

RECOM SOLUTIONS

About 20 years ago, two construction management students hatched a plan to one day run their own business. Not only did they stick with the plan, but today their business turns over £20m and employs over 50 staff. **David Taylor** spoke to co-founder Jason McKnight

Friendships formed at university often prove the most enduring, maintaining ties many years after graduation and when career paths have diverged.

As students of construction management at Salford University in the early 2000s, Jason McKnight and Joseph Dillon immediately hit it off. Besides a keen interest in the construction process and football, the two students shared the same ambition to run their own business.

And before they'd even graduated, the two aspiring entrepreneurs had mapped out how they'd build a business together.

Ten years later, that business became a reality. And today Recom Solutions is a thriving contracting and consulting business headquartered just a stone's throw from the main Salford University campus.

This year the two founders are predicting turnover to breach the £20m threshold.

McKnight and Dillon were both sponsored through university by contractor Bovis Lend Lease. "It was a four-year course: six months at uni alternating with six months out on site," says McKnight.

McKnight, born and raised in Northern Ireland, selected Salford after considering universities in Edinburgh, Newcastle and his native Belfast. A passion for Manchester United played a part in the decision, he admits.

Dillon, meanwhile, was a local boy, growing up in Manchester.

Both academically bright, the two students thrived

in the university environment, but they were mostly inspired by their time spent out on site. "We got to work with some of the best minds in the business," recalls McKnight.

Their university course also gave Dillon and McKnight the opportunity to acquire some international experience, studying for a term in Graz, Austria. Dillon then returned to Manchester to work on the new Royal Infirmary project while McKnight undertook a construction placement with Bovis in New York.

"I was working on a high rise residential project, 111 Central Park North. The US is very different from the UK – for a start, it's very unionised," he says. "But the construction team I was with were fantastic; everything was very methodical and their attitude was very matter of fact."

While in New York, McKnight also volunteered with a charity – Project Children – set up in the 1970s by two expatriate Irishmen to provide both Catholic and Protestant children some respite from the Troubles.

"Living and working in New York was a great experience for a 22-year-old from Ireland," says McKnight.

Bovis spotted the pair's potential early on. A competitive programme for student performance on various Bovis projects saw McKnight and Dillon regularly top the rankings. Both were subsequently selected for a 'springboard' scheme for external leadership training, which involved a visit to Lend



