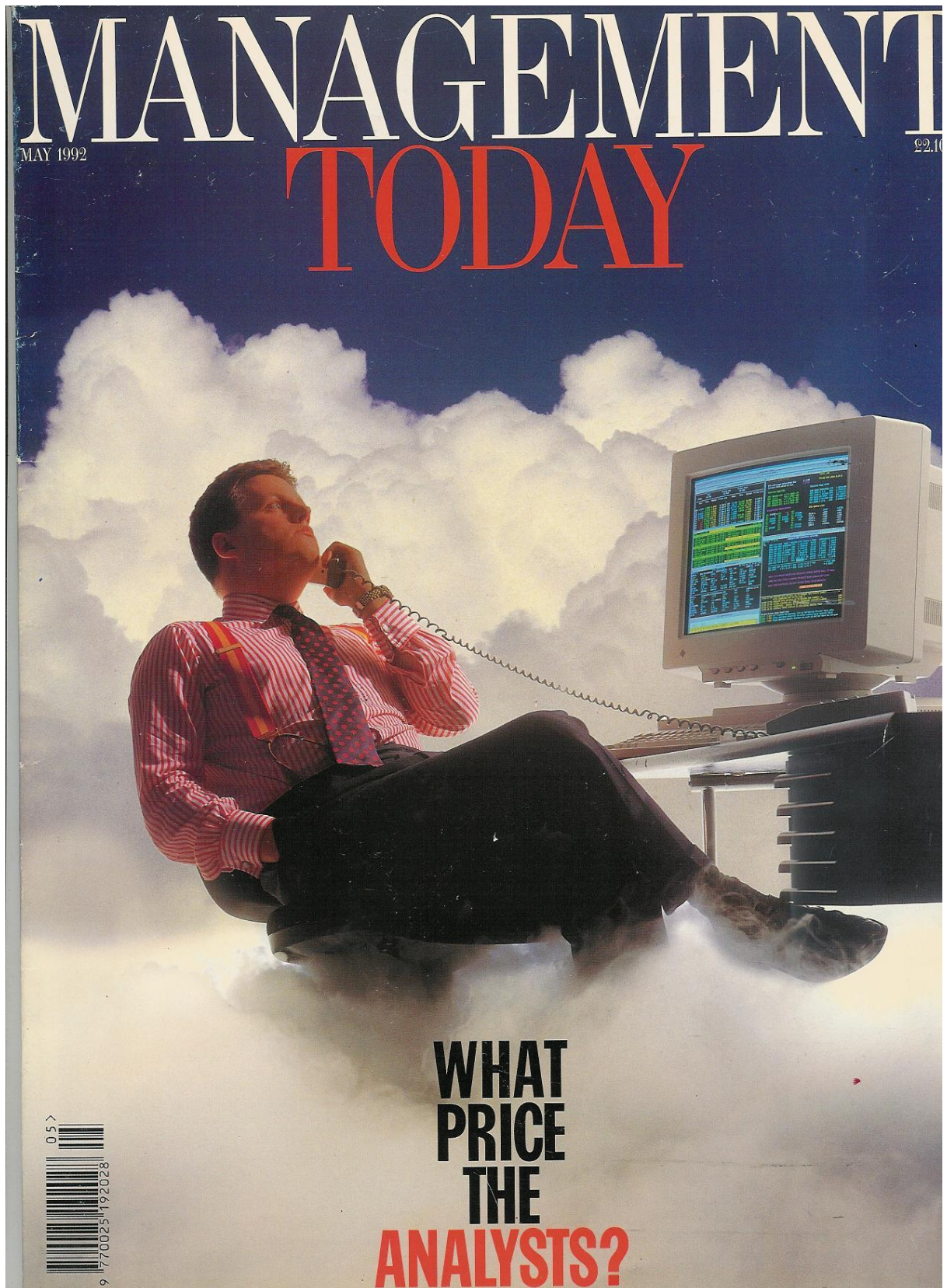


A Funny Article reporting on Jeff Charlton as an Entrepreneur in 1992



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# MAKING THE MOST OF A DIRTY BUSINESS

Neither fear, fire, nor Foreign Legion come between Jeff and his nice little earner. The RAF may be surprised to learn they helped. **Charles Darwent**

Had you had the mixed fortune to be at Riyadh Airport one airless night a year ago last February, you might have seen a shadowy figure creep across the tarmac towards a waiting, Kuwait-bound RAF Hercules. Certainly, a Foreign Legion security guard did, for he stopped the aforementioned figure and asked it to produce its documentation.

'Well', says Jeff Charlton, for such was the figure's name, 'if e'd said me passport I'd 'ave showed 'im straight off: but I didn't 'ave no documentation, so I told him so, flat.' [For reasons of house style, all aspirates and participles will be reinstated from this point]. The effect on the Legionnaire was electrifying: hissing 'Special Services', he led Charlton to the aircraft and found him a seat on a cargo palette. Three hours later, Charlton, complete with rucksack ('Two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants and all my chemicals') adorned with a Union Jack ('Well, I didn't want to get shot, did I?') became, in all probability, the first British businessman to set foot in liberated Kuwait.

