MEDIA MONITORS

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Brief: OPUS_MENT

Scottish-born engineer David Prentice had handled turbulence before he took the reins at Opus and ran into a quake, writes **James Weir**

Opus boss used to handling tough jobs

DAVID PRENTICE was all set to take over the family farm in Scotland before his maths teacher put the idea of engineering into his head.

Now Dr Prentice lives halfway round the world, running Opus International Consultants, a business where "the sun never sets" on offices in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and Canada.

At just 41, Dr Prentice took the reins from former Opus chief executive Kevin Thompson, 60, late last year.

Dr Prentice's spartan office in central Wellington is as spotless as his well-ironed white shirt and "engineer's" business suit – conservative and no flashy pinstripes. The only hint of personality is the bright orange high-visibility jacket hanging on the back of his door, ready like an eager farm dog to get out on site where the real action is.

Dr Prentice has guided the Opus business through the fallout from the big Christchurch earthquake on February 22, just a day before Opus put out its financial results for last year.

Some Opus staff were back on the job just a couple of days after the quake assessing damage to buildings. Among much other work, Opus International is planning the complicated operation of removing the dome at the Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in the city, using cranes.

It is all a far cry from Dr Prentice's home in southwest Scotland, where a life on the family sheep and beef farm near Castle Douglas was his early expectation.

"Till the age of 16 I thought I was going to be a farmer and then I had a chat with Mr Carson, who taught me maths at school," he says in his Scottish burr.

"He said: 'Have you ever thought of engineering?' and I said, 'no, not really'."

His earliest memories were out on the farm with his father, rounding up sheep and driving a tractor at a young age. As kids, he and his brother built a golf course on the farm and charged people a "couple of quid" to play.

The farm was hard work but a great childhood and much like the childhood many Kiwi kids have.

But he had a huge amount of respect for Mr Carson and the idea of engineering stuck.

Aged just 17 years and three months, Dr Prentice went to Edinburgh University, doing a four-year degree at what he says is one of the top engineering courses in Britain.

At university the history and heritage of Scottish engineering was driven home. "Scots as inventors and engineers seem to punch above their weight," he says.

He met his future wife, Ruth, in her first week at university, when he was in his third year. They have been together since and now have three young children.

On leaving university, Dr Prentice started with Blyth & Blyth engineering company. It was "brilliant" and allowed him to go out and get his hands dirty.

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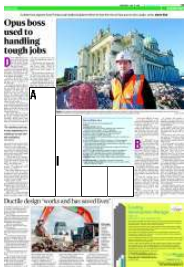

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AT JUST 21, Dr Prentice was a consulting engineer and within a year had designed three bridges and was appointed as resident engineer for one of them.

"The absolutely best way to learn engineering is to actually go out and work with contractors. Most of them were called Paddy or Jimmy and you are always Sonny.

"You see how things fit together," he says. "To take what you've done in design – a whole bunch of numbers and lines – and actually see the reality of building that, the difficulties and challenges."

That forced him to make decisions that might seem easy in the office, but on site made him think: "that's crazy – why did I ever design it like that"?

"I learned more in that year constructing a bridge down in Gallowshields. It was the best learning experience I could possibly get," he says.

The project was "terrifying", involving a dozen grizzly old contractors who thought they knew far better how to build a bridge than the young engineer did.

"I think I rang head office 10 times a day. It was a nightmare," he says, but it taught him to think for himself at just 22.

Within the first week, the local chief of police arrived and told them to stop work because they were holding up traffic with a massive pile driver. The job became fairly litigious.

"By crikey, you learn fairly quickly," he says. In the end, the client agreed to close the road for some time, instead of trying to keep traffic flowing down one side of the bridge while the other side was demolished and rebuilt.

But the result, seeing the bridge done, felt fantastic, he says.

The industry now struggled to give young engineers that type of experience and had become a bit too conservative. Young engineers needed to be given responsibility, which had been taken away after the 1980s.

In the past people had to show they had site experience, but that had been relaxed so people could become chartered engineers without doing much on-site. "I think that's a shame," he says.

He believes young engineers could be heavily involved in big projects, though not in charge of "the next Auckland harbour bridge".

Though he is a fan of learning on the job, Dr Prentice loves teaching. He went back to Edinburgh University after three years of engineering work to complete his doctorate with the aim of taking up a teaching career.

But he became disillusioned with academia, because universities got funding through research, and researchers were not always brilliant teachers. "It really rankled and I couldn't do it."

IN 1997, Opus was recruiting engineers in Scotland for planned international expansion.

Dr Prentice went along for a chat even though he did not think he had enough experience. As it turned out, he had played rugby with the man doing the initial screening of candidates.

For the first three-quarters of the formal interview that followed, rugby was the main topic.

