



Firmly in the family: (from left) Steven Dixon, Rick Willmott, Sir Ian Dixon, Peter Willmott.

Stand by your clan

Sons or daughters taking over the reins of family firms have to prove their worth nowadays. Jessica Cargill Thompson explains how the succession has been tackled at a successful contracting business whose affairs have long been under the control of two families. Photographs by Julian Anderson.

THERE COMES A TIME IN THE LIFE of every parent when one has to let go and allow the next generation to get on with it. At Willmott Dixon, that painful process is well under way as the contractor's two family representatives relinquish responsibility in favour of their sons.

Peter Willmott, the fourth generation of his family to head the firm, retired two and a half years ago. The firm's current chairman, Sir Ian Dixon, is due to retire at the end of next year.

Already being groomed for the top are their two sons, Rick Willmott and Steven Dixon, both 33 and hand-picked by their respective fathers as successors. Despite the coincidence that they are both eldest sons, Sir Ian is adamant that their succession was in no way inevitable.

"Selection is probably the most difficult and the most delicate part of handing over the reins of a company," says Sir Ian. "I think the criterion we both used was what's best for the company. It's the old story – the cobbler's son isn't necessarily the best bootmaker."

Long road to the top

Planning the succession has been a lengthy process, and started more than 10 years ago. Retirement of the family heads have to be co-ordinated with those of other directors, and potential successors have to be selected and guided through the appropriate training. It was also agreed that there would be only one successor from each family, to

prevent the possibility of a network of people with a controlling interest getting out of hand within only a few generations.

For Peter Willmott, the choice of successor was straightforward – he had a daughter about to go to law school and a son who had already expressed an interest in the construction industry and had proved his competence by doing work experience on site in the school holidays. Rick joined the company in 1982 as assistant site manager, working his way round the company's subsidiaries and up the management ladder until he was appointed director in 1994. Since then, he has been in charge of construction in the group's five regional businesses.

"Rick's a very good site manager. He's practical and he's good at putting up buildings," says Sir Ian, who, when he was chief executive, was responsible for overseeing Rick's development. "He also has the authority of having worked on site. They can't say 'you don't know what you're talking about' because he's been there, done that."

The Dixon inheritance was more complex. First, it was not until 1987 that Sir Ian became a partner and John Willmott Construction became Willmott Dixon Ltd. Second, Sir Ian, himself renowned for his strong management style, looked first to his daughter Amanda, who had a management degree.

"I think it would have made most sense to choose her, and I would have done. She

is the best manager. But she's been ill with ME, so it just wasn't possible."

As it turned out, neither was she interested, so his eye turned to his two sons: Steven, whose strength lies in sales, and Mark, a graphic designer. Being a practical man, Sir Ian chose the salesman rather than the artist. "But if I thought my son wasn't right for the job, I wouldn't have done it," he says.

Learning the ropes elsewhere

Having already worked as a trainee site manager and a commercial property negotiator for other contractors, Steven joined Willmott Dixon Maintenance in 1989 as regional sales manager. He is now national sales director of Willmott Dixon Construction and Housing.

Looking at the two families side by side, they couldn't seem more different. The willowy stature and almost aristocratic sobriety of the Willmotts seem very fragile next to the stockier, brasher Dixons.

Both generations see similarities in the family line. "Steven is like me. He's big and fat and plays rugby," says Sir Ian. "He also has the same personality traits. He's very strong-willed."

Peter Willmott – who is more than happy to sit back and let Sir Ian do all the talking, interjecting only to correct points of fact – recognises that his son, although physically similar, is far more outspoken than himself. He attributes this to Rick's more academic background, whereas ▶

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SIR IAN DIXON, CHAIRMAN



► Peter came up through the trades.

Rick and Steven have known one another since they were 10-year-old prep school boys at Kingshot School in Hertfordshire. Despite going to the same boarding school, The Leys in Cambridge, they say their paths rarely crossed, Willmott junior devoting his time to county athletics while Dixon junior was scrummaging on the rugby pitch.

Neither is aware of there having been any parental pressure to follow a career in construction. "To be honest, it wouldn't have worked - we'd have just rebelled," says Steven Dixon.

"I had no parental pressure, but obviously there was a line of tradition," says Rick Willmott, the fifth generation to enter the family firm. "When you're young and you have the opportunity to be around building sites, you'd rather spend your holidays there than stacking shelves in a supermarket. It's the kind of industry where you can get hooked."

All four feel that being a family business sets the company apart from its publicly quoted competitors. To the employee, this means a more paternal attitude that tends to be met with long service. To the directors, it means the freedom to worry about the company rather than the share price. And to the client, it means an insistence from the top on high standards and the reassurance of a real person behind

the company name; that, in theory, they can pick up the phone and talk to "Mr Willmott" or "Mr Dixon".

So far, neither Steven nor Rick feels that their fathers are breathing down their necks, aside from the inevitable scrutiny that Steven accepts he must come under until he has qualified. "My father has backed right out of the business," says Rick Willmott, "unlike his father, who haunted him until he was in his 70s."

"I took the decision many years ago when my father retired that I would get out

at 65. I don't think I've interfered since," says Peter Willmott.

In general, Steven and Rick plan to keep the company running "in much the same vein as we have done for five generations", hoping to continue its steady growth. They also plan to raise the profile of the company on the international market.

Sir Ian will remain group chairman until the end of 1997, but, at the board's request, will continue in the post part-time for another five years. He says it is unlikely that he will be succeeded in his managerial capacity immediately by Rick Willmott, who will then be only 40, and both fathers feel this is too young for the role.

Steven Dixon, meanwhile, will have to pass his professional examinations before he will be invited to join the board. All Willmott Dixon directors must be a member of their chartered institution, and family members are no exception.

"If and when he gets qualified, if he's a good boy, keeps his nose clean - and scores enough tries on Saturdays - he should come on at the beginning of 1998," says his father.

With the next generation of Willmotts and Dixons still only old enough to play with building blocks, it is too early to know whether the lineages will continue with a sixth generation of Willmotts and a third of Dixons. Only time will tell.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WILLMOTT DIXON

1852 John Willmott Construction founded in Cambridgeshire. First contract: constructing a well at Wimpole Hall.

1870 Moved to Hitchin, Hertfordshire. Has been based there since.

1965 Peter Willmott becomes chairman.

1967 Ian Dixon joins John Willmott Construction.

1987 Company changes name to Willmott Dixon Ltd.

1993 Peter Willmott retires and son Rick is appointed to main board.

1996 Ian Dixon knighted in New Year Honours. Group turnover £240m; staff 1100.