**Profile: Sir Alan Sugar**

Sir Alan has overseen the UK's business landscape for decades

Sir Alan Sugar, one of the UK's best-known businessmen and the star of BBC One's The Apprentice programme, has agreed to sell the company that helped make his fortune.

In a deal worth about £125m, Sir Alan will sell television set-top box maker Amstrad to broadcaster BSkyB.

Amstrad supplies about 30% of the set-top box devices for Sky.

But who is Sir Alan, and how did he climb to prominence and wealth from a council house in east London?

Sir Alan Sugar once remarked that to be a success in business you needed to know everything about your operations, right down to the nuts and bolts that held everything together.

This attention to detail and willingness to get his hands dirty could be seen in his childhood, when, too poor to have a bicycle, he built one himself from an old frame. The 1980s gave anyone the opportunity to succeed

Born in 1947, Sir Alan was the youngest of four children, brought up in a council house in Hackney.

He described himself as "not a ruffian" but having plenty of talk, some of which still remains today.

By the age of 12, he was rising at 0600 every day to boil beetroots for a local greengrocer.

Four years later, Sir Alan's earnings, after school and at weekends, were far outstripping those of his father, Nathan, who worked in a tailoring sweatshop.

**Moving markets**

Having started out selling car aerials and cigarette lighters, aged just 21, he launched his own electronics company, Amstrad - Alan Michael Sugar Trading in 1968.

The firm floated on the stock market in 1980, its core business based on hi-fis and the ground breaking PCW8256 personal computer.

Even though early computers were clunky, they were in demand. The stereos and the computer - an all-in-one affair comprising processor/screen, keyboard and printer - sold like hot cakes, bringing the wonders of word-processing to everyone from students to small companies.

It was the height of the Thatcher years, and as old certainties went out of the window, a new breed of commercial buccaneer swung into action. At the heart of this action was Sir Alan - and with Amstrad, he made his first million. By the age of 40 he was worth about £600m, making him the 15th richest person in the UK. "The 1980s gave anyone the opportunity to succeed," Sir Alan says. "The establishment was smashed, definitely. The old school tie went out the window. Anybody can do anything now."

**Killing Bambi**

But Alan Sugar's is not a tale of unalloyed success. There have been blips along the way. Big blips. The stock market crash of 1987 slashed the value of Amstrad to £197m, including a record one-day fall of £400m, and the company's fortunes took years to bounce back. You don't get to see any of the light-hearted, friendly side because, as far as the TV producers are concerned, that doesn't put bums on seats

Then there was his involvement with Tottenham Hotspur. Despite little knowledge of the club's history - he is alleged to have once enquired "Double? What double?" - Sir Alan became Spurs chairman in 1991. Hailed as a saviour at first, he invested heavily, paying off £20m of debts.

But his relationship with Tottenham's fans collapsed after he sacked manager Terry Venables - "I felt as though I'd killed Bambi" - and Sir Alan sold his shares in 2001, after death threats to him and his family.

**Difficult choices**

Amstrad has also sometimes backed the wrong horse. In 1990, an attempt to enter the video gaming market bit the dust when the 8-bit GX4000 machine flopped spectacularly, losing out to the 16-bit Sega Megadrive. Three years later, the PenPad, an early type of electronic personal organiser, also foundered, while the E-mailer and a later videophone - which combined phone, video calling and e-mailing - failed to capture the public's imagination.

Consumers are often very choosy about the technology they adopt. Though Sir Alan's critics remain highly sceptical about his role as arbiter of good management style on The Apprentice, Amstrad has remained an important player in the retail electronics sector. And the core of Amstrad's current business, the provision of set-top boxes for BSkyB, remains lucrative. Even so, much of Sir Alan's wealth now comes from his extensive property empire, and analysts say that the sale is in line with his plans to get rid of some of his holdings. Sir Alan has also sold his stake in football club Tottenham Hotspur for £25m.

**Cockney flavour**

Despite his ferocious temper and generally feisty manner, Sir Alan Sugar is heavily involved in charity work. He has long been a generous supporter of Great Ormond Street children's hospital and was instrumental in the resurrection of the Hackney Empire theatre, a classic example of Victoriana that he knew well as a child. And he complains about his television persona, saying: "You don't get to see any of the light-hearted, friendly side because, as far as the TV producers are concerned, that doesn't put bums on seats." Abrasive, opinionated, hard-working, Sir Alan is living, growling proof that you can reach the top and yet retain a distinct Cockney flavour.

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