

How Joe Lyons built
a 45-year legacy
in construction

RELIABILITY ABOVE ALL

In an age where smartphones fit neatly in our pockets, it's easy to forget that once, owning one was a bold investment.

Back in 1985, Joe Lyons spent £1,750 on a mobile phone – and it had none of the computing power of contemporary smartphones either.

"The battery only lasted half an hour and calls were 50 pence a minute," Lyons recalls. But it wasn't about convenience. "I needed to be reachable – clients expected that. Reliability mattered more than anything."

That word, 'reliability', has underpinned Lyons' business philosophy since he founded J.L. Lyons & Company Limited in 1980. Forty-five years later, it's still the foundation of the company's identity and success.

Be true to your word

"I've always said, 'Do what you say you're going to do.' If you can't, don't take the job," says Lyons. "You're only as good as your word."

That simple credo has carried the firm from modest beginnings to becoming a trusted contractor for clients including the Foreign Office and Thames Water, along with Marks & Spencer, Heathrow Airport, and Transport for London – where on all three projects Lyons had both a day and night team to cover 24-hour shifts.

In each case, J.L. Lyons & Company Limited built trust by showing up, delivering to spec, and hitting deadlines.

From the outset, Lyons made a decision that would define the trajectory of his firm: he employed his workforce directly. It's a strategy that's

become rarer in the industry, but for Lyons, it was never up for debate.

"We started in 1980 with our own staff, and we've always done it that way," he says. "If you want reliability, you need people you trust and train. You need accountability. You don't get that with a revolving door of subcontractors."

Many of those early team members were decades older than Lyons himself, experienced tradespeople with reputations built over long careers. "Some were 20 or 30 years older than me, but they knew I was serious. I respected them for their knowledge and craft, and they respected that I was building something for the long term."

This intergenerational respect proved invaluable. The older tradesmen set the bar for quality, and Lyons, still young at the time, absorbed everything. "The craftsmen of that era were something else. No routers, no laser levels – just hand tools, a keen eye, and a pride in their work. Everything was precise."

That experience shaped his leadership philosophy: lead by example, stay hands-on, and never assume you're above learning. "You have to be willing to listen – especially when someone knows more than you. That's how I learned to navigate the challenges."

Setting high standards

The calibre of Lyons' work attracted clients that demanded discretion, discipline and high standards. "We worked on the Foreign Office refurbishment near Downing Street," he says. "That's not the kind of job they give to just anyone. We had to go through full security clearance. It was a complete refurbishment – and it had to be perfect."

Another standout project came in the late eighties, when the company took on a 13-month contract to build a new pasta production facility for Heinz at Park Royal in London.

"We had 30 staff working seven days a week," Lyons remembers. "There were chemists on-site, inspecting everything for hygiene. It was food-grade construction, so the spec was

incredibly tight. One mistake, and the job stops. But we didn't stop."

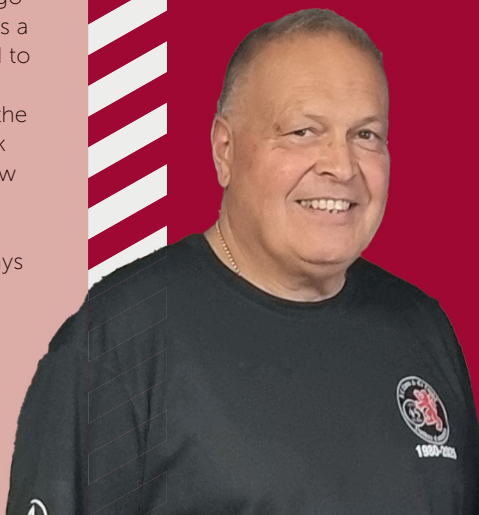
In the commercial sector, reliability matters most. "When you work with people like Thames Water, Marks & Spencer, or London Transport, there's no room for error. You have to be there, you have to deliver, and you have to do it right," he explains.

Craftsmanship then and now

Lyons doesn't hold back when it comes to quality, which he believes has taken a hit over the years, especially on the residential side, where regulation is lighter and competition is fierce.

"Anyone can call themselves a builder these days. There's no

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licensing. No real barrier to entry. You wouldn't let someone wire your house without an electrical license, or install your boiler without a gas certificate, but people let unqualified builders take on major projects.

"That's where we lose the craft. When you don't have standards, you get inconsistency, shortcuts, and corners cut."

Positive progress

Still, not all the changes have been for the worse. Lyons praises the introduction of CSCS cards as a step in the right direction. "At least it proves someone's had some form of training. It doesn't guarantee excellence, but it's something and it helps commercial clients know who is on their site."



He also welcomes improved tax and regulatory oversight. "It used to open the door to scammers. People would deduct tax from workers, then disappear before paying HMRC. Now it's harder to do that."

"The rules are tighter, and the books are more transparent. That's a good thing for everyone."

Professionalism over promises

One of the biggest lessons Lyons shares – especially for newer business owners – is about scope and scale. "Only take on what you can manage. I've seen people say yes to £200,000 extensions without any plan for how to deliver it. They just see the number. That's not business – that's gambling."

He advises new firms to build their capabilities before chasing big contracts. "You need professional

support. A surveyor, a decent admin set-up, proper insurance. You can't run a serious operation off the back of a notepad and a mobile."

That's not to say Lyons doesn't appreciate the hustle. He believes it needs to be matched with structure.

"I was never a big reader, and I'm not great on computers. But I hired surveyors and admin staff who were. You've got to know where you're weak and bring in people who fill the gap."

Running a business like this hasn't come without sacrifice. Lyons admits the long hours and relentless call-outs took a personal toll. "I missed a lot of my kids growing up. We were on call 24/7 – that was the deal with Marks & Spencer. I got called out on Boxing Day, on New Year's Eve. That was the job."

But he doesn't carry regret. "It's the life I chose. I wanted to build something with a name. I wanted to achieve something – and I did. I still love it."

Today, Lyons works alongside his son, Dan, who joined the business after gaining a formal education in construction and project management. "He's done it properly and he's good. Better than me with tech and the paperwork too."

Advice to FMB members

To fellow FMB members and small builders looking to stand the test of time, Lyons' advice is practical: "Be reliable. Be honest. Dedicate yourself to the job. Your word is your bond – don't break it."

Most importantly, don't get blinded by big numbers. "Take on only what you can do properly. Know your limits. And if you say you'll be there, be there."

At 45 years and counting, Lyons and his company are still setting the standard.