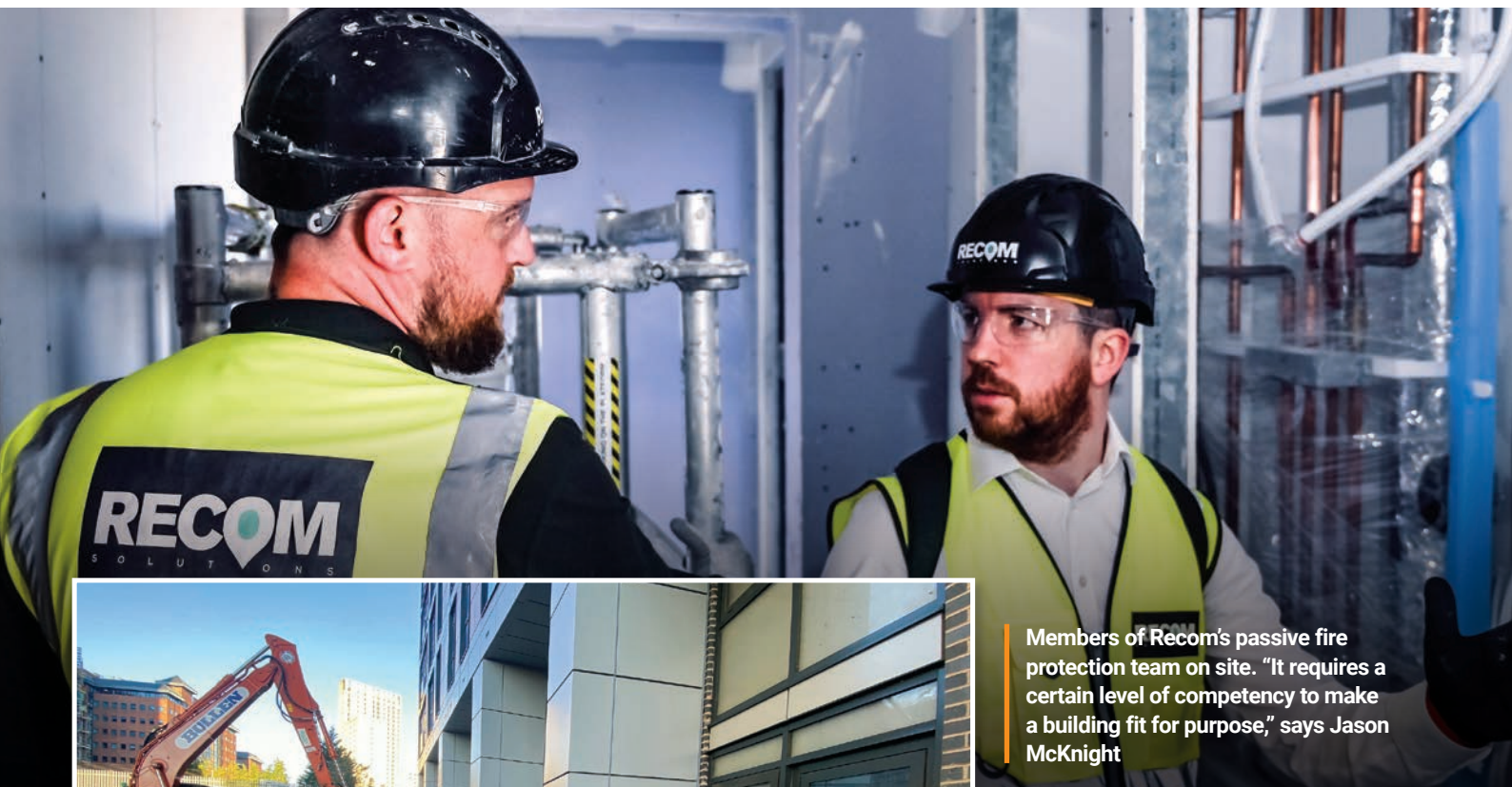
Jason McKnight (l) and Joe Dillon (r) met as students at Salford University

Lease projects in Australia.

After graduation in 2008 Dillon and McKnight went on to work with Bovis on different projects but they remained in close contact. Both were high-achievers at university, leaving with first-class degrees. Dillon was named "Best Overall Student" and won an accolade for "Best Dissertation".

At work with Bovis, they continued to excel. "But I think Bovis realised that we weren't going to hang around for very long," says McKnight.

Graduation coincided with a phenomenon that nobody had predicted: the 2008 global recession that cut a swathe through the UK's construction sector. Bovis was forced to impose a



Members of Recom's passive fire protection team on site. "It requires a certain level of competency to make a building fit for purpose," says Jason McKnight



Recom Solutions has taken on several stalled residential schemes. Among them is Furness Quays, a new £52m residential development in Salford for client Latimer

► programme of redundancies and layoffs and while many new recruits were let go, both McKnight and Dillon were kept on.

Dillon went to project manage the Royal Eye Hospital on Oxford Road, part of Manchester Royal Infirmary, and McKnight was assigned to the MoD's Single Living Accommodation programme. This followed his first job as project manager: the new Pendle Vale College in Burnley, one of the government's Building Schools for the Future schemes.

Though deployed separately, McKnight and Dillon remained in constant communication – professionally and socially. "We played a lot of five-a-side football and we had lots of conversations about what we were going to do after Bovis," says McKnight.

Many ambitious twenty-somethings are fearless enough to take the plunge into the world of business without much preparation – plenty of blue-chip businesses were launched on a shoestring by a visionary equipped with nothing more than a bank loan and naïve self-belief.

But for each of those success stories there must be dozens of failures and McKnight and Dillon weren't going to risk it.

"We knew the sort of business we wanted to create but we also knew that we weren't ready to leave full-time employment. We weren't fully-rounded; we needed more experience," says McKnight.

