

# Taking the high road was right move for TV executive with focus on digital

Simon Pitts carved a highly successful career at ITV but now enjoys life north of the border, **Greig Cameron** writes

**C**hildhood plans to become a professional tennis player or to follow in the smooth-talking footsteps of Des Lynam as a sports broadcaster never quite materialised for Simon Pitts.

Still, when choosing “a proper job” he was determined to ensure it was something he could enjoy. A deep love of television, encapsulated in his fond remembrance of weekly family gatherings to watch *Blackadder Goes Forth*, underpins his ascension of the corporate ladder.

The Bristol-born executive started as a media policy adviser at the European parliament in Brussels before going on to spend more than a decade across a variety of roles at ITV. These saw him working for British business luminaries such as Carolyn McCall, Adam Crozier and Archie Norman while taking on increasingly complex projects and wider responsibilities.

Pitts acknowledges he has had some good mentors and said: “You learn a lot from your bosses, it defines you in lots of ways. You learn some of the things you want to ape later in life and occasionally you learn one or two things you are not going to do if ever you get the chance to run an organisation.”

That chance for Pitts arrived when a headhunter called about an opening at STV, the broadcaster that operates the Channel 3 licence in Scotland.

STV, founded in 1957, plays a unique part in Scottish cultural life with near universal brand recognition around the country. Its public service requirements for an independent news service provide an alternative to the BBC while the company is associated with diverse but much-loved shows such as *Take The High Road*, the gentle Highland soap, and *Taggart*, the Glasgow crime drama.

Pitts “saw an opportunity” but realised relocating from London to Scotland was not a decision he could take on his own. His wife, Cecile, agreed it was time to change pace and raise their family, of three young boys, away from the UK capital.

As Pitts, 47, said: “We had lived in London for 20 years or so. We loved it but it is a very busy life and a different environment to bring up your family. We thought this was an opportunity to see each other a bit more often, to not see the Tube quite as often and have more of a balance.”

On joining STV at the start of 2018, he inherited a business which had gone through a massive simplification and financial turnaround under the former boss Rob Woodward. He had sold off elements such as Virgin Radio and Pearl & Dean, the cinema advertiser, which had been accrued during a previous regime, rebuilt the balance sheet and reintroduced dividend payments.

Pitts believed the opportunity was in improving digital capabilities and growing the scale of a production business which had only a smattering



Simon Pitts at STV's headquarters in Glasgow, where one of the broadcaster's most popular shows, *Taggart*, below, is set

ROBERT PERRY FOR THE TIMES

population signed up as users. A partnership with ITV means all of the main dramas, sport and entertainment found on channel three are also available to those using STV Player.

But Pitts wanted the company to “think bigger” hence more than 40 content deals since he took over to expand the digital offering while also tapping into nostalgia for the likes of *Taggart*. “It was quite clear early on that was an area of opportunity for STV as we were not quite embracing the digital streaming opportunity. In particular we weren't organised around the digital function, it was part of the broadcast business.

“I felt we needed to break it out of broadcasting to give it its own strategy and dedicated team and managing director to identify how we were going to grow.”

The main television channel is still in rude health and regularly outperforms all other commercial operators in Scotland. STV's flagship news programmes typically beat the ratings of the equivalent shows for BBC Scotland.

The financial performance is also strong with 2021 a record year as revenue grew by 35 per cent to £144.5 million, pre-tax profit trebled to £20.1 million and the annual dividend rising by 22 per cent to 11p. Interims for the first half of this year saw revenue up 3 per cent to £62.1 million and pre-tax profit lifting 25 per cent to £10.6 million.

Pitts is serious about his fiscal duties but sees looking after the people in the business as his greatest responsibility and cites the “perspective about what is important in work and life” the pandemic gave him. He said: “It was clear early on that when we look back in a few years' time on the Covid period we were not going to be judged on the profit we delivered but whether we had stepped up and done the right thing by our people, our advertisers, our partners, our audiences and our communities.”

Among the rules trying to ensure staff have a balance between work and life are no Zoom meetings over lunch and emails after 7pm should only be sent in emergencies.

As for his own viewing habits Pitts has just finished *The Capture*, the BBC show about spies and deep fake technology, and is watching *The Suspect*, an ITV drama, as well as the second series of *Blood*, an Irish thriller on STV Player. *Gogglebox*, the Channel 4 hit which shows ordinary people and celebrities reacting to TV shows, is a regular watch for “escapism” and Pitts adds: “Even now with all the noise, the choices and the platforms TV brings people together.”

“Look at the state funeral. If that isn't a moment that brings the nation together then I don't know what is. But there are countless examples, through football or Covid, where TV has got a vital role to play still in giving people trusted facts and information or escapism when they need it most.”

## Q&A

### Who is your mentor?

I've learnt a lot from my bosses along the way. Both what to do and what not to do.

### Does money motivate you?

It's one motivator, but by no means the most important one.

### What was the most important event in your working life?

I'd have to say the Covid pandemic. It's reminded us what's important in work and in life – the people



around us.

### Which person do you most admire?

My brother. He's a great dad and has his priorities right.

### What is your favourite television programme?

*Blackadder*, below

### What does leadership mean to you?

Leading by example, being accessible, and communicating very clearly what kind of an organisation we are.

### How do you relax?

Spending time with family and friends, playing tennis. I watch a lot of TV and tell my wife it's work.

## CV

**Education:** BA modern languages and European studies, Bath University; MA in European politics, economics and law, College of Europe, Bruges

**Career: 1998-2000:** Parliamentary adviser in Brussels on media policy, European parliament; **2000-17:** head of public affairs, controller of digital platforms, director of strategy and technology and MD for online, pay TV, interactive and technology, ITV; **2018-present:** Chief executive, STV **Family:** Married, three children, lives in Glasgow

in our success and Scotland's success as well. We are starting to punch above our weight in TV production and so we should be as there is a huge amount of talent here.

“The issue is there wasn't enough work, returning series and volume of production to keep that talent here. Talented people felt they needed to get on a train or plane to do their best work. That is changing now.”

Pitts is often approached by people with ideas for shows but adroitly sidesteps them by pointing out that if he were in charge of the creative decisions then STV would “be in a lot of trouble”.

He adds: “I encourage conversations about our output and what we are making but you won't find me going to the head of news and complaining about how we reported on a story. You won't find me picking over the drama development pipeline and asking where the costume drama is or why they aren't making four rather than three.”

Alongside the burgeoning production arm, the STV Player, the company's streaming and catch-up service, has expanded to offer 150 unique drama box sets and has about 80 per cent of Scotland's adult

of light entertainment formats in its stable. STV Studios is on course to book £40 million of revenue in 2023, compared with little over £10 million in 2017.

Along with a growing list of quizzes, light entertainment, documentary and reality shows it is also back making prestige drama for customers at home and abroad. Among those is

*Criminal Record*, an eight-part thriller STV Studios is making for Apple TV, with Cush Jumbo and Peter Capaldi.

Pitts believes the “momentum” in the studios business is starting to pay off and said: “There is absolutely no reason why Scotland shouldn't be home to world-class producers of the biggest shows for networks and global streamers. You are starting to see that

