

Celebrating a double anniversary

This year marks both a Silver and a Diamond anniversary for Peter Thom, MD of Cambridgeshire-based Green Heat, a firm that specialises in energy efficiency consultancy and installation. PHAM News spoke with Peter to find out about the contributions he's made to the industry.

This year marks a double anniversary for Peter Thom, who in 2015 is celebrating the personal achievement of 50 years in the industry as well as 25 years at the helm of his business, Green Heat. There may be no shortage of installers who can look back on five decades of service within heating and plumbing, but there are few who can also lay claim to having played a material role in the development of energy efficiency policy in the UK.

When Peter began his career 1965 as an apprentice with Eastern Gas, the most common efficiency measures were draught proofing and insulating cylinders, so it would have been hard to predict that his career would see him become a leading figure on the front line of putting energy efficiency high on the political agenda. By the 1970s, when the oil crisis made energy conservation a necessity, Peter got involved with the Institute of Domestic Heating and Environmental Engineers (IDHEE), an organisation that was ahead of its time in focusing on the link between home heating and the environment. Peter would later become a two-time President of the IDHEE and now sits on the Board of Directors.

"When I got my qualification with the IDHEE, the emphasis was firmly on calculating and demonstrating the results of your work," explains Peter. "I was taught that if you can measure something, you can manage it and improve it."

Energy ratings

This scientific approach saw Peter's career eventually move to the business of promoting energy efficiency to clients and the Government. When he founded Green Heat in 1990, the original aim was to provide home energy ratings to domestic customers, however the scope broadened out to include consultancy for housing associations, building societies and commercial establishments. Having worked for a number of years previously helping to develop the Starpoint rating system, a precursor to SAP, Peter brought a wealth of knowledge to his new enterprise.

"We pioneered and developed home energy ratings and lobbied to get these into Building Regulations," explains Peter. "We succeeded in 1995, when SAP ratings were first required



Peter Thom with his John Cheshire Green Business Award for his outstanding contribution to energy efficiency in the UK

by Part L. Since then, SAP ratings have been woven into all energy saving legislation and government schemes."

Condensing technology

The second objective of Green Heat was to promote the use of condensing technology, long before it became a requirement. However, in the early days of Green Heat, Peter found that while it was easy to recommend condensing boilers, it was nearly impossible to find an installer conversant with this technology. This hole in the market meant Green Heat would open its doors to installation work as well.

"In 1990 we were one of only a very few heating companies promoting and installing this technology," says Peter. "In 1997 I made several radical predictions in a paper given at the IDHEE annual conference, one being that only condensing boilers should be available within the following 10 years and that open flue appliances should be phased out. This was met by a lot of opposition, but again we demonstrated the benefits and lobbied Government to enforce this through regulation. The result was that condensing boilers were eventually made a requirement in the 2005 Building Regulations."

Another major achievement Peter can point to is his role in

getting the boiler scrappage scheme enacted in 2010. In the aftermath of the successful car scrappage scheme, he joined a heating taskforce which lobbied for a simple and accessible programme that would enable consumers to replace their 'G' rated boilers with modern, efficient condensing models.

Scrappage success

"Boiler scrappage was the most successful scheme the industry has ever seen," Peter insists. "Government allocated £50m for the initiative, and the money went very quickly. One of the reasons it was so successful was because it was simple, it didn't confuse the public. But another important reason was that it was open to small installation businesses as well as the big ones. As long as they were Gas Safe registered, they could have a piece of the action."

In sum, around 120,000 'G' rated boilers were displaced with 'A' rated boilers under the scrappage scheme, which by any measure made a significant dent in the country's carbon output. So when the Green Deal was launched in 2013, Peter had high hopes that this new scheme would enjoy similar success, both with householders and small installation companies. Because the aims of the Green Deal married up nicely with those of Green Heat, Peter went to considerable expense and trouble to get his company accredited.

"The original Green Deal plan had all the hallmarks of a good scheme," says Peter. "The pay-as-you-save aspect was set at 0% interest on the loan taken out to do the improvements, and it was going to be open to all Gas Safe registered installers, regardless of the size of their company. Left this way, it should have worked, but Government ended up making it so bureaucratic that nobody could really understand it."

Green Deal

Over the next few years, Peter fought hard to bring some common sense to how the Green Deal was run. In 2014 he achieved a small victory when he convinced the Government to amend the Green Deal home improvement fund after he made a FOI request that revealed British Gas was securing more than 95% of the Green Deal cashback vouchers. His efforts were rewarded when the scheme was opened up to smaller installers, and it was hoped a new era had dawned.

Despite this achievement, the Green Deal continued to disappoint, and in January of this year Peter penned a strongly worded letter to David Cameron decrying the programme for excessive red tape and pandering to interest groups that stood to profit from it. He publicly declared his intention to 'uncouple' from the Green Deal, just months before the Government decided to scrap it altogether.

Considering that much of the work done at Green Heat is providing SAP ratings, EPCs and other related energy assessments, you might think that the death of the Green Deal would have dealt a blow to Peter's business, but he doesn't see it this way.

"We will do better because we won't be sidetracked by government meddling and start-stop policy making; we can just get on with the work we do. With the recent closure of so many green schemes, I think installation companies should look on the next one that comes along with suspicion. My advice is: participation in a government scheme may seriously damage your wealth and your business."

What's next

Looking to the next 25 years, Peter and his son Robin, who is Director of Sustainability, will look to carry on their mission to make more homes energy efficient and sustainable.

"There is still a lot of work to be done, still lots of inefficient homes out there," says Peter. "We want to develop our architect and developer clients, showing them how to achieve compliance in a cost effective and environmentally friendly way. We know we're doing good, we've won lots of accolades and awards for our work, and hope that will continue."