At this time, both McKnight and Dillon were managing Bovis sites, working closely with other members of the supply chain. "We were working with some of the leading consultants," says McKnight, dropping a couple of instantly-recognisable names, "and we were surprised to find ourselves coaching them. We were already ahead of the curve."

With limited domestic responsibilities or significant demands on their time the two devoted themselves entirely to work, anxious to learn and develop the skills they knew they'd need to launch their own business.

"We were trying to understand where the gaps were and were working towards getting the

necessary accreditations," adds McKnight.

In 2012, four years after graduating, Dillon and McKnight finally incorporated their business, registering the company as Recom Solutions Ltd.

The name Recom provides a clear indication that the two founders knew exactly what their business was going to be all about, being an amalgamation of 'retail/residential', 'commercial' and 'operations management'. But although the business was now a living entity, it remained in suspended animation for three more years.

In 2013 McKnight left Bovis to take up a new position with AA Projects, a project management firm based in Sale.

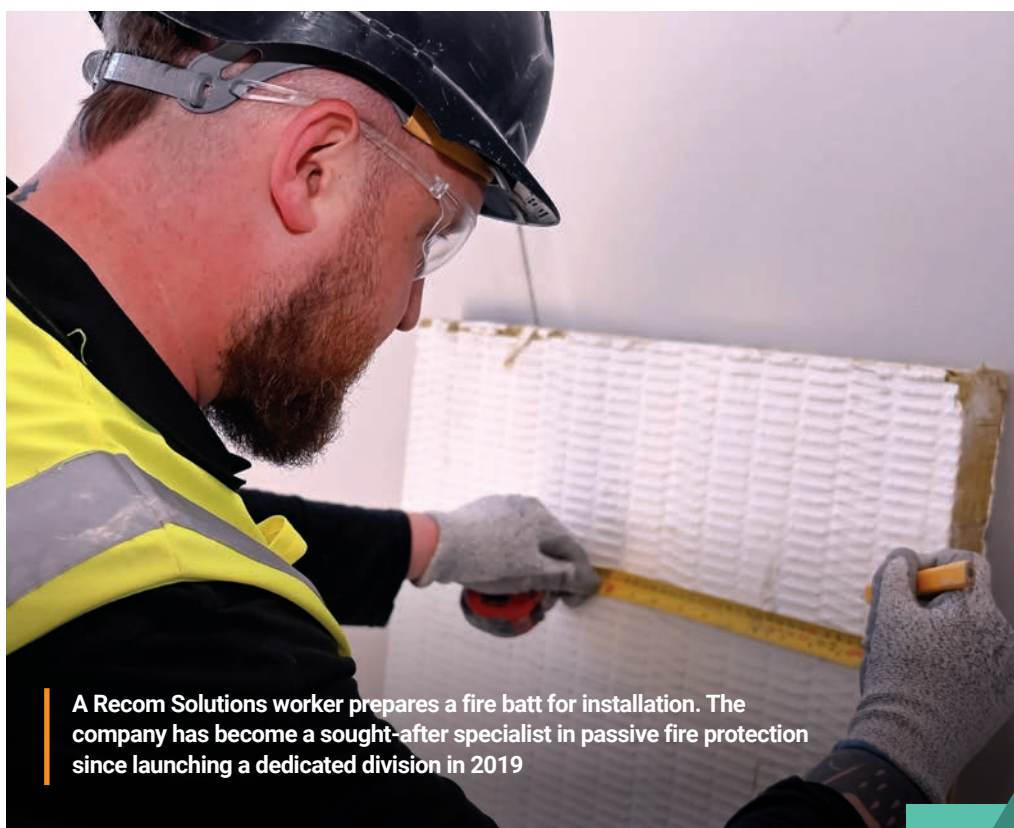
At the same time, Dillon left to join Prosol, a small contractor based in Trafford Park specialising in the healthcare and education sectors.

"At AA Projects I learned how to procure consultants, while at Prosol Joe learned about procuring subcontractors," explains McKnight.

