

Matt Oliver discovers why Chris Whatmore, founder of Viewpoyn't chose a 'virtual office' and talks to lawyer-turned-garden designer Rob Jones

Until recently, heritage sites that were unable to provide expensive traditional audio guide equipment to visitors had to go without. Now, Chris Whatmore and his award-winning Oxfordshire company Viewpoyn't have found the answer.

Providing audio guides and tours for heritage sites through smartphone apps, Viewpoyn't has eliminated equipment and production costs for smaller, more rural sites such as Dorchester Abbey which cannot afford the extra expense.

The company's aim is to eventually branch out to bigger attractions and heritage sites, as demand grows for its innovative approach.

Mr Whatmore, 56, founded the company in 2011 and lives in Blewbury. His son, Tom, is a professional web developer and coded the company's website for his father.

But Viewpoyn't's founder was not always a businessman. "I was a technology writer in IT and telecoms specialising in mobile, and I decided one day that it might be more interesting to do it rather than write about it", said Mr Whatmore.

"A friend told me there was a need for a cheaper alternative to traditional audio guides and so it struck me that everyone already had smartphones in their pockets and there must be a way to provide the guides, off the back of the Internet."

Mr Whatmore is director of the company and runs it from a 'virtual office' at the Harwell Innovation Centre, provided free by centre operator Oxford Innovation after the company was named the region's most promising new business at Oxfordshire science and technology fair Venturefest.

Mr Whatmore believes the award has given

Chris Whatmore with Joanne Willett of Oxford Innovation



Virtual VIEWS

Viewpoyn't the a head start as it bids to expand into a "multi-million pound market".

He added: "They originally offered us a physical office but we thought a virtual one would be more useful. It is perfect for our needs and for the stage of development the company is at right now, which is very early days. It has been invaluable."

Jo Willett from Oxford Innovation said: "We

have years of experience helping fast growth companies achieve their potential and have supported hundreds of new firms with facilities and advice. We are delighted to welcome an exciting organisation like Viewpoyn't on board."

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From little ACORNS ...

For some, now is a risky time to grow a business — but Rob Jones has taken the opportunity to introduce a new idea to the home gardening market.

His new venture, the Tree and Garden Gift Company, aims to simplify the customer experience of purchasing, planting or gifting trees, making it possible from your living room.

Mr Jones, 52, is a father of two and lives in Goring. He left his job in the city as a litigation lawyer and decided to go down a different path — horticulture.

He said: "It was a pretty high pressure job. I wanted to explore ways of improving my quality of life — I didn't want my gravestone to read 'a lawyer for 40 years'."

Mr Jones added: "I was making hanging baskets as a hobby for a number of garden centres while I worked as a lawyer.

"I would drive to New Covent Garden Market, buy up stock and go to work, then afterwards, I would come home and make the baskets. A garden centre came up for sale and I considered buying it, but I thought I ought to study the trade first."

Soon after, Mr Jones (pictured) left his job to study as a mature student at the Pershore College of Horticulture.

He said: "It was a mixed bunch of people. Some were

school leavers and others were undertaking career changes like me. I was seen as a bit of a father figure, the ex-lawyer getting his hands dirty."

In 1992 he started designing and creating gardens and founded his now-successful company, the Garden Design Company, in 1996.

The Tree and Garden Gift Company is his attempt to bring the kind of shopping experience that supermarkets now provide to gardening.

Mr Jones explained: "We have all become so used to ordering our weekly groceries online and using the Internet is a fantastic source of information.

"We want to explore e-shop technology but also use the knowledge and experience we've acquired over the last 20 years. Big trees can cause trouble, too, when it comes to delivery and planting, but our service now includes that as well.

"We make it easy for customers to obtain their tree of choice, right from their living room."

When asked about the prospect of the family business, Mr Jones says his 17-year-old son Alex is more interested in working for the city he left behind.

He said: "I have had him down for some work experience — but since then he has run a mile!"

