



**‘I WOULDN’T CHANGE
THIS JOB FOR** *anything*

Dental technician **Ashley Byrne** is the head of family business Byrnes Dental Laboratory in Oxfordshire. But how did the little boy who played in his father's lab come so far?

I could not have set up Byrnes Dental Lab in 2006 on my own; I was simply not experienced enough. That accolade has to fall to my Mum and Dad. Starting a business is incredible – scary, exciting – you lose sleep, work silly hours and all for very little return... but those are the joys of being your own boss.

Ashley Byrne, 34, Managing Director of Byrnes Dental Laboratory and former Masterchef contestant, heads up a dental laboratory specialising in implants and digital solutions, in a converted seventeenth century barn in Wheatley, Oxfordshire. His father works three days a week at the lab, specialising in ceramics and complex cases; his mother does the accounts; and Ashley's Australian wife Alison runs the business side of things: a truly family business.

As the son of a dental technician, Ashley says 'I spent most of my childhood playing in the lab with wax and burs.' He sailed through his A-levels and the entrance exam to secure a place on the BSc (Hons) Dental Technology course at Manchester Metropolitan University.

'I'm a very practical person and quite arty. I also have a real love of science and it's very rare that you find a job that involves both,' says Ashley. It was a natural career path and Ashley really became hooked when he undertook a third year placement for one week at Portland Ceramics under John Wibberley.

'John told me that the future was in implants and that I should focus my career on that. He arranged for me to see surgery of an implant and I was blown away. It's the best advice anyone has given me in dentistry and that is why Byrnes Dental Laboratory focuses on implants and all that goes with implantology.'

During his degree Ashley worked in a small NHS denture lab making 'staggering

amounts of bite blocks and special trays', teaching him time management and speed. The academic side of his degree taught him to understand his materials, the evidence to using particular materials and taught him to really reflect on what dental technicians do and challenge it. 'Some people misunderstand the dental technology qualification,' says Ashley, 'but I think that it is a fantastic qualification all round providing students get experience working in a lab.'

Ashley's Dad, Anthony, had actually advised him against becoming a dental technician, pointing out the long hours, poor pay and that it was tough at best.

'[Dad] had a large lab with 32 technicians and the stress was apparent. It was a tough time for dental technology at that point and it was probably good advice; however, thankfully dental technology has got better.' Ashley worked at his Dad's lab during university holidays – 'I managed to meet some awesome technicians through my Dad in my early years that really guided me in the right direction' – but his Dad sold the lab not long after Ashley graduated and there was no expectation for Ashley to take over the company.

Ashley graduated from university with a 2.1 in 2001 and went on to work for three years for Anthony Laurie, Michael Wise and Andrea Tropea. 'They taught me the highest standard of dentistry and while Mike is now retired, Andrea is still one of the most talented technicians I have ever met in the world.'

Ashley moved on to working for another dentist before deciding he wanted to start his own lab in 2006. At that time his Dad was out of contract from his previous lab sale and the timing was just right.

Ashley explains the sequence of events:

'My Dad and I searched high and low for a building with character until we stumbled across an old barn that was in the process of being converted. We didn't have an appointment; we just walked in only to discover a shoot meeting taking place with port and cheese everywhere. The building was incomplete but stunning so we tracked down the owner and arranged an official meet. As we left the building my Dad and I looked at each other and knew this was the one. We headed straight to the pub for a celebratory real ale.'

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“The launch on 2 May 2006 is a day I will never forget. We had a launch party and invited every dentist that we could. We turned the plaster room into a bar and attracted over 100 people from the industry. It was a fantastic night.

“The stunning barn was our greatest initial selling point but we had no previous customers or local network so we had to work hard and fast. We never advertised or marketed ourselves which when we look back now, was amazing. Once the work started coming in we

ensured that the work that went out was top notch and the standard of customer service was second to none.”

Ashley and his business partners took out a loan to help fund the set up of the business, but thankfully they were able to pay it off fairly quickly.