Two years in their respective roles enabled McKnight and Dillon to plug the perceived gaps in their portfolio and in 2015 they finally made their move: they revived Recom Solutions – the business that had lain dormant since 2012 – and began building a business.

McKnight was using co-working office space in the old Great Northern Warehouse in Manchester when Recom Solutions landed its first substantial contract.

"I got talking to the building manager and he said 'well, we're doing some construction work upstairs as it happens,'" says McKnight. The manager arranged a meeting for McKnight and Dillon with Steve Pette, owner of Central Working, a provider of flexible office space for businesses



A Recom Solutions worker prepares a fire batt for installation. The company has become a sought-after specialist in passive fire protection since launching a dedicated division in 2019

TIMELINE

and entrepreneurs, and the result was a £500,000 contract for Recom Solutions.

The contract was to convert vacant space in the Great Northern Warehouse building into new office accommodation. "It was a proper fit-out job and we had lots of fit-out experience by then," explains McKnight.

With a 20% advance from Central Working, McKnight and Dillon set about assembling their supply chain. Pulling together a cohesive team and managing a contract is the most challenging aspect of a project, says McKnight: "Building is the easy bit," he says.

But their time served with Bovis, AA Projects and Prosol meant that Recom Solutions had a wide pool of contacts to draw on. "We'd built up strong relations with several suppliers and were able to employ some extremely good small subcontractors," says McKnight.

This being their first major project, McKnight and Dillon were anxious not to blow it and thus were focused on delivering a first-rate result. "We went belt-and-brace, making sure the client was kept fully informed at all stages." The contract, completed in eight weeks, proved successful and began an ongoing relationship with Pette.

Drawing on their previous experience and local contacts, McKnight and Dillon set about securing more work in sectors they knew well. "With Joe's experience in the health sector we started chasing healthcare jobs in the Greater Manchester area while my previous work with the University of Manchester while at AA Projects helped us qualify for a place on the university's framework," says McKnight.

At the same time, Recom Solutions was on the

lookout for opportunities in niche sectors that might be under-exploited. One specialist area very soon proved ideal.

"Joe had worked on lots of passive fire protection jobs with Bovis and we saw an opportunity in the fact that a lot of contractors weren't really up to speed in this area," says McKnight.

Passive fire protection (PFP) – the installation of fire-rated materials to seal openings, coat surfaces and compartmentalise a building to limit the spread of fire – is generally less understood than active measures such as sprinklers.

At that time, any contractor could act as a PFP installer and the fact that the installation and application of PFP products requires the sort of skills possessed by most dry-liners, plasterers and general tradespeople often meant that PFP products were applied by people without the specialist knowledge of how PFP performs.

"It requires a certain level of competency to make a building fit for purpose and unfortunately there's a lack of understanding in the industry about the role of PFP," says McKnight. "The attitude was 'anybody can do it'.

"The technical ability and understanding by main contractors have been a factor but so have budgetary constraints driven by clients," he adds.

A poor understanding of the role of PFP allowed contractors and their clients to down-spec or even ignore PFP requirements in a bid to reduce costs. "I absolutely hate the term 'value engineering' – it's just another name for cost-cutting," says McKnight.

In the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, attention was suddenly focused on the fire performance of buildings – but even before that, building owners and occupiers were becoming ▶p29

2012

Recom Solutions is incorporated

2015

Recom starts trading with its first contract: a £500,000 fit-out in Deansgate, Manchester

2017

Recom appointed on projects up to £160m as project manager/quantity surveyor

2019

Recom wins place on NHS shared business services framework. Passive Fire Protection division is launched

2021

Recom embarks on its first 'distressed' residential scheme completion

2024

PFP division targets £6m turnover. Consultancy appointed to numerous public sector projects. Construction turnover reduced to aid stability

2025

Recom celebrates 10 years of trading. Construction takes on more 'traditional' public sector contracts. Recom named SME of the Year in the North West Regional Construction awards.



