a taxi to being a chief executive

Exponent and its management took a minority stake.

Mr Davies insists that neither his career path, nor his acquisitive background, are by design, citing a recent survey of top executives in the Fortune 500, a large percentage of whom put their success down to, yes, luck, even if he's "not sure it's luck entirely. I love businesses and I am a passionate believer that people who work hard and do well will rise within the business."

"I've been in many disciplines. I've been an operations director, a commercial director and a finance director — and I'm not an accountant. I didn't ever plot or plan it. I am fortunate. I can't remember the last job I applied for; I just seem to get the opportunity to do interesting things."

"Interesting" is one way of describing his experience, just before joining HSS, at Hunter Boot, where he was parachuted in as interim chief executive in 2006 to trade the humbled designer wellies, famously sported by celebrities including Kate Moss, out of administration. "It was out of the blue. Somebody who knew somebody, knew somebody who was about to buy Hunter Boot [Lord Marland of Odstock, the former Conservative Party treasurer]."

"They said: 'Go on, you should give it a go.' Off I went, I got in my car and drove to Scotland. When I got there, the finance director came out and said: 'Thank god you're here.' He gave me the keys and

## Q&A

**Which person do you most admire?**

Gaudi. Unique, creative, useful, inspirational

**What is your favourite television programme?**

*Modern Family*. I also recently enjoyed the complete box set of *Game of Thrones* over Christmas

**Does money motivate you?**

To a point, but creating something and making it better ranks ahead

**What was the most important event in your working life?**

I was made redundant three months into a graduate traineeship; my Dad said it was the best thing that ever happened to me and he was right

**What does leadership mean to you?**

People follow  
**How do you relax?**  
Painting

## CV

**Age:** 60  
**Education:** Eastwood High School, Glasgow; Aberdeen University BSc Pure Science

**Career:** 1974: graduate trainee, Volvo Commercial Vehicles; 1974-79: product manager, timber product industry; 1980-98: sales manager rising to chief financial officer, Harcos; 1998-2003: chief executive, UK, then vice-president Europe, Staples; 2003-06: managing director, Disney Retail Europe, Walt Disney; 2006: interim chief executive, Hunter Boot; **September 2006-present:** chief executive, HSS Hire  
**Family:** Married, to Debbie, two grown-up children

as cleaning. The company has contracts with Heathrow and other leading airports, as well as working for hospitals and shops and servicing lifts across Britain's biggest cities.

"Is it glamorous, a fashion business?" Mr Davies asks rhetorically. "No. We provide the stuff that keeps business and the country going. It sounds like marketing speak and it is, but it is also true."

He speaks with genuine pride about the company, never more so than when describing a training academy he has set up at HSS, where every new joiner is sent for a five-week residential course, during which at some point they are almost certain to meet him personally. "They all get the chance to ask a question and usually the question asked is: 'How do I become successful in this company?' I always reply: 'Work hard, do your best and you'll probably be OK.'" His zeal is evident, too, in the decision to commission Rachel Lichtenstein, the social historian, to chronicle HSS last year to personally taking part in pitches for new contracts.

Mr Davies says that he is ready for life at a public company, arguing that having to produce quarterly reports for the holders of HSS's listed bonds means that he is up to speed with disclosure requirements and that good corporate governance is already built in to the way the business operates.

It suggests that the company's chief executive is pretty likely to hang on after the listing completes and Exponent makes a partial exit, certainly until the next piece of unplanned luck comes along — but then they say that you make your own luck.

said: 'I'm off.' He'd resigned. I went up to see the sales team, who were very quiet and they looked at me and said: 'Who are you?'

"I said: 'I'm the bloke who has been sent here, hopefully to take this business forward. Let's have a cup of tea.'"

With no assets to its name save for Hunter's previously unpopular pink wellies and the wooden shape, or last, used to make the boots for the royal family, Mr Davies set about rejuvenating the company, including luring back a retired finance chief with the promise of plenty of golf on the 26 courses situated within a short radius of its former home in Edinburgh.

Inside a year, Hunter was firmly on the road to recovery and Mr Davies,

job done, was on his way to face his next challenge. HSS has had its share of travails. Founded as The Hire Service Company in Kensington, west London, 58 years ago, it had an awful credit crunch and an even worse recession, as business demand for its kit hit the skids and its burdensome debt had to be restructured in 2009.

Now, nine of every ten of its customers are commercial and, instead of heavy, industrial plant and machinery, HSS rents out smaller items to smaller operators. It describes its core markets as "maintain and operate", where "maintain" represents customers who refurbish, improve and repair rather than build, and "operate" takes in facilities management activities such