

Rossy Brothers – established 1929

At 69, racecourse bookmaker Ken Walsh reckons he's in the process of winding down, although to see him in action at his local track, Beverley, one could be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

His Rossy Brothers firm has three pitches there including number one on the rails. They are among a 20-pitch portfolio spread across 14 racecourses.

"I've sold a few pitches and I've bought some good silver ring pitches. If one comes up that I fancy, I will buy it."

It's a similar scenario with betting shops. He only has one these days but calculates he has bought and sold 35 throughout his career. If he got a good offer he'd sell.

He attributes much of his success in that sphere to a man named Arthur Wells, who, Ken reckons, taught him most of what he knows about the betting shop business.

"Arthur Wells was very good at seeking out betting shops which were run by people who didn't really know what they were doing or were nearing retirement, and he'd buy those shops. He knew a good pitch and I picked that up off him," he says.

Rossy Brothers was established in 1929, around the same time as the firm Art Wells. Rossy – it's an abbreviated version of Rosenthal – was a family firm which provided a credit service for Hull-based bookmakers, whereas Art Wells became a well-established rails bookmaker.

In 1961, with the legalisation of betting shops, Art Wells was one of many racecourse bookmakers who branched out into the off-course market, opening a couple of shops in Hull. Art Wells continued to operate on the racecourse while his son Arthur ran the off-course side.

Arthur Wells had a step-brother, named Joe Cuthbertson. He and Ken were best friends. Indeed, Joe may have been influential in taking Ken's career path in a very different direction to that originally envisaged.

"When I was 18 I started an apprenticeship as an aircraft engineer," Ken recalls. "I used to boost my income by working in the betting shops."

"I then went to work for Pan-Am and ended up being a licensed engineer for them. I was an overseas engineer and toured all over the world. That was in the late 1960s. I then got a good job offer from Continental Airlines, which represented a big promotion for me. I'd just spent two months working for Pan-Am in the Belgian Congo so I decided to take a month off before joining them."

"I came back to Hull but after a week I got bored and started working in the Art Wells betting shops. At that point he bought another couple of shops. It was decision time for me. I gave up the offer of a job at Continental and started



Ken Walsh at his board with assistant Bonita Warren

Picture: Chris Pitt

working in the shops.

"We built up to seven shops but then Joe Cuthbertson died tragically young at 29. That left me and Arthur; by that time he'd made me a director with a small stake in the company."

"By 1980 we were established as quite a big force on the local betting shop scene, while Rossy Brothers were big on the credit side. We hadn't got much of a credit business so we decided it would be in our interests to merge with Rossy. Arthur kept 50 per cent of the business while myself and Leon Rosenthal (son of the firm's founder) had 25 per cent apiece."

"In 1982 Coral made us an offer we couldn't refuse for the betting offices, so Arthur then decided to move to South Africa, leaving Leon and I to carry on with the credit business, trading as Rossy Brothers."

But shortly afterwards, Leon died of cancer, having been diagnosed just a few months earlier.

"When Leon died I decided to go back into the betting shop side of things. I opened a few new shops, bought a few old ones, which were all successful, and also

took up some franchises on holiday camps on the east coast – Bridlington, Filey and up to Scarborough. They were very lucrative, packed out in the summer."

"I also had a new partner in the company, a man named Peter Adams. He was very innovative; he came up with some good ideas. In 1985 we began offering guaranteed odds on every handicap every day. The result was phenomenal; we increased turnover in every shop by 30 per cent. We were up to ten shops by that point."

"We also devised a system with Prestel whereby we had a screen in every shop, got the Prestel computers and we could transmit prices from shop to shop. Nobody else did that then."

"Arthur Wells came back from South Africa in 1990. I then sold him one of my shops as he wanted something to do, then later brought him back into the company so we carried on as me, Arthur and Peter."

When pitches became available for sale by auction, Ken decided to sell the betting shop chain and become a racecourse bookmaker, aided on course by his wife Elaine and daughter Rebecca. Sadly,

Elaine, who had been suffering from a brain tumour, died in November 2008.

Rosy Brothers sole shop today is situated in Beverley Road, Hull and is run by Rebecca. "She is a licensed bookmaker in her own right," says Ken. "She's worked for me through all aspects of the business and has had a good grounding.

"The shop is in competition with a William Hill a quarter of a mile away. It is a rented residential area with a lot of foreign occupants, mainly Polish and Lithuanian. They're not betting on horseracing, they're interested in football and the machines."

When asked about the Gambling Commission's focus on underage gambling and concerns about bookmakers accepting bets from underage people, Ken feels that the Commission's priorities are misplaced.

"I do think that underage gambling is a problem but I also think common

sense should prevail. I don't know any bookmaker on the racecourse that would knowingly take a bet from someone under eighteen. I think the Gambling Commission are going overboard on it. There are far more important issues – money laundering for one – that they should be focusing on.

