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THE BOSS

NAME:

Tony Walker

POSITION:

Chief executive,
Scarecrow
Bio-Acoustic
Systems Ltd

AGE:

72

DRIVES:

Toyota IQ2

LIVES:

West Park,
Uckfield, East
Sussex

STATUS:

Married

FAVOURITE

MEAL:

Moules

FAVOURITE

BOOK:

"50 People
Who Bugged
Up Britain" by
Quentin Letts

Scaring the birds

Tony Walker has always had an interest in sound technology. After the Second World War, he was one of the first to undergo a sound engineering apprenticeship at EMI in Hayes. "I spent several days a week during my training at Abbey Road studios before the Beatles," he remembered. Later, he joined the Pye Group, and one of the systems he designed was used in Coventry Cathedral when it was rebuilt.

Eventually, he set up Millbank Electronics and products which the company first made in the late Seventies still bring in inquiries today from people asking if they can be repaired. Among other things, Millbank designed and manufactured a £6.5 million public address system which could broadcast an evacuation message and was installed for London Underground after the Kings Cross fire. Mr Walker took the turnover up to £9.3 million in 1990, and sold it to some Americans. "They destroyed it through mismanagement," he said.

In 1985, he set up Scarecrow Bio-Acoustic Systems, a private family run business. Today, its bird scaring products are used by most of the world's airports to keep birds away from aircraft jet engines. Other customers include the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, farmers, the Royal Air Force, the Italian Air Force, British Steel, Pfizer, Deloitte Touche, the Eden Project, Hull Docks and Sovereign Harbour at Eastbourne. In the next 18 months, Scarecrow expects to at least double its turnover and change from a family based business to a more commercial enterprise.

To that end, Michael Ziolk - who is a breakfast presenter on Uckfield FM - has been recruited as commercial director, and is joined by a new airside operations sales manager and a sales manager for commercial and urban products.

Bird strikes on aircraft are often in the news - everyone remembers the brilliant crash landing on the Hudson River in New York earlier this year. "Nothing could be done about that because it was high flying Canada geese," said Mr Walker. But much can be done by airports to save lives and prevent expensive aircraft crashing. One of

Scarecrow's most successful products is Ultima, a hand held computer device with an in built global posi-

tioning system which is linked to loudspeakers and uses natural bird distress calls to disperse flocks. It is also a data management and recording system. Now two years old, the first one was bought by Christchurch Airport in New Zealand, and one of the latest uses was to protect Pittsburgh Airport during the recent visit by presidents and their entourages to the G20 economic summit hosted by Barack Obama.

Airports in the United States have found Ultima particularly attractive, said Mr Walker. "It's the answer to all their problems over there: it is quite usual for US airports to use lots of things - including Collie dogs - to disperse birds." If an operator says he dispersed birds at a particular time and yet there was still a bird strike, it is possible to go back to Ultima and find out how and when it was used. "Bird behaviour at an airport can be recorded over time and all the airports in the UK, for example, can exchange data and track birds moving from the south to the north during their migratory periods."

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Ken Livingstone and his hawks keeping pigeons out of Trafalgar Square are probably the most famous example, and Mr Walker was involved at one stage. "But it became very political and we withdrew." The trouble with

hawks, though, is that they can cost £60,000 a year and the birds they are supposed to be scaring learn that the hawk is there and keep away. With a hand held system such as Scarecrow's Patrol Two birds don't become used to the distress calls because they are timed at random. "We lent our system to a landfill site in Scotland and they changed over to it."

For farmers, gas cannons have been used to scare birds - but they have become more socially unacceptable. Scarecrow has developed Compact for agriculture and horticulture. The device sits in the middle of a field playing back the birds' own distress calls over a 360 degree area.

Manufacture of the equipment is contracted out to a firm in Crowborough, East Sussex and another in Colchester, Essex. One of Scarecrow's software designers is based in Australia so that if any system fails while the UK team is in bed, he can be hard at work resolving it. "We do not source any electrical components outside Europe if we can help it. We only buy the plastic mouldings for the hand held Patrol from Japan and some sound system accessories from a firm in Taiwan." Mr Walker is not tempted by China. "People who go for cheap, offshore products pay the penalty".



TONY WALKER