The interviewers initially told him he did not have enough experience, but changed their minds and called him back before he was even out of the building.

He expected to be in New Zealand for a couple of years, in part for a holiday, but he and Ruth loved the place, had children and stayed on.

He also aimed to infiltrate local rugby and "bring it down to a standard more akin to Scotland". He played for Wellington club Old Boys-University, the "Dead Ants" team.

Despite some team-mates nursing obvious hangovers in his first game, the standard of rugby was the highest he'd ever played "by a country mile".

Rugby was a great way to meet people in New Zealand and he maintained friendships with his teammates and still gets the boots on, once a year.

But in early 2009, at the height of the global financial crisis, Dr Prentice was asked to run the ailing Opus business back in Britain. The family arrived in the worst snow storm in decades, and sat for three hours on the tarmac at Heathrow, which was a sign of things to come.

He had just one day's handover from the previous boss, only to be told on the following Monday that job cuts were needed and he had two weeks to put a plan together to fit staff numbers to the falling revenues.

Four smaller offices were closed and Opus laid off about 70 people.

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Page 3 of 4

"It was very difficult," he says.

As revenue continued to fall, everyone remaining took a pay cut or went to a four-day week. Some are still on reduced pay.

But the flip-side was that it brought staff together, and they now think and act as one, rather than 12 separate offices, he says.

"And we will reap the benefits when the [British] economy does come back."

BUT THINKING as one group has been a change for the whole Opus international group in the past couple of years.

For example, British staff have been called on to carry out work in the buoyant market in New Zealand, with about 15 staff helping in Christchurch after the big quake.

"That has required a complete change of people's thinking, but in terms of developing a global organisation, we will reap the benefits. It is incredibly important."

Dr Prentice has been brought in to take Opus to "the next level" after the group's expansion plans were knocked by the global financial crisis for the past couple of years.

In 2008, the company said it aimed to increase staff and revenue by a third by 2011 taking numbers to 3500 staff by growing outside New Zealand, but in the following year it actually went backwards, cutting staff in some markets.

Opus is going through a five year plan process now, with details likely to come out in a few months.

Dr Prentice has already restructured the top ranks of the company, including the creation of a new position of director of "strategy and growth".

The company wants to look at opportunities "with open eyes" and decide quickly if it might be something they want to do as a group.

Dr Prentice's new catch cry for the group is "nimbleness, agility and flexibility", to get the right decisions made quickly and for the right reasons.

In the past Opus had looked at its four countries – New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Britain – but growth in future may be beyond that. "The likes of Asia, Indonesia, South America or wherever there is a lot of opportunity for us," Dr Prentice says, as long as the opportunity fits within the group's risk framework.

A big plank for growth is likely to be asset management, making sure things like roads and schools last as long as possible.

In places such as Britain and Canada, facing government austerity measures, asset management is becoming more important and the opportunities may be huge, with the added benefit of a steady revenue stream, rather than the peaks and troughs of big projects. "In New Zealand we have had to make what we've got last as long as possible."

And that expertise means Opus is working at the highest level in other countries, such as Britain, now looking at its highway system with the help of one of Opus' roading experts. "It bodes very well for us."

'The absolutely best way to learn engineering is to actually go out and work with contractors.'

DAVID PRENTICE

DAVID PRENTICE

- Opus chief executive and managing director
- Age 41
- **Country of birth:** Scotland
- Graduated from the University of Edinburgh with a Bachelor of Engineering (Hons) degree, a PhD in Engineering.
- Member of the Institution of Professional Engineers of NZ;
- Chartered Professional Engineer (CP Eng), New Zealand.
- Worked for Blyth and Blyth Consulting UK
- After completing his PhD, joined Keith Borer Forensic Consultants as a forensic engineer
- Came to New Zealand in 1997 to join Opus as a structural engineer
- 1999, joined Working Knowledge in Wellington as an information technology project manager and business analyst on significant software development and rollout projects
- 2003, returned to Opus and was appointed manager of the Business Solutions Group in Wellington
- April 2006, appointed general manager for business development
- February 2009, appointed director of Opus' British operations
- October, 2010, appointed chief executive and managing director
- **Family:** Wife, Ruth and children, Megan 11, Ben 9, and Lucy 6.
- **Interests:** Rugby, skiing, walking, biking, reading, aspiring to learn how to sail.
- **Latest book read:** *The Kite Runner*, about life in Afghanistan.
- **Opus annual profit for 2010:** Net profit after tax up by 18 per cent to $22m, on revenue of $367m.

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Big jobs: Opus heritage and structural engineering experts are deconstructing the unstable north tower in Christchurch's Catholic Cathedral and also plan to remove the building's main dome. The aim is to stabilise the cathedral so the damage can be thoroughly assessed and a fully informed decision as to the future of the building can be made. Photo: THE PRESS