Yes, I know: but Charlton swears it's true, and, in a sense, it doesn't matter. The point is not the detail, but the moral. Charlton, MD of a firm, GraffitiClean, with a turnover in six figures, was on the ground, selling, while what he pungently refers to as 'the fat-arses' were worrying about traffic on the M25. 'I'll tell you what,' he says, exasperated, 'everyone moans about how the Yanks got all the business in Kuwait, but I'll tell you why. They were out there straight away, selling. The British came along a couple of days later, and they handed out brochures. I mean, Charles.'

It is, no doubt, dangerous to suggest that there is such a thing as the entrepreneur of the future, but I have seen Jeff Charlton and he works. This observation is based not so much on Charlton's performance as a combatant in the Battle for Kuwait as in the really bloody war that took place after the liberation: the one between Charlton and his supposed compatriots, the uncallsipygian British businessmen described so trenchantly above. If this skirmish can be said to have produced a commercial Norman Schwartzkopf, then Charlton may be said, without too much fear of exaggeration, to have been it. Well-upholstered he may be, but Charlton's performance shows him to be a complete antithesis to that infamously large-bottomed animal, the traditional British businessman.

Let us consider points in favour of his candidature. The prime one is 60▷

**Jeff Charlton in graffiti-removing mode outside the National Gallery**



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flexibility. In 1984, Charlton ran a small but successful trucking company, delivering parts for Comet; in 1989, he ran a small but unsuccessful trucking company, not delivering parts for Comet. All of this is retailed with devastating frankness: 'We,' Charlton observes, 'got done up like a kipper.' But do we feel downhearted? We do not. 'Listen', Charlton reasons, 'two years ago, Alan Sugar was worth £120 million; today he's only worth maybe £60 million. Does that mean he's half as clever? Two years ago, Amstrad only made computers; two years from now, they'll be making fridges with radios in. That's what it's all about.' Falling back on an earlier skill (blacksmithing), Charlton took to mending iron railings – a nice little earner.

One day he was doing the gates at Bush House when someone asked him whether his sanding machine could clean floors: Charlton replied that it well might. Now he was in building renovation. Then he was in Sweden, learning graffiti-removing techniques. (And a bit of Swedish: take Charlton's rogue aspirates with a pinch of salt.) Almost immediately, he was appointed official anti-graffitist to London Underground, and was soon turning over well in excess of £300,000 a year. Eighteen months later with the underground finances in dire straits, GraffitiClean's lucrative business disappeared in the inevitable cutbacks, and with it some 70% of the firm's income.

'That bastard at ... (he names a bank) – yeah, say I said he's a bastard and say I said to say it – told me "Don't write

any more cheques",' GraffitiClean's MD recalls. 'So I looked at the news and I thought "Kuwait: now that sounds dirty".' Charlton sold his car and cashed in his life insurance. The rest, as they say, is history.

Now, odious though comparisons may be, let us compare this story with the Kuwait experiences of other British firms. Having already (ahem) joined the SAS and co-opted a British Army Landrover in Kuwait City, Charlton decided to call in the Navy. 'I knew they were going to have to get all those tanks back somehow,' he says, 'so I rang the DTI and said, "You got some room on a ship?" They said yes, so I thought to myself, "All those bombs: what are they really going to need?" And I reckoned, Glass. So I rang up Pilkington's and said, "Let's do a deal. I've got an empty ship: you let me have some glass and I'll sell it for you." And do you know what they said when they eventually rang back?' – Charlton affects a highly-aspirated drawl – "'We've never really been very successful in the Middle East, so we don't think we'll bother. But if you'd like to take out some samples of our stained glass" – stained f\*\*\*in' glass to Kuwait – "it might do".'

And there is much, much more where this came from. Among other firms at whose entrepreneurial myopia Charlton expresses disbelief, are ICI and British Berol, both of which refused to airfreight out cleaning chemicals to what Charlton's sidekick, Peter Croxford, describes as 'the biggest job in the world': in the end, the pair had to approach Berol's Swedish HQ.

Charlton's jibes are not the simple brickbats he makes

**While other British businessmen were still 'handing out brochures', GraffitiClean did the business in Kuwait**



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them out to be, however: they are, rather, part of a passingly sophisticated management philosophy. 'See me, Charles, I'm a terrible manager,' says GraffitiClean's MD, deadpan. 'Hill Samuel, now, they like words like "long-term projections". You know, when I was in Kuwait, this company – let's just say it was one of the Top 100 – offered to buy me out. So we sat down in the Holiday Inn and they said, "What would you charge to clean that building over there?" So I said, maybe £65,000. So this geezer taps it into his laptop and he says, "times 10,000 buildings" and so on, and before you know it he's giving me my weekly annual return for the year 2000. I just don't believe that. Nobody knows where the roulette wheel's going to stop, so you've just got to cover all the numbers and keep your eye on it while it slows down. People talk about luck in business: that's what luck is.'

