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How Skyform is Revolutionising Building Maintenance with Robotic Solutions

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When Andrew Thompson took the helm at Skyform 6 years ago, he inherited more than just a family business – he inherited a legacy of innovation that began when his father founded the company in 1988. Now, as director of the 35-strong London-based firm, Thompson is steering the company into uncharted territory with robotic facade cleaning and solar panel maintenance systems that could transform how we maintain Britain's buildings.

A Technical Foundation Built from the Ground Up

Andrew's journey to the director's chair wasn't handed to him on a plate. After training as a lift engineer and working in the motor industry, he joined Skyform on the bottom rung, maintaining machines and working on sites with his tools in hand.

"I started from essentially the bottom – maintenance on machines, working on sites on the tools," Andrew explains. "Eventually I learned the job and came up through the company over 11 years. I went from the towers to the office and learned how the business works from a real boots-on-the-ground perspective."

This hands-on experience has proved invaluable as he's grown the business from its traditional roots in high-rise access work into new territories across Birmingham, Liverpool and as far north as Scotland.

The Weight of Leadership

Andrew Thompson is refreshingly candid about the unique pressures of running a family business. "It can be a lonely place, being a director," he admits. "No one really speaks about that." For Thompson, this solitude is intertwined with the immense weight of ultimate responsibility. "At the end of the day, it's

always your fault, even when it isn't," he states. "The buck stops with you."

This internal pressure is compounded by the external unpredictability of managing a team. Thompson recounts a familiar scenario with a wry laugh: "People will ask, 'Why did that person do that?' The truth is, I don't know—I'm not in control of them. But you're the one who has to answer for it."

Despite these trials of isolation and accountability, his leadership has proven effective. Andrew has successfully steered Skyform to become what he describes as "a good, healthy growing business," earning an established reputation among tier-one contractors in the access and facade industries.

Spotting the Gap in the Market

It was while following contractors around on aftercare work – supplying lift and cleaning cradle systems for glass replacement – that Thompson identified a significant problem plaguing the industry.

"We always kept coming up with one major problem: the BMU doesn't work," he explains, referring to Building Maintenance Units – the primary means of access for cleaning tall buildings. "So, we saw a little gap in the market. When we're following around these buildings and the building maintenance unit doesn't work, which is their primary means of access, they're pretty stuffed."

Traditional alternatives like rope access come with their own headaches. "I think it's a bit of an uncontrolled cost and uncontrolled narrative," Thompson notes. "We're going to turn up, it's windy and we can't do it today. So that's just cost you £750 for two blokes that day."

The Robotic Revolution

Skyform's solution centres on robotic cleaning systems that can operate on existing building tracks, erected in approximately four hours and capable of cleaning far more surface area than manual methods.

"If you can clean the building without having to put personnel on the outside of the building, it's taking away a big risk factor," Andrew emphasises. The technology isn't just about efficiency – it's about safety and reliability.

The company is particularly focused on solar panel cleaning, recognising the growing importance of renewable energy infrastructure. "We're looking at warehousing, retail structures – all those sorts of areas," Andrew explains. "There are a few solar panel cleaning companies, but definitely the facade cleaning robot solves a lot of problems for building managers."

Ambitious Plans for the Future

Andrew's vision extends beyond simply providing cleaning services. He's setting his sights on influencing building design from the earliest stages.

"The idea is to try and get involved at the architect level and say 'right, we don't need a BMU because we can use this robotic system,'" he reveals. "The client's going to save a lot of money on not having the BMU, not having insurance for the BMU, not having the maintenance of the BMU."

It's an ambitious goal that could fundamentally change how we approach building maintenance. "Whether we get there or not is to be seen, but certainly if you're coming in at tender stage and you're having your

system specified, then it's pretty much a guarantee that that's what they're using for their buildings moving forward."

Looking Ahead

For Andrew, the next five to ten years represent a period of strategic expansion while maintaining the core construction business that has sustained Skyform for over three decades. The company has recently acquired another operator in their field and is focused on establishing itself in the facade and solar cleaning arena.

"I don't think there's many people out there doing what we're trying to bring in at the moment," he says confidently. "I'm talking to building managers where their BMUs don't work – they haven't been able to clean parts of the building for four or five years."

As Andrew continues to balance the demands of leadership with family life – particularly important given his daughter's recent health challenges – he maintains the adaptability that has characterised Skyform's evolution.

"One thing we are good at here is not slipping into that 'well, this is how we've always done it,'" he reflects. "It's always changing."

In an industry often resistant to change, Skyform's embrace of robotic technology represents more than just innovation – it's a practical response to real-world problems that have plagued building maintenance for years. Under Andrew's leadership, this family business is positioning itself at the forefront of a technological revolution that could reshape how we maintain our built environment.