"I'm also told that I can't advertise machines on the outside of my shop, yet when I switch my television on at night I'm bombarded with people inviting me to come to their casino, bet online, bet on bingo. How many sixteen-year-olds are sat watching all that?"

Ken has one particular claim to fame in that he was the first licensed British racecourse bookmaker to have a pitch in Ireland.

"That came about through bookmaker Ron Wadey," he explains. "Ron bought a house in Ireland but didn't have a

racecourse licence. He rang me and said he fancied going on-course so we bought a pitch at Punchestown; weeks later we got one at Galway, and then at Listowel."

He worked the Irish tracks for about three years before other priorities dictated that he focused his attention solely on those in Britain, but says he enjoyed the experience and praises the friendliness of Ireland's racecourse bookmakers.

"It's an enjoyable life," he reflects of his present lot. "I like being at Epsom on Derby day, at Royal Ascot, and when we go to Cartmel, we (he and partner Jill Doonan) book a hotel and do some walking in the Lake District."

Winding down? Perhaps, but indications are that the man who could so easily have spent his working years in the aircraft industry isn't quite yet ready for retirement. That might just be a flight of fancy. ■

Britain's oldest punter could be unluckiest



George Atkinson

Photo: Press Association

AT 104 YEARS old, George Atkinson reckons he's Britain's oldest punter and also the unluckiest. Legend has it that in seven decades of trying he's never backed the Grand National winner. A £104 free bet courtesy of William Hill on this year's race failed to reverse the trend as he opted for AP McCoy's mount Shutthefrontdoor.

"Why I didn't back Many Clouds I don't know," he laments. "But then, I'd met AP McCoy at Southwell earlier this year – he couldn't believe I was 104. He's a beautiful man and I was hoping he and I could retire gracefully with a Grand National winner!"

The grandson of a bookmaker and the son of a tic-tac, George was born in London's Holloway on March 16, 1911 – George V had reigned for less than a year; Herbert Asquith was Prime Minister – but has lived in the Norfolk market town of Swaffham for the last 14 years.

Down at the local betting shop, where he ventures most days on his motorised scooter, they call him George the Second, such is his reputation for backing the runner-up.

"The other day I backed seven horses and had four seconds," he reflects. "I can't understand it – I think my granddad put a curse on me!"

But the very fact that, at 104, he still lives independently and is able to get to the bookies unaided is surely a remarkable victory in itself. He even survived double pneumonia last Christmas.

George's grandfather, Charlie Atkinson, was a bookmaker; his father, Charles Elijah Atkinson, was a tic-tac; his Uncle Horace, who lost both legs in the Great War, was the bookmaker's clerk.

"My grandfather used to take me to Hurst Park, Alexandra Park, Epsom, Kempton and Sandown," he recalls. "I had my first bet when I was 12.

"I used to run bets for an old bookmaker named Jack Price. I did that for three years and never got caught, I was too fast for them."

He remembers a day during the Great War when his mother took him and his brother shopping: "It wasn't long before the warning went. In those days it was boy

scouts on bicycles shouting 'take cover, take cover.' When we looked up there was a Zeppelin coming over and it dropped a stack of bombs on Seven Sisters Road."

His jobs included a driving instructor with the Empire School of Motoring – "I taught 17 policemen to drive" – and he drove gun carriages in World War Two.

After the war he became foreman for South London Decorators. "I was the first man to use a paint roller (instead of a brush)," he says. "I had to teach the blokes how to wash them out properly. My first job was painting the Royal Albert Hall. I had 18 men there and finished four and a half weeks ahead of schedule." Other venues he presided over included the Royal Courts of Justice and Scotland Yard.

He's a widowed father of seven, of whom six survive; three sons and three daughters, ranging in age from 63 to 79. "My mom never told me about birds and bees," he laughs.

His mother did, though, have good genes in terms of longevity. George's brother Charles lived to be 104 while another is in his 90s.

Recalls George: "I went to see Charles the week before he died and said 'Charlie, I'll beat you!'"

He still smokes, still drinks – Guinness, Budweiser, plus "a bit of brandy and port for medicinal purposes" – and still goes to the bookies most days. "That's my life now," he says.

At the age of 99 he had his left ear pierced and now sports a silver stud, the result of a £6 bet with a "betting shop big mouth" who dared him to do it.

"I asked him afterwards if he wanted another bet for my other ear," he says. "He declined!"

So, in all those years of backing horses has he ever had a big win?

"Oh yes," he replies, "in my dreams!"

He'll just have to stick around until he's 105 if he wants to break his Grand National hoodoo. But having failed to back a winner of the great race since 1946, he doesn't recommend anyone following his tip. ■