Thus GraffitiClean's multi-branched operation, with a fast-flex structure that would make Professor Charles Handy salivate. Sitting in what passes for an office in the back of an industrial unit in Woolwich (a framed letter from the Kuwaiti Crown Prince, referring to its recipient as a 'praiseworthy manager', hangs over a highly un-Islamic bottle of Teacher's), Charlton shuffles brochures advertising his various products and points out to Croxford that one is missing. 'Chiropody?' hazards Croxford, sweetly. Many a true word: GraffitiClean's 10-man team already offers an admirable range of deeply unpleasant services, including tower-block rubbish-chute cleaning, flood damage repair and air-conditioning maintenance.

'Until we came along, you couldn't really clean rubbish chutes,' says Charlton. 'Well, you can't put little boys down them any more, can ya? So we had this turbo-injecting brush made for when we did Thamesmead' – GraffitiClean are official valets to both Southwark Council and the London Docklands Development Corporation – 'and, well, you wouldn't believe what we found down there after 20 years. That's lucky, innit?' The firm has also pioneered the use of a minute four-wheel-drive motor car for sending along air conditioning ducts to take Legionella swabs ('Luck as well') and, post-King's Cross, an anti-fireball paint system for use in large buildings ('That's so lucky that no-one even knows about it yet').

Another Charlton incarnation – as a medical technician at the old St George's Hospital – has left him with a handy grasp of chemistry, though even he was defeated when demonstrating graffiti-removal in front of Kuwaiti television.

'I've got this bit of wall, right?' winces Charlton, 'and I've sprayed "Saddam Rules OK" on it. So I start cleaning with an assistant and the chemicals only evaporate, don't they? – it's 120 degrees – and the cameras are rolling. So the next thing is me assistant's up and legged it. Well,' Charlton reasons, eyeing an SS officer's hat kept specially for such moments, 'I had to sack him, Charles, didn't I?'

True to form, however, Charlton remains on the commercial qui vive, eyeing the European roulette wheel against the day when the Kuwaiti one ceases to turn. Using a patent bacterial dispersant, GraffitiClean has

**'Hello, Sainsbury I'm Jeff' -and so a new contract went into the bag**

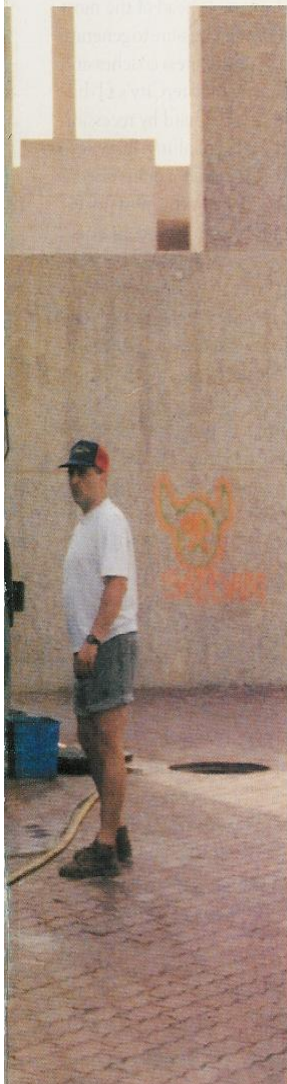
won a lucrative contract to de-clog a four-mile subterranean pipe network flooded with crude oil by Hussein's departing soldiers, but – true to his short-termist management principles – the firm's MD is refusing to look further ahead than that.

While in Kuwait, Charlton noticed an article in an Arab newspaper on the Paris metro's problems with 'taggers' (that sub-specie of graffitiists specialising in the re-decoration of underground railways), and instantly got Croxford to telephone the relevant RATP department. RATP were clearly impressed by the firm's transmanche experience ('The little bastards in London used to sneak up and graffiti our employees, never mind station walls,' remarks Charlton, pithily), and negotiations are currently under way.

As to London, Charlton has plans to clean that up, too. He has already made (or, rather, unmade) his mark on the National Gallery's new Sainsbury Wing, whose curators, unlike those at the Tate, have decided that graffiti is not an art form they want to appear on their walls. If any doubt remains as to Charlton's business nous, allow me to leave you with this potent little vignette. 'I'm a real philistine, me,' beams Charlton, happily. 'I mean, I didn't even know what the National Gallery was, but I looked at that new bit and I thought, "People are going to get the 'ump with that." [This on the grounds of cost rather than on Robert Venturi's pallid aesthetic.] 'So I've gone in and I've said, "You're going to have problems," and they said, "You'd better come up and see the boss." So they show me into this room, and there's this little geezer stands up and says, "Hello, I'm Sainsbury." Well, I thought "Odd name," but I didn't want to offend him, so I said "Hello, Sainsbury, I'm Jeff," and I sat down and told him about my anti-graffiti system, and he listened and asked questions. Now, that's a good businessman.'



**One man's illicit work of art is another's business opportunity. Jeff Charlton might be the last to discourage the first**



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