

# The SOSE Spotlight podcast

## Series 3, Episode 4 transcription – Alistair Fell, Iron & Pine

**Host – Sarah Lunney**

Hello and welcome to Series 3 of The SOSE Spotlight Podcast.

Wherever you are, in Dumfries and Galloway, the Scottish Borders or beyond. If you're a business, entrepreneur, community enterprise or aspiring to be one, this is for you.

We're South of Scotland Enterprise and we're all about helping people in the South of Scotland to thrive, grow and fulfil your best potential.

This series is all about putting the spotlight on the inspiring businesses we have supported and highlighting our hidden heroes.

I'm Sarah Lunney, the Net Zero Modern Apprentice for SOSE, and with me today is Alistair Fell, one of the founders of Iron & Pine, a Dalbeattie-based business which recycles used shipping containers to create fully fitted out high specification modular buildings.

With strong net zero and Fair Work credentials, Iron and Pine is an exciting, ambitious young and growing business in the South of Scotland.

Hi, Alistair. It's great to have you here.

**Guest – Alistair Fell**

Hi, Sarah. Great to be here. Thanks for having me along.

**Host**

So, we'll get started. If you could just start with telling us a bit about how the business was formed.

**Guest**

So, my business partner Luke and I grew up together in Newton Stewart and we both went to the Douglas Ewart High School.

And as with many people in the area, we finished school and left - Luke went and joined the army, he was a Royal Engineer.

And I went off to Edinburgh University and we both did our separate things down south and abroad, but we both wanted to move back to Dumfries and Galloway, really passionate about the area.

And there wasn't really much on offer.

So, we put our heads together and came up with the idea of converting shipping containers.

Got going in a friend's hay shed just outside Newton Stewart. He was really kind and let us use that for free.

We got a really small business grant from LEADER at the time, which got us going and the pair of us set off converting a shipping container into an office, with no idea what we were doing.

And the end result turned out pretty well.

That got has a product that we could take out to market and show off, and the rest is history.

Luke's got a great background in engineering and making things happen, he is really practical.

And my background is planning and design and business growth. So, we complement each other pretty well.

We had this vision for building something in Galloway that was proud to be based in the area and that's where the strapline 'Galloway Made' came from.

And all we were really passionate about bringing people back to the area like us who had moved away for university or careers and also developing as many jobs as we could in the area and skilled jobs and long term employment for people whose careers could grow alongside our vision for the business.

So that was kind of the plan.

So yes, that was seven years. Ago, it doesn't seem that long ago, but it's been a bit of a whirlwind since then.

**Host**

So how would you say that it's developed in the past seven years?

**Guest**

Loads.

At start it was me and Luke doing everything. Neither of us are tradesmen. So, we were kind of just guessing and trying to figure it out.

And now we've got 21 on the team that's growing pretty rapidly.

That change in itself is huge, in terms of managing a teaming team as it grows.

I'd say the quality of what we do has increased massively because we've got these really highly skilled tradesmen in the workshop now - joiners and fabricators, welders, decorators, plumbers, electricians really top of the game.

We are still really entrepreneurial as a business and we are nimble and open to opportunity and we're quite flat in terms of decision making.

So that hasn't changed much, but I suppose we're at this stage now where you can't just be entrepreneurial, you've got to be entrepreneurial with all the processes and systems and all that background stuff to operate a business of this sort of scale.

So, it's getting a bit more corporate which is good because it enables growth.

We're kind of doubling the turnover of the business annually at the minute, which is great, but comes with a load of growing pains.

And I guess day-to-day our lives have changed a bit from when we started to manage that growth and people and managing a much bigger quantity of work.

So yeah, it's really exciting and fun.

**Host**

We have heard about your project for developing modular social housing to help the housing crisis, could you touch on that a little bit?

**Guest**

So, it's early days for us in that market, but we're really passionate about tackling particularly rural housing issues, being a rurally based business.

So those big issues in Dumfries and Galloway with housing availability generally and the big house builders typically aren't that interested in building smaller sites in rural locations, which means we're massively underserved as a region.

So, we're developing some standard models for affordable housing and social housing.

By using an off-site modular lean manufacturing approach, we can improve the quality of the houses, reduce running costs, implement all sorts of energy saving renewable energy and hit a price point that makes it affordable to build.