Recom Solutions' senior leadership team (l-r): Sarah Leadbetter, head of fire protection; Jordan Stent, head of construction; co-founder Joseph Dillon; James Holmes, group head of operations; co-founder Jason McKnight; Luke Roscoe, head of consultancy and Gemma McKnight, head of human resources



In 2019 Recom Solutions project-managed construction of a new training facility in Wythenshawe for high street retailer Timpsons

► aware of shortcomings in their estates' fire protection.

From his experience with Bovis, Dillon had acquired good technical knowledge of PFP – “We learned from other people's mistakes,” says McKnight. “We had the opportunity to offer help to our healthcare and education clients. They knew that something had to be done – their own fire officers had told them.”

This eventually led to the creation in 2019 of Recom's own dedicated passive fire protection division.

The PFP division has since secured national contracts for a variety of clients including government offices, social housing schemes, apartment blocks, industrial and commercial properties as well as in the healthcare and education sectors.

With its roots firmly in the Greater Manchester region, Recom Solutions has grown steadily thanks to its strong connections to major clients such as Manchester University and the local healthcare trust.

In the early days – when it was just McKnight and Dillon – the business operated out of an office over a chip shop in Trafford Park. It has since moved

twice and now occupies its own three-storey headquarters, bought in 2022, at Waters Edge business park in Salford Quays.

Key to the company's growth during this period was the development of an experienced senior leadership team. James Holmes, who had worked with both McKnight and Dillon at Bovis, joined Recom in 2020. He now leads the group of three businesses (construction, consulting and PFP) as group head of operations.

Jordan Stent, another former Bovis colleague, joined Recom in 2017 and is now head of construction; Luke Roscoe joined the business as strategic lead in 2022 and is now head of consultancy, while Sarah Leadbetter, who also joined in 2022 as healthcare projects lead now heads up the passive fire protection division.

Flagship project management consultancy schemes over the years have included the award-winning redevelopment of the Old Quadrangle at the University of Manchester and the disaster recovery operation for the Cancer Research UK Institute Manchester following a fire at The Christie's Paterson Building.

A more recent diversification is the resumption

of interrupted residential schemes where other contractors have become insolvent – another kind of disaster recovery. These include a 56-house development Sandbach, Cheshire, and a 155-unit development in Bristol.

Recom, which has accreditation from the National House Building Council, is currently undertaking an interrupted scheme for 52 homes in Delamere, Cheshire.

“When a project goes wrong it's seldom due to just one thing,” says McKnight. “We go in and pick up the pieces and the first thing to do is get the client on board. This is essential because there's going to be nothing but bad news until the project is finally finished”.

“The client can be left holding the pieces of a project; we're there to provide a solution,” he continues.

As a small business, Recom Solutions has thrived by providing a quality service to a portfolio of local clients; but as it grows, the business is starting to look further afield.

The PFP division already offers a UK-wide service – satisfying a growing demand hitherto overlooked by other contractors. But its consulting and construction activities have found new business in Birmingham, Bristol and London, where its representatives are seeking new clients.

A growing business needs a strong workforce and, like most construction firms in the UK today, Recom Solutions faces stiff competition in its bid to recruit the skills it needs.

“It's a struggle for everybody at the moment,” admits McKnight. And he fears that in the current political and economic climate the skills shortage will not improve. “There's been a real shift in attitudes in the past five years. Young people see a career as a ‘nice to have’ rather than a long-term career path.”

Whereas McKnight and Dillon were focused on long-term career goals from their undergraduate days, even graduate recruits today seem more likely to have itchy feet – Recom Solutions has recently lost two team members who upped sticks and moved to Australia.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this, making itself an attractive employer for ambitious school- and university-leavers has always been a priority for Recom Solutions.

“At the outset, we had a vision to raise standards in construction and consultancy, and then to do things better than others in passive fire protection, based on what we had seen in the industry,” says McKnight.

“We've developed three outstanding business units with their own leadership teams and have prided ourselves on developing talent across the company and giving young people an opportunity in the industry by supporting them through their studies and recruiting apprentices.

“Throughout, we've sought to become an employer of choice by providing career chances and implementing a market-leading programme of staff benefits.” ■