

£25,000:

The amount of money raised for children's hospice Claire House since 2008



> Managing director Andy Stanley



> The A&B team has completed many endurance events to raise money for charity

Photography: Richard Hanson

the black," he says. "We've grown relatively fast, but always at a manageable rate. We have ensured that the jobs we take on have been profitable and that money has been reinvested into the business."

Today, the business directly employs 120 people, including 18 office-based staff, and draws on a trusted supply chain of sub-contractors to cope with peaks in demand.

Despite the company's growth, it has managed to retain a family ethos. Norman joined as an apprentice – the company still tries to take on four a year – and his son is an apprentice at the firm; Ian's nephew joined as an apprentice in 2010, while contracts engineer Brian Carroll is the son of former director Joe. Two of Richard's sons also work for the company.

"It's very much a family business and we look after our own, definitely," says Andy. "A lot of people who work for us live within a 10-mile radius."

Like every electrical contractor, A&B Engineering has inevitably been affected by the downturn. "It's very difficult at the moment," says Andy. "Two years ago we'd be tendering against four or five people and now we're against anything upwards of 15. A massive part of us still being a success is our partners – the main contractors we've been working with for a long time. Without that it would be a lot harder."

The government's decision to shelve the Building Schools for the Future project was a big disappointment, admits Andy. "But the flip side is that schools have only been carrying out the minimum of maintenance required because they thought they were getting a new school," he says. "Now they know they're not, they've got to spend money on their existing schools. If you look at it long and hard enough you'll see a way of turning most situations to your advantage."

'Existing schools have only been carrying out the minimum of maintenance. Now they're not getting a new school, they've got to spend money'

Feeling the pain

The business has had plenty to keep it occupied, however, through its efforts to support Wirral-based children's hospice Claire House, a residential centre for terminally ill children that relies entirely on charitable donations.

"We were introduced to Claire House by one of the senior people at Carillion, which supported it as their nominated charity, and it has now ended up being ours too," says Andy. "We would attend charity nights and see and hear these heart-rending stories. We'd see how others had become involved and thought it was something we could do too."


A&B Engineering first put a team into the Three Peaks challenge in 2008, and has been on a mission to go one better every year, culminating in the "2011 year of pain"; a series of 12 events taking part throughout the year, including the infamous Iron Man challenge in Lanzarote in May and the Scotland Coast To Coast event in September.

"It's no good saying 'I'm walking 10 miles round the park' because no one's interested," says Andy. "They've got to think 'I wouldn't do that!'" Already plans are afoot for future projects, including the notorious Marathon Des Sables in 2013 and an attempt on Mount Kilimanjaro the following year.

In all, Andy estimates the company has raised around £25,000 for the charity. "We cover the cost of entry so all funds raised go to Claire House," he says. "But the challenge is to get bigger and better each year to keep the interest going and the donations coming in."

In the boardroom, too, Andy has his sights set on growth. "Over the next two years we're looking to stay at the level we're at now and then to expand from there," he says. "In five years the business will be a lot bigger and I would hope to be turning over between £15 million and £18 million."

The company regularly receives approaches from other organisations with a view to taking it over, but any such enquiries have been firmly rebuffed.

"It's a young team," says Andy. "There's no one here thinking of an exit yet. I've only just turned 41 and Ian's about to turn 40. If we were 55 it might be different, but as it stands today there's still a lot to do before we reach that stage. It's early days for us." 

» Nick Martindale is editor of *Connections*