

In association with



Building for growth, both online and off

More than a year on from its multi-million management buy-out by Rutland Partners, Aston Barclay is on course for expansion, with big plans in real estate, digital technology and recruitment.

The national independent auction group has five auction centre locations in the UK – Chelmsford, Prees Heath, Westbury, Donington Park and Leeds. The Leeds site will move to an 18-acre mega centre in Wakefield by the start of 2019. Its previous mega centre, at Donington Park, opened nine months ago.

Neil Hodson, Aston Barclay's chief executive, said: "We're already at 20,000 sales at Donington Park. That really painted a picture of what we can do with the right location. We'll be moving to phase two with that site and expanding further."

Aston Barclay is investing in new inspection facilities at Westbury and Chelmsford and has acquired a further 10 acres of land at its Prees Heath site to expand further.

Wakefield continues Aston Barclay's strategy of creating large regional auction hubs – the site has the capacity to sell 50,000 used vehicles a year – rather than a large network of smaller centres.

It will be fitted with banks of interactive screens with app functionality that links Aston Barclay's digital operations to the physical auction location. There is space on site for internal storage for more than 200 cars in a fully lit, air conditioned, dust-free environment.

Wakefield will also feature two glass-fronted auction halls and will employ about 90 full- and part-time staff once it is fully operational in early 2019.

These investments all push Aston Barclay closer to Hodson's goal of doubling sales volumes across the company to 160,000 vehicles by 2022.

He said: "These are all big real estate investments and it's an interesting balance you have to strike. We're really serious about

IT'S ALWAYS GOING TO BE A MIX BETWEEN [DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL]... THE PHYSICAL SIDE IS ALWAYS GOING TO BE THERE FOR US

NEIL HODSON, ASTON BARCLAY

growing the digital side of the business, too, and that is taking off rapidly.

"It's always going to be a mix between the two and the physical side is always going to be there for us.

"You're always going to need to move, prepare and photograph the vehicles. We'll always have that option for people that want to physically be here and grab a cup of tea."

Over the past year, Aston Barclay has won contracts with Vantage Group, Group 1, Santander, Wessex Garages, Chapelhouse Group and Leasys.

Hodson said: "A challenging market makes you look at your suppliers and see what's out there, and that's playing to our advantage.

"People are using us to benchmark against the other two main players in the UK remarketing sector and dealer groups are looking at alternatives. For those dealers that are struggling to acquire stock at the moment, I would urge them to review all of their potential channels and to have a look at what is out there."

Digital sales growth

As a percentage of total volume, Aston Barclay's digital dealer sales have risen from 5% a year ago to 20% today.

Fleet is farther along, up from 20% to 50%



For more information, call 01245 450700

of all sales, and vehicle manufacturer sales have gone from 20% to 70%.

Hodson said: "Even though digital has grown so massively in the last 12 months, I still think there's further to go."

Aston Barclay has a team of 300 people across the business and has taken on 30 new recruits in the past 12 months. There are plans to recruit a further 12 people specifically on the digital development side.

Hodson said the aim for Aston Barclay's digital remarketing solutions is to connect buyers with vehicles, boil down the processes that have existed for years in the physical space, and translate that into something that can fit in your pocket.

He said: "We've been thinking really hard about how we can help people transact and bring everything together in one place digitally."

Aston Barclay's Buyer App has been downloaded 9,000 times, far exceeding

Hodson's expectations, and it has about 3,000 active users a week.

"We have got some really innovative ideas in the works and we'll be making some announcements about that in Q1 2019. We've invested a lot in the digital development side and I think this has been one of the biggest differentiators for Aston Barclay," he said.

"We have Stewart Ford, our IT director, and a team of developers working on enhancements all the time and we've rolled out 15 updates in the last 12 months."

One such enhancement is using the data of those using the Aston Barclay app to create predictive stock suggestions based on previous buying and browsing history.

Hodson said: "If we know there is history there on white BMW 1 Series automatics and we get more in stock, we can help alert customers to that type of vehicle when it comes in, rather than them having to search through themselves."

Virtual auctions

Another innovation is virtual auctions. Hodson said these combine the features of an online digital auction experience for buyers with all the benefits of a physical sale.

Stock from a variety of vendors can be offered in the same sale and a car manufacturer recently used Aston Barclay's virtual auction to sell stock from three separate physical sites directly to its existing buyer base online.

Hodson said: "Virtual auctions open the door for vendors to sell stock from remote locations, such as de-fleet or refurbishment centres. A live auctioneer hosts each virtual auction, with buyers accessing stock through the Aston Barclay website or through their Buyer App from wherever they are in the world."

"Vendors can remotely control their sales via the vendor functions of the app, just like a physical sale."

Buyers carry out their pre-sale homework online supported by images, inspection grading and a 360-degree walkaround of the car's interior and exterior.

The virtual walkaround

Aston Barclay uses GardX Spincar technology to provide the walkaround in its vehicle inspection process.

It gives buyers a 360-degree view of the used car's exterior and interior with a zoom facility to enable them to more closely inspect any part of the car.

Hodson said: "We wanted to use technology to improve that inspection process and getting up close to seats and the interior with Spincar is really useful for buyers.

"We've looked at feedback on condition reports and things like Spincar have really helped reassure those who may be assessing vehicles at a distance."