“It was in the days when money was easier to obtain but even so, we felt we had a good business model so we had the confidence that our plans would be successful,” explains Ashley.

The Oxfordshire location was not essential,

with Ashley pointing out that their customers are situated all over the UK as well as in Ireland, Italy and Germany. However, Ashley admits that having been born in the Chiltern Hills, ‘the rolling green countryside of the Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire border is divine so we wanted to stay here’. The barn was discovered from simply driving past a sign and according to Ashley, it was sheer luck that it is right in the junction of the M40 and A40 so transport links are incredible.

Since the lab was opened in 2006, the

monthly meetings and once a quarter have what they call a 'two cans' meeting where they finish early and everyone has 'two cans' of beer. The team attend seminars and courses and if they have seen something new they are encouraged to share it with colleagues.

Ashley met his wife Alison in Melbourne when he was best man for a friend who had emigrated. Alison left a highly paid finance IT job to join Ashley and run the lab in Wheatley.

'Alison heads up a great team and she's using her team building skills to help develop us. It's an outstanding bunch of people whose attitude and drive is second to none.'

Ashley himself enjoys being the MD and really feels that he has now put his stamp on the company: 'we have come a long way in five years and the days of just managing one member of the team are long gone. Of course being the MD has its pitfalls, team issues, problems and so on which can be challenging, but the pros of working with such a great team far outweigh the negatives. When a team member produces some outstanding work and a patient or clinician calls us to say we've changed a patient's life, it's the greatest buzz in the world knowing that you have been a part of that. I really enjoy driving the team forward and encouraging professional and personal growth, building client relationships and solving the challenges of running the lab on a day to day basis.'

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original team of four has grown to 21. Anthony was the director to begin with but Ashley took over in year three as the role developed.

'The team is the most important aspect of any company,' says Ashley. 'A good friend once said to me "never call your team staff; they are not staff, they are your team" and she was right. We handpicked most of the team and thankfully the attraction of a stunning work environment was enough to lure them from other places of work.'

Ashley and his team work hard to have



That is not to say that Ashley surveys his domain from an ivory tower. He is not office based and still sits at the bench working on cases every day. Some days are spent entirely on lab work and others are half lab and half administrative tasks while Alison takes full charge of the business.

At that show every two years all the latest and greatest materials and techniques are shown and yet I still see the same handful of faces every year. Technical dentistry is changing and if labs do not keep up with the changes in technology then they will get left behind a lot quicker than they realise.'

Ashley that entered Masterchef?! – Ed)

Ashley has a strong desire to deliver an outstanding restoration for the patient. 'As a profession we tend to focus on the dentist and we sometimes forget that what we are making is for a patient. Using a combination of artistic and scientific skills with the desire to deliver a fantastic product on time is essential for any technician. I am also driven by the desire to pioneer new techniques and I think this makes our lab the lab that it is.'

The extent to which Byrnes Dental Lab focuses on the patient and customer service is demonstrated further by the fact that Ashley has his iPhone and iPad switched on at all hours. 'As a lab we also work with the right customers,' he says. 'If a customer comes on the phone swearing at the admin team we won't tolerate that. We either try to change that customer's attitude or we stop working with them.' The lab implements a 'no-blame' policy so that if something bad happens among the team, a solution is addressed to ensure that it doesn't happen again rather than just pointing a finger.

Byrnes Dental Lab also aims to be open and honest about the way they work, and are happy to show other technicians around; nothing is hidden.



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'I do intend to develop my technical skills but more with using a mouse rather than a tool,' says Ashley. He is currently on the clinical dental technician (CDT) course with the KSS Deanery (the same course attended by Carl Fenwick who appeared in the autumn 2011 issue of *Vital*) and has plans for a surgery in the lab for mostly implant denture based work.

