

Tone Tech

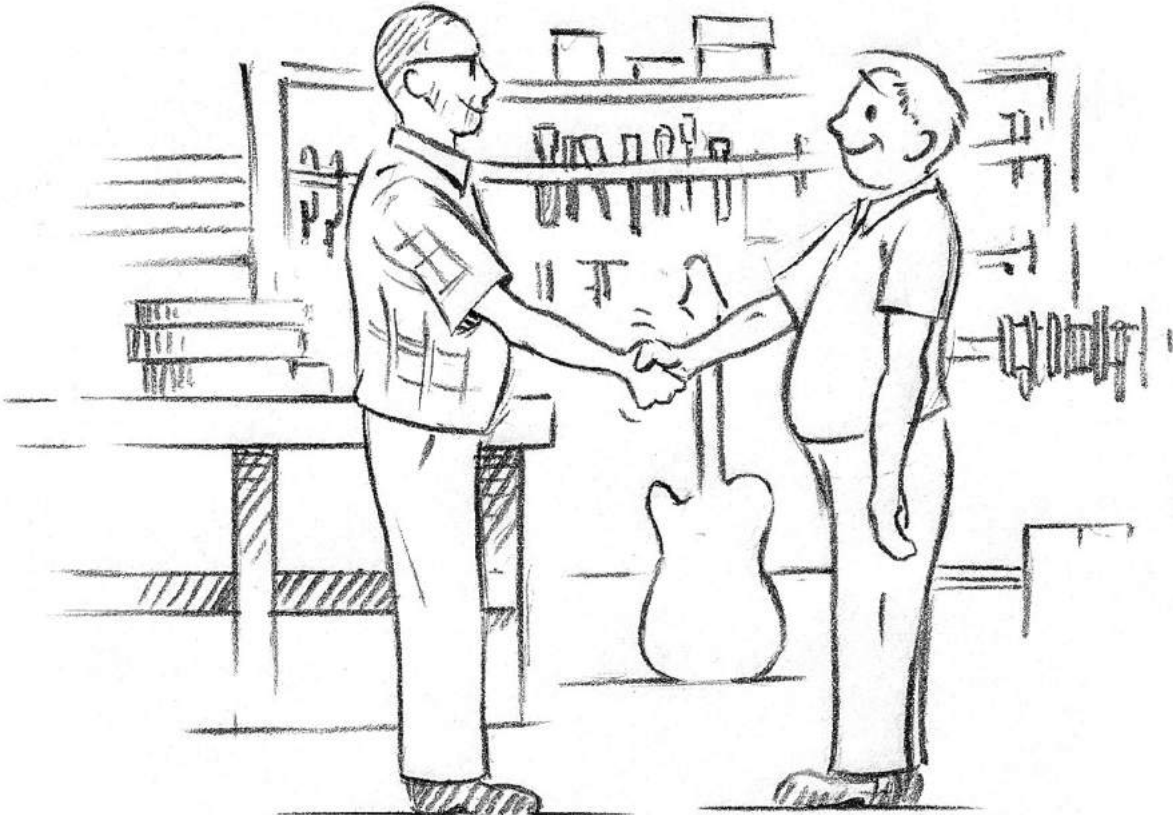
10
Years

Luthier Supplies



"I suggest you call it a day lads!"

The Tonetech Story



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July 2007. I'd taken the opportunity to leave my well-paid job as a management consultant due to the downturn in business caused by the "big recession". I signed on to Job Seekers allowance and did my duty by applying for all kinds of jobs. There was part of me that didn't want "another job" but the mortgage needed to be paid etc. There was a kernel of an idea trying to come to the fore. I really wanted to be my own boss, to live or die by my own decisions, a high-risk option. My wife, on the other hand, was none too impressed by this dreaming.

In the past year or so I'd developed a website for my artist brother and in the process learned a lot about how to do business online. My real passion has always been woodwork and latterly guitar making. The other thing I'm really good at is customer service from my long history in the chemical industry.

Now for the tough negotiation. Could I persuade my lovely wife Jayne that she needs to support the two of us so I can chase my dream? I'd received a reasonable redundancy package, though it wouldn't last more than a year. We got some advice from an accountant friend of hers and he was negative about the venture.

In the end, Jayne agreed. I could look at starting my own business. I wanted to get into online selling to people who made guitars. I also committed to doing work as a life coach to "co-fund" the venture. I already knew that the main UK luthier suppliers were not online and their service levels at best were mediocre. I could get supplies from the States quicker than they could reply to emails.

I contacted the main UK suppliers offering to become their online presence and build a role for me in their business. There was no interest. Then I came across a guy in Southend on Sea who was selling aerosol paints and a few bits of wood. A couple of emails and a phone call later, and I was off down to Southend to meet Dan MacPherson, a guitar maker. A meeting that would change his life and mine, not necessarily for the better, other than to become great friends.

I met Dan in his workshop in Raleigh. A cup of tea, an hour long chat and a handshake; we were in business together. I was buzzing on the drive home. We were going to start a business from scratch. Dan always wanted to get into the supply business and had registered the name Tonetech Ltd in the February of 2007.

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In October my workshop at home was cleared out to make room for stock. Dan provided the inventory and I paid to get a website developed. By November we were trading online via Ebay and by January our own E-commerce website was up and running.

I had an office at home upstairs and my workshop was about 30 metres behind the house. As orders started to come in (slowly), I would rush down to the workshop, grab the items for the order, take them back up to the office and wrestle with bubble wrap and cardboard to pack the order. Each evening I'd walk the mile to our post office and stand in line as eager Ebayers emptied sack-loads of parcels onto the post office counter.

As our business was officially registered in the February of 2007, we had to prepare our first year accounts at the end of January, 3 months into our business. I had registered with an accountant and Dan made the trip up so we could both hear the results. The accountant was old school. He insisted on pronouncing Tonetech as Tony tech, (irritating)! He looked at us both and said "I suggest you call it a day lads". We then had to explain we had only been trading for 8 weeks and we'll grow the business in the next year.

Undeterred we carried on. Neither of us was taking any salary from the business, mainly because it wasn't earning anything! The business was growing slowly and all the money we made went into buying more stock.

By the end of 2009 there was no more room for stock in my workshop and the stair carpet at home was now threadbare. It was time to find premises.

I scoured the area and found a low cost unit in Meadow Mill in Stockport. There's a reason it was low cost. More on that later.



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The unit I leased was full of rubbish from the previous occupier who had “done a runner”. The promised skip and help from the managing agents to clear the place never materialised.

The previous occupants sold screen printed wallpaper. In addition to the general detritus there were about 10 x 5 litre kegs of screen print ink concentrates. As I was moving them out of the way I picked up one of them by the not quite secured lid. The 1 gallon tub parted company with the wide mouthed lid at about chest level. As the container hit the floor the contents rebounded. I leapt back to avoid most of the torrent but the back of my sleeve (the bit I couldn't see), was dripping in blue ink! Being a resourceful chap I used copious quantities of reject wallpaