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THE PROTECTOR

Iain McCallister has built one of Britain's biggest security businesses. Now he's looking to punch at another level

Iain McCallister is a big man in a big office with big ambitions and big stars to look after.

When the MAN Commercial Protection co-founder tells you that he started in security "working on the doors" at clubs and that he was a keen boxer in his youth, you can believe it. He's tall, powerful and affable, comfortable in himself and what he's doing.

Over three decades, he's built one of the largest privately owned security businesses in Britain from scratch to a £62m turnover and 1,600 employees. Now McCallister wants to take Solihull-based MAN Commercial Protection to the next level: a £100m concern, by organic growth and acquisition.

You will have seen MAN many times without realising it: their black branded T-shirts would have been at the edge of the stage on Oasis's recent tour, or flanking the boxers Oleksandr Usyk and Daniel Dubois as they made their way to the ring to battle for the heavyweight championship at Wembley Stadium in July. Its staff cast a wary eye over the crowds for bands such as The Rolling Stones, Paul Weller, The Who and UB40.

"What we're best known for is event security: it's less than 5 per cent of our turnover, but it makes up 90 per cent of what people want to talk about. It's like the little piece of bread on the hook for fishing – it grabs attention," says McCallister.

"For 25 years, we've provided security for Frank Warren's boxing events. When you watch on TV, you'll see our MAN uniforms."

Although it may be a small part of income, it is obvious how much McCallister likes and appreciates the celebrity side of the business: posters, pictures and passes to top name fights and gigs cover his office walls.

Event security came about almost as an accident. A few years after MAN was set up in 1993, McCallister – along with his father and MAN co-founder – agreed to meet the manager of an up-and-coming rock band. Ocean Colour Scene were about to set out on a world tour and their manager happened to be an ex-policeman colleague of McCallister's father: "They knew each other well – nobody else was going to get that job."

> "The key is to be firm but fair – calm, professional and always focused on de-escalation."

MAN Commercial Protection provides security at Frank Warren boxing matches

McCallister says: "Conflict management is a big part of what we do. It's about preventing situations escalating by talking first. If that fails, it's safely removing the person from a show without anyone being harmed.

"It's about defusing, de-escalating, calming things down. Often people's bark is worse than their bite, but you've got to manage the situation carefully. Our training covers techniques like maintaining safe distance, controlled holds to escort someone out, and working with colleagues to keep everyone safe – not about striking or aggression.

"Handling those situations is all about approach. Many of those people will be volatile from the outset. You can't go in timid, but equally you can't go in aggressive, and pour petrol on the fire. The key is to be firm but fair – calm, professional and always focused on de-escalation," says McCallister.

"A big part of the role is recognising behaviours. How do you know if someone's acting suspiciously or under the influence of drugs? You look at their pupils, their stance, their reactions. The truth is 99 per cent of people allow others to get too close – within range to lash out or bite. Our security officers are trained to maintain safe distances, to observe people's eyes and body language, and to pick up on signs of substance misuse or aggression."

The bulk of MAN's work comes from traditional security work – looking after ness parks, office buildings, logistics ce even housing blocks. Contracts range f guarding oil refineries to protecting lux superyachts.

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Iain McCallister wit boxer Fabio Wardle

The bulk of MAN's work comes from more traditional security work – looking after business parks, office buildings, logistics centres, even housing blocks. Contracts range from guarding oil refineries to protecting luxury superyachts.

McCallister says that events are seasonal, concentrated in the summer months, while overseeing distribution sites or office blocks is 52 weeks of the year business.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER

McCallister got into the security business as a teenager. Not a great fan of school, he discovered he could make as much money from a couple of shifts as a doorman as he could working a whole week at his local butchers. However his father, who retired from West Midlands Police in 1993, knew it wasn't a lifelong career, so helped him set up MAN along with two other founders.

He built the business by taking "educated risks" (such as signing on a 12,000 sq ft headquarters in Shirley during Covid), by being willing to travel for work, by constantly pitching and by trying to show that good security is a value-add rather than a grudge purchase dictated by the lowest price.

"The old stereotype of a night watchman – an ex-copper sat in a chair watching screens – doesn't apply any more," he says.

"Quite often we end up being like a fourth emergency service, dealing with unwanted visitors on site or managing issues caused by bad weather. Many businesses come to us because their sites deal with unwanted guests – whether that's trespassers, protesters, squatters, travellers or even so-called 'auditors', who turn up to provoke a reaction.

"Security staff are often the 'directors of first impressions'. When you walk into a building, the first person you'll meet is either a receptionist or a security officer. How you're greeted, how you're signed in, how you're made to feel welcome – that sets the tone for the whole meeting. It's customer service: helping visitors, showing them the car park, inducting them, giving them the right first impression. That really shapes how everything else goes. We've won and retained a lot of business this way, and often gained new contracts off the back of it."

This professionalisation, and improving the image of security, McCallister takes seriously. He set up an academy at the Shirley office in 2022 – it has now trained 1,000 people, his own staff and others, in first aid, CCTV monitoring, data protection, physical intervention, even how to handle minors.

"The industry had to clean itself up," says McCallister. "We had a poor reputation. If there's a security guard in TV programmes like *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* or *Emmerdale*, he's usually up to no good, messing about, a thief, a drunk – never the hero.

> "Promoting our staff and raising the profile of the industry is hugely important to me."

Iain McCallister with boxer Fabio Wardley

"Now if you see a security officer, they'll have a blue badge showing they have a government SIA [Security Industry Authority] licence. At the very least, it means the person has a clean DBS check and has completed the required training. We're heavily regulated, and rightly so. If an officer even gets a warning on their licence, they can lose it.

"And we can be heroes. Since the Ariana Grande bomb attack in Manchester, all security officers have to be trained in first aid. That's a great step forward, because if they're with a lone worker on a site, they may be the only person there to help. Last year, one of our employees saved a colleague's life after a cardiac arrest – thanks to his training. Two members of staff were recognised for tracking down murder suspects. Others have talked people down from suicide attempts.

"There are so many success stories, and we're very proud of them. Promoting our staff and raising the profile of the industry is hugely important to me."

SECURING THE FUTURE

Of the top 20 security firms in terms of size in the country, MAN is one of the two biggest privately owned, in a sector that is dominated by conglomerates such as Mitie, Securitas and G4S, many of whom are general facilities management (FM) providers.

McCallister isn't going down the FM route: "My motto is: Dig one hole and dig it deep. Security is my hole. We'll never, ever go into cleaning or cutting grass. We stick to security, what we know, and not dilute our brand."

McCallister wants to grow his business to £100m turnover and is looking at acquisition as a means for growth. He's interested in technology-driven businesses that can add more service to customers – he argues drone technology and artificial intelligence could be as impactful on security as CCTV.

And he's not retiring just yet: "I've got zero interest in an exit from the business. I couldn't just reach a certain size and stop – otherwise I'd have stopped at £5m or £10m.

"Only yesterday I met the head of security for a billion-pound company about what we can do for them. That's what I thrive on: closing deals, driving operations, learning about the different sectors we work in – from superyachts to aviation to manufacturing. I love understanding it all.

"If you retire, you expire. The worst thing for someone who thrives on deals and growth is to retire and end up wandering around garden centres. That's not for me."