Ashley feels that digital dentistry will come to dominate the industry and he wants to be at the forefront of that development:

'There are three ways to approach technology: lead, follow or lose and we would like to think we lead. We were the first lab in the UK to have digital models available from iTero and various CAD-CAM systems and because of that we now beta test some of the world's most advanced technology. It is essential in this modern age to keep up with the technology and it frustrates me that the International Dental Show in Cologne is so poorly attended by technicians from the UK.

Byrnes Dental Lab has expanded into teaching on site and has its own lecture theatre. Courses offered include hands-on technical, clinical and shade taking photography and a course on screw-retained hybrid dentures using CAD-CAM beams.

'I love teaching and have been lucky enough to have been taught by some of the UK's greatest dental teams so I would like to pass on some of what they taught me,' says Ashley. 'It also developed after attending some terrible courses, poorly run and structured and taught by people that have not worked in a lab for years.' Byrnes Dental Lab are proud of their 100% 'outstanding' feedback record. Ashley is keen to point out that this is not intended to sound arrogant, only that if you attend a lot of courses and it is obvious which ones are great, then it makes sense to copy that model. 'We run courses like the courses I like to be on.' Courses held on site are complemented by homemade food made by Alison. (Wasn't it

'I have full respect for anyone in our industry,' says Ashley. 'From someone making dozens of NHS units a day to people producing a single crown a week. If we all shared our ideas more I really feel we'd be a better profession.'

He adds: 'Most technicians are fantastic people and I really enjoy other technicians' company.'

Of course, every business needs to make money. 'Profit shouldn't be a dirty word yet in dental technology we seem to be petrified of our customers knowing we make a profit. A company that simply ticks over cannot develop so dentists want a lab that does keep up with technology and that is only possible with profit. We have reinvested every penny we have ever made to the point that we have never taken a penny profit from the company, but that's why the lab is the way that it is.' Ashley explains that the lab has the 'latest and greatest' materials, equipment and team members to ensure the business continues to



grow. He admits that in the current market it is really tough to make a profit but thinks that their significant investment in recent years will pay off.

The lab has certainly earned recognition in the industry. It has won a Laboratory of the Year award and team member Matt Wilde in the prosthetics department won Technician of the Year 2010. They have been invited to lecture all over the UK, Europe and the world and Ashley himself has spoken in places as far away as Canada and India on Byrnes Dental Lab's techniques and methods. 'It's been an awesome few years and we're only just getting started,' says Ashley, although he won't be drawn on their future plans for the business.

At the end of 2011 Ashley and Alison set off on a five-week honeymoon, taking in Singapore, Australia, Vancouver and Whistler – a well earned break.

'In 2010 I really got the work-life balance horribly wrong and I only had about 20 days off all year including weekends – which simply wasn't enough,' says Ashley. 'It has been a hard year in the industry but hard times highlight what's good and what's bad so in 2012 we are really pushing to work harder Monday to Friday and very little at weekends.'



'I want to spend more time walking my Boxer dog with the wife, growing vegetables and cooking them and spend less time making teeth.' Being 'mad into cooking', in 2012 Ashley intends to have a lot more dinner parties... 'Hiring a PA was the best thing I ever did and my weekend diary is now wonderfully empty to spend time with friends and family.'

Ashley's positive outlook and ambition are clearly evident. 'I think being a dental technician is an amazing profession and one that's really going places, providing you keep up to date and understand it's poorly paid to start with.' Ashley's first full time job earned him £9,000 per annum and his train fare was £3,200, but he thought that it was worth it as he wanted to be a technician.

Ashley was also blessed with a great mentor in the form of his Dad: 'my Dad is a real believer in allowing me to make my own mistakes and learn from them and that still happens now. We still have our moments of disagreement but a swift pint in the pub on the way home and it's all sorted.'

'A lot of today's youth expect a huge starting salary and that just won't happen, but if you stick with it, you'll enjoy one of the most rewarding jobs there is to have out there. Dental technicians can make a smile last a lifetime. I wouldn't change this job for anything.'

Interview by Kate Maynard