

How we did it

Kingsbridge's Absolute Dental maybe small, but is perfectly formed, thanks to the vision and drive of **Rhodri and Emma John**. A partnership in practice and in life, the duo explains why their practice packs a punch in terms of style, design and ethos

Picture this – while staying with friends one glorious summer weekend we gazed over the rolling landscape and Avon estuary and were instantly captivated; what a place to live, to work, to bring up a family. A clear-cut case of heart rules head, impetuous youthful optimism, or a deep desire to get out of a post-graduate rut of working tirelessly in other people's mixed practices, call it what you will but by 2000 we wanted to be out of Bristol. We? Emma is wife, mother and practice manager - and the driving force behind Absolute Dental. But first came Anchor Dental, one of two practices available at the time in Kingsbridge, and which we bought into with the unseemly haste of the smitten, totally ignoring advice from our accountant that the figures did not add up. Accountants aren't always right and by 2003 we had turned the practice around and had to close our books to new custom.

Spatial restrictions

With only two treatment rooms, a tiny waiting area that bordered on claustrophobic and no office for Emma, we were struggling to run the practice as we would like. A staircase divided the space and the staff, preventing us from maximising our team communication and rendering expansion impossible. We had outgrown our premises spatially, worse than that, it was preventing us from implementing working strategies that we considered fundamental to a contemporary dental practice moving inexorably into high-quality cosmetic dental care. Emma's progression into team and practice management on an advisory level was made difficult in the extreme by our inability to even get our own team together in one space. By the end of 2006 we were convinced that a move was not an option; it was an absolute necessity, and Absolute was what we were about to become.

Conception before birth

We wrote a business plan based on projections of increased income from increased surgery capacity and were alternately chivvied and supported by Simon Hocken and the Dental Business School - whose business ideas and suggestions we had taken on board - but truth be known we were probably not as financially or mentally prepared as we should have been. I like to use the birth analogy; if we had known how painful and expensive the process would be we wouldn't have undertaken it... and I like to use the birth analogy; having given birth I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the results and don't know why we didn't do it sooner.

Initially we analysed our requirements, drew up our wish list if you will, and also canvassed our client base on what they most wanted from their practice. Our clients' regarded hygiene of paramount importance, and so do we, in some way we would want to create a state-of-the-art sterilisation room to be easily accessible and indeed highly visible, central if possible. A third treatment room, light and spacious reception and waiting area were stating the obvious but our core strength is our team, a dedicated and talented group of individuals who have gelled into our most marketable asset, and our overriding intent was to further nurture and enhance what Emma had worked hard to establish. For various reasons we







would also require a totally new identity; this was our opportunity to build our own image from scratch and it would have to reflect a change of emphasis from a partly NHS dental practice to one serving an exclusively private, and often high end cosmetic dentistry market combining a range of facial aesthetic treatments. Vision is what we had and a visionary was what we needed.

Choosing the designer

And of course the vision must conveniently fit the space available. If we learnt anything at this stage it was that the sooner you have a good designer on board who can interpret your requirements and offer sound advice on the suitability of the properties on offer, the better. We were introduced to Alan Tate of Grey Associates through Simon, who had a magnificent dental practice designed by him several years previously. Alan has a reputation for producing unique contemporary interiors for dental practitioners and he's highly approachable and enthusiastic. It is more than useful to be able to view current work that your designer has been involved in and to gauge whether you are at least on the same wavelength before wasting more time and money. Finding one with a history of striking designs and some close by was reassuring and inspirational.

Working with the space

Limiting our property search to central Kingsbridge we found ourselves lacking in choice of premises. Most were immediately dismissed as unsuitable and the one we eventually plumped for was not ideal. Duke Street Court is a courtyard development of three units and number three, previously used as a tanning salon, required some stripping out of an existing suspended ceiling and a minimal amount



of demountable partitioning to provide us with a 100m² rectangular space, and an additional 14m² for kitchen and WCs. Alan's inspired space planning and sketch design proved it to be tight but workable. The drawbacks were the depth of the unit and natural light only available from the front of the shop and our 'top of the list' desire for a central sterilisation unit would not work in the long narrow space. Kissing goodbye to this was disappointing but we trusted in Alan to come up with a decent compromise.

What we finally agreed on was a layout with a light airy reception and a dedicated consulting room to the fore, a glazed wall between, and three treatment rooms laid out to the left long wall of the space picking up one long new drainage run. Alan's use of floor to ceiling glass, with some etching to create privacy and visual interest, was applied in most areas to capitalise on the natural light available. Full height doors along with the full height glass created an illusion of ceiling height and pale limestone on the floor of the consulting room, reception, and hall reflected more light back into the furthest reaches of the practice. Glass topped specialised units from Intercontinental furthered the cool, contemporary look through treatment rooms and sterilisation area, and we found them highly responsive to our needs.

The sterilisation unit was relegated to the rear of the building but straddles the end of the corridor where it is in full view to clients as they walk towards a treatment room. It also sports full height glass doors and dirty and clean zone cupboards are distinctively backlit with red and blue light - the blue light of the clean zone also being picked out



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on two sides of the reception desk. Lighting throughout is ever changing, subtle and relaxing in treatment areas, fun and funky in reception, and conspicuous in sterilisation. It defines each space and adds character and mood.

Sandra Tate came onboard to sort our graphics and the colours chosen were woven into the interior design, together with a three-dimensional rendition of the logo, which dominates the reception and is the focus of attention when entering the building. She impressed us with her efficiency, enthusiasm, and interpretation of our ideas. It was all coming together.

Hiccups and hard work

But the path to a beautiful contemporary practice is strewn with things to trip over. A builder who breaks his hand a week before the start date leaving us in the lap of the gods; the late delivery of some items and the early incomplete delivery of others; a glass wall broken; no space to store materials; a mental aberration on our part in forgetting to take VAT into account when faced with lots of ‘must have’ expensive items. Net result? Some major financial headaches and nail biting deadlines to face and a pearl of a practice materialising before our eyes through the confusion.

Throughout the good times and bad the team spirit was tremendous, all worked hard to make the transition from Anchor to Absolute as painless as possible and all without exception gave of their own time to help with relocation, cleaning and preparation before we opened our doors. And it works for us, staff morale is high and clients, new and old, have embraced the changes we made with great enthusiasm.



The final result

What have we achieved? The place is like a TARDIS, small from the outside but with an air of spaciousness within. Every square inch is maximised and it is a pleasure to work here because it reflects who we are and what we are doing; the suit has been fitted as opposed to buying off the peg. Emma is able to build on the team's already formidable strengths and breathes the word to dental practices nationwide with her popular one-day courses with Dental Business School. Ruth, Stephen and I enjoy our own treatment rooms and the privacy of the consulting room to give new clients the respect they deserve. We have a month on month increase in our new client numbers of an average of 30, so we're definitely doing something right.

And the nitty gritty? We budgeted £125K for interior design and gained financial approval from the Royal Bank of Scotland, but by the time we had finished we had overspent by £75K (thankfully they supported that). The amazingly helpful Basil Mais of Claudius Ash/Planmeca, who provided our specialised equipment, recommended that we seek finance for this separately from Braemar Finance, which we did. In addition to Planmeca chairs, Claudius Ash purchased our sleek units from Intercontinental on our behalf, so that we could keep all equipment finance from one £100K lease pot. Alan Tate brilliantly designed and project managed us, his wife Sandra providing graphics and website and a whole lot more. Pierre Reyveron of Intercontinental also deserves mention for his responsive attention at all times, as do our own staff who made the whole experience a pain-free one. And that's what we're all about after all. [PD](#)



Companies involved in the project

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