But also, the benefit of being able to develop quite large portfolios of housing. Say we build 100 houses, they can then be sent, say 10 houses per site over 10 sites, and we still get the economies of scale and we can develop quite small sites, but as part of the wider portfolio.

So, we're really trying to push the boundaries of what we can build in that space.

And then also we could some niche solutions around elderly living, incorporating smart technology into that and adaptable homes.

There's a lot of elderly people in the region, in really large homes that aren't really the best fit for them and their needs.

And so, if we can develop more modern technology-enabled homes, that could potentially free up their houses.

There are all sorts of stuff we're doing. It's quite exciting.

**Host**

Can we talk a little bit about the importance of Iron and Pine contributing to the circular economy?

**Guest**

It's really key for us.

I guess circular economy and sustainability sort of work hand in hand. So, from a circular economy point of view, we are recycling containers as the core of our product and they are a fantastic building block to build from because they are core 10 steel bomb proof. These things are designed to travel the world, take 30 tonnes of goods in each of them and get stacked 12 high on a ship.

So, the inherent strength of the units are phenomenal to begin with.

As a nation, we import far more than we export, so there's typically a massive surplus of containers. So we start from the point of recycling the base element, which is really important, and then everything we do from then to convert that into a home or a building or an office, we

look at that from the point of view of being able to disassemble that at a later stage and recycle and reuse as much of that as possible.

The lean manufacturing approach we have to construction massively reduces waste compared to a traditional build for all of our development happening in one location, so we're massively reducing transport costs.

Because of the strength of the building, we can use much lighter touch foundations. We use screw piles quite a lot, which doesn't involve any concrete and at the end of the day the building can be lifted up, reused, removed and we can put the ground back to how it was.

The circular economy part is really key – we use as many local companies and subcontractors as we can. Although we use a lot less subcontractors now than we used to because we've brought most things in house.

We work with the local community as well to help other organisations in that circular economy space by developing buildings for them or container conversions for whatever they need.

So, we're trying to work with other organisations locally too to do that.

### **Host**

It's great to hear. Then a little bit on Fair Work as well. I know that's at the heart of what you guys do by engaging, valuing and listening to your staff.

Can you touch kind of how that benefits your business?

### **Guest**

We've grown the team pretty quickly and it's absolutely crucial that the communication between everyone in the business is good and that doesn't necessarily just happen.

So actually, it's really important that you put in place the systems where everyone has a voice, everyone has the ability to speak up and contributing to the business.

And that spans from us explaining to them what's the strategy, where are we going, what are we doing and why are we doing it?

And as a management team, we've got really strong ideas on what we're trying to do and where we're trying to get to and everyone across the business buys into that.

They know what their role is as part of that and what good looks like as an organisation, which I think in the past, on reflection, we actually we weren't that great at that at some points.

It's pretty tough when you're in the trenches trying to do day-to-day stuff, actually that communication pit can sink down.

So, we've made a conscious effort to make that easier.

We're just implementing some new processes where we get much more feedback from the guys in terms of how can we improve processes and systems and what do you love about work? What don't you love?

Generally, everyone's really happy. It's a great team.

Fostering that sort of supportive growth across the company is really important and it's really starting to gel now we've got more senior guys across both management office and in the workshop.

And then apprentices going on under them and that pride in the end product and the quality of workmanship and the customer satisfaction. It's all there and it's all coming together as one piece.

I varied off that Fair Work piece but it all ties in to that sense of purpose.

The big thing there is being fair and trying to make a nice place to work, giving people responsibility, pushing boundaries, letting them win, letting them fail and make supportive when they do.

And then practical things like moving to a four and 1/2 day week. So, we close at half one on the Friday, which gives the guys a longer weekend.

Which is really great for them and we've seen really positive responses from that.

I'm really, really proud of the team. We've got a fantastic team.

I'm proud of the atmosphere at the moment we've made and that's coming through now in terms of recruitment.

Whenever we put in an advert up for a job, most of the people that come through are guys that have been recommended to us from people that are already working with us, who have said what a great place it is and you should come and work here.

So that's really rewarding but continuous improvement is important, because we could always do better.

## **Host**

You touched slightly on recruitment. What are the challenges with recruitment and efforts that you're making at the moment?

## **Guest**

Recruitment is tricky in a rural area where we are.

We're growing quickly, so we recognise that we're probably going to need to double the size of our team over the next year to 18 months to cope with the level of orders we're starting to see come through now.

So it's a strategic issue, if you've got a growth strategy and that relies on doubling the size of your team and recruitment is a big issue as a business, it's a worry to be, to be blunt, you know like how are you going to do that?

And one answer is definitely training people and we've got a great relationship with the college and apprentices.

And bringing more of those guys on and we are really, really keen to grow careers through Iron and Pine and that's something we are really passionate about.

But in order to have good apprentices, you need good, experienced guys to train them and getting them can be tricky.

We're in a good position now. As I say, we've got a lot of people applying speculatively in coming to us, so we're in a better place than we have been in the past when we were probably less well known.

But skills shortage is a tricky thing, attracting good talent to the area if it isn't already here, there's a lot of great people already in employment in the area, but already in great jobs. So how do you attract them if you want to?

It's a tricky landscape, but we're doing everything we can to promote ourselves from an employability point with view and make sure that as many people as possible know that we're here and we are looking for people across all aspects of the business.

### **Host**

Can we talk a little bit about the future aspirations of Iron and Pine? What are you looking to achieve in the next few years, five years, ten years?

### **Guest**

We've got pretty big aspirations. We are moving in a few directions at once, which is fun.

We're working a lot more in in terms of additional accommodation for wedding venues and hotels established from scratch where we're providing 20 to 30 additional rooms which is a great business for us to be in.

It's a great product for the client and there's a real need for that, for us it gives us repeatability of process and one point of contact for a client.

So, from the business management point of view, that's really beneficial.

Moving towards fewer, larger contracts is probably a direction of travel.

Working with bigger developments and instead of ones and twos we're looking at fives or tens or fifteens.

That repeatable, standardised product we've been quite responsive to client requirements and doing a lot of bespoke things as we've grown just out of necessity.

We're in quite a nice position now where we can shape the narrative a bit in terms of what we're selling and say, well this is tried and tested.

It's great because of XY and Z, that's the price point. Which makes our life a lot simpler.

Make sure the client gets a really high quality product that works.

So yeah, scaling that up and at the same time looking at housing.

We've got pretty big plans.

### **Host**

And then just last question, have you got any advice for aspiring entrepreneurs that want to start a business, but they don't really know where to start?

### **Guest**

Good question. I would definitely get advice, reach out to people who have been there and done it and my doors always open to speaking to people.

The guys at SOSE are fantastic. The Business Gateway team are really good locally so there's loads of support out there for startups.

So, you use that or if you're willing to push it out there, people will help.

And then once you have done it, minimise the risk upfront.

So, try and do it in a sensible way that isn't going to leave you exposed if it all goes wrong.

And then when it does go all wrong, get back up again, as it will go wrong. It always does one way or another.

And I think the main thing I see out of successful entrepreneurs is resilience.

And people say that all the time but it's so true.

The chances of you starting a business that's just an overnight success, without any major issues is pretty slim.

Stuff goes wrong. It's hard, it's tough, it's lonely.

And I think that's it's also probably slightly overlooked in terms of the mental health impact of running a business, a successful business and scaling it and growing it and doing what you want to do is pretty significant.

I think there's a bit of a stigma, particularly around male business owners, about talking about that, that stress level.

I think we need to get much better opening up. And being like 'this is tough and I'm having a tough week and I need help'.

Be open on that front and people will help but enjoy it as well. If you're enjoying it, there's no point.

**Host**

Thank you so much, Alistair, for coming today and sharing the inspiring story of iron and pipe.

**Guest**

No problem. Thanks for having us.

**Host**

And if you are looking for support with a business idea or community project, 1-2-1 coaching, practical learning, or you're interested in networking events across the South of Scotland, then please get in touch, and come and meet us.

Our website: [southofscotlandenterprise.com](https://southofscotlandenterprise.com)

Our email address: [clienthub@sose.scot](mailto:clienthub@sose.scot)

Or call us on 0300 304 8888. That's 0300 304 8888.

We'd love your feedback, and please subscribe so you don't miss our next episode.

Next week we will be joined by another business ready to share their inspiring story with you all.

I'm Sarah Lunney. Thanks for listening to The SOSE Spotlight and do join us again next week for more inspiring business and stories from across the South of Scotland.