

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

By **Paul Merrick**

If you're wedded to the idea of a career in property, then you need to be able to recognise when it's time to adjust and adapt. Sometimes even the most experienced investors can be brought down to earth with a bump. Long-term investor and developer and former YPN columnist, Paul Merrick, shares how an unexpected illness changed his career and life plans ... for better or for worse.

Let me take you back to Thursday the 6th October 2016. My life was exactly where I thought I wanted it to be.

I remember driving my red Range Rover sport autobiography (one of 12 cars I owned at the time) to Glasgow airport to catch a plane to London. I was a successful property developer, investor and coach. My wife and business partner, Margaret Ann, was back in the office overseeing our property rental business. That business had a profit of six figures and a portfolio of mixed properties, both commercial and residential, that were debt-free.

We were in the process of making two big development deals: one for a 4.7 acre

commercial site we were buying from the local authority. The other was a 1.6 acre site we were buying from Scottish Water. This was a very attractive site. The plots were going to benefit from stunning views across rolling hills to the Campsie Fells. The nearby Carron Valley reservoir is a favourite of walkers and outdoor activity enthusiasts, whilst the historic village of Fintry provides local amenities including shopping and sports facilities. The plots would sit only 14 miles west of Stirling and 22 miles north of Glasgow.

I spent part of the journey talking to my JV partners on the phone about our excitement for this project and how soon we could start the build.

My life was "perfect".



**Paul's wife
Margaret
Ann**

LIVING THE DREAM

"As a young boy from the East End of Glasgow, who started life with no money and even less prospects, this was a world I had only dreamt of. But I was no longer dreaming of it. I was living it."

I had all the cars, watches, material possessions I had ever wanted. I had a beautiful wife who was not only bright and funny but also very capable. Our son was in one of Glasgow's best private schools and excelling academically.

I felt my life could not get any better. I was excited about the latest projects especially the Fintry site that we planned to put five houses on. There was an existing building already on the site that would be converted to two semis, and three large plots where we intended to build four- and five-bedroom detached houses that would be designed by a renowned Scottish architect.

Paul Merrick



As I remember back to that flight down to London, drafting my next YPN article to pass the time, I couldn't have imagined how my life was about to change.

JUST A MOMENT ... AND EVERYTHING CHANGES

I landed at Heathrow airport as I had done many times before and was waiting for one of my colleagues to pick me up. That day seemed just like any other. I was planning to drop off my luggage at the hotel, pick up some provisions from the local shops then have dinner with a few friends.

When we reached the supermarket, I started collecting the items I would need for running that weekend's property training course. We were talking about the 20-plus attendees who would be at the course over the next three days. As I bent down to reach something from one of the bottom shelves, I bumped my head on the way back up. At the time, it did not seem like a big bump. There was no blood or swelling. But I did feel very dizzy. I leaned on the counter and hoped the dizziness would pass. But I still felt very odd. As well as feeling dizzy, I was nauseous, extremely tired and felt very unwell.

I asked my colleague to drive me back to the hotel, cancelled my dinner arrangements and went straight to bed. It was a rough night's sleep with the room spinning every time I opened my eyes. On the Friday morning, I felt no better. I considered going to A&E but there were 20-plus people downstairs who had come from all over the UK to attend my course. Plus they had already paid for the course, their transport

and accommodation. I could not let them down. I delivered the course over the next three days, feeling worse every day that passed. By the Sunday night, I just wanted to get home. I did not think flying with a head injury was a great idea, so asked one of my colleagues from Scotland to drive me.

We arrived in Glasgow in the early hours of the morning and I went straight to bed. I lost most of the Monday to restless sleep. On the Tuesday, my wife took me to A&E where they diagnosed concussion and told me it should pass in a few days.

They were wrong. Weeks later, I still felt the same ... if not worse.

We made an appointment with a private consultant who said I had PCS (Post Concussion Syndrome).

I'd never heard of it before. By this time, I had lost over two stone in weight as the constant nausea made it almost impossible to eat.

How long will this last? I asked. It could be months or even longer, the consultant answered. PCS is a very debilitating condition with many symptoms. In my case they included: headache, dizziness, vertigo, fatigue, memory problems, trouble concentrating and insomnia.

"I can best describe the symptoms as being like a brain fog. At points I thought I may be developing the early stages of Alzheimer's. It was terrifying."

Depression and anxiety soon kicked in and there were occasional emotional outbursts as I learned to live with this frustrating and life-destroying condition.

My work life was over as Margaret Ann took on more and more of the business decisions alone. She had always been a huge part of our success and had, on occasion, taken time out from her own career in communications and campaigning to support some of our larger projects.

My job in the business had been to find the properties, gain planning consent and run the development sites or refurb. Margaret Ann would oversee the office, administration and communications. But as the PCS increased its grip, Margaret Ann had to compensate for my lack of ability to concentrate and my memory lapses. She started to shoulder more of the daily decisions and issues that arise when running a busy business. I tried to help out at home with my son and the housework. But Margaret Ann had always been a better mum than I was a dad.

There are no words I can use that would begin to explain how hard those first few months were for the whole family.

Margaret Ann was a rock and looking back now I see how tough that must have been for her at times. I was lost in my own world of confusion. I had spent my whole life relying on my brain and my wits so it was difficult to adjust to a new reality where my thought processes were slower and I tired easily. I attended the brain injury clinic for some tests, and they told me I now had below average comprehension.



The Fintry development that Paul's illness is forcing him to sell



Artist's impression of the Fintry houses when developed



The Fintry Countryside

They couldn't advise when or if it I would return to my previous levels. As someone who always thought my brain was my best asset, that was hard to take.

There is no real treatment for PCS, it is just a matter of giving the brain time to heal itself. That road, in my case, was exceedingly slow. It felt like I would take three steps forward and two steps back. A never-ending battle with my own dysfunctional mind.

There could be days or even weeks, when my health seemed to be improving. But it would only take one sleepless night or a day involving too much stress to put me back to the beginning again.

A NEW NORM

After several months of learning how to cope with this new way of living, I started to adapt to what one medical professional called "my new norm."

The expectation that the old me was ever coming back was something I spent less and less time thinking about. This was the new me: almost two stones lighter; my mind three times slower and I now had a memory like a goldfish.

THE POWER OF TEAMWORK

Looking back, it seems almost profound that one of the things I taught on my training course was the importance of building your property team. As my ability to work lessened, I had to rely more and more on the people around me. Walter, our architect for almost 20 years pulled out all the stops. Luckily, prior to purchasing the Fintry property (and the fateful London trip), I had managed to build relationships with the planning department and the neighbours to the site. Using that research and those relationships as a foundation, Walter was able to submit the planning application and we achieved full detailed planning for five houses on the Fintry site on the 27th April 2017.

It was an area that had seen few new houses achieve planning in the last decade, making our site even more exclusive and desirable. The thriving community of the surrounding area includes a nursery and an award-winning primary school. The site falls within the catchment of renowned high schools and is also only a short drive from Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. This was going to make selling the completed houses easy. Although I was still slowly coming to terms with my PCS, there was still the hope that in time I could build out this exciting and highly profitable project. We had

calculated an average potential profit of almost £100,000 per house.

As the weeks turned into months, my physical and emotional health was still a roller-coaster. I began to accept that while my health was improving, I was a long way from going back to full-time work or having the amount of commitment or concentration it would take to build five houses.



Paul talking at the West Midlands Landlord Investment Show 2016

By January 2018, my physical health had deteriorated, and I was rushed in to hospital where I had an emergency operation to remove my appendix. My body had taken a beating for over a year because of the PCS. And because I now weighed just under nine stones, what should have been a few weeks' recovery from a routine operation instead seemed to take months.

RE-EVALUATING LIFE

By late summer, I knew it was time to re-evaluate my life. I had been spending much more time at home with my family than I had ever done before. My relationship with my nine-year-old son was closer than it had ever been. I had gained an even deeper respect for my wife's inner strength and true character. Not only was she dealing with my on-going illness, she was also running the business single-handedly as well as continuing her own career – she had successfully pitched a novel to publishers at Bloody Scotland and was writing and editing the first draft.

It seemed that our lives were changing direction. A feeling that only intensified when I lost my mum to cancer in August 2018. I had always lived and worked in the East End of Glasgow, close to my mum's family home. Her passing was the severing of another tie to the area and we decided it was time for a change.

"We moved out of the city and I now spend my day doing the school run and tending the garden."

Retirement is calling but we are going to sell the Fintry development first, and let someone else reap the rewards. We will offer the site as a whole or, for people with smaller amounts of money to invest, we may sell off single plots. Eventually, Margaret Ann will be able to focus on her first love: writing.

And me? I'll become a full-time house husband!

Will I miss my life-long love of property? Perhaps, but I'll still be on a lot of the property social media groups and sometimes writing for magazines like YPN. There will also be the opportunity, as we sell off our portfolio, to help the buyers by sharing some of our 20 plus years of experience. Property is in my blood and I'll always have a keen interest in the market. But the day-to-day responsibility of owning and running a successful property business is no longer for us.

Property changed our lives and gave us a freedom that no other business ever had. Even now at the end of our property career, the proceeds of the sale of the business and the individual properties will give me the financial freedom to enjoy my early retirement.

We had always planned to sell our portfolio eventually, but PCS has accelerated the decision. Property is a business that you can adapt around when you are healthy, well and focused. With a strong team, you can even weather the storms of chronic illness. But sometimes, illnesses and challenges cause us to re-assess our priorities.

When I set off for London two years ago, I had no idea I was embarking on a trip that would change the direction of my life. As I've discovered more about PCS and other chronic illnesses, I've realised that it's often everyday incidents like going to the supermarket or walking downstairs, that can start a chain of events that completely overturn your health, your sense of self and your life direction. But rather than be wary of the everyday, we should cherish it. As Einstein said: "In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity."

Sometimes, we just need to pause ... to identify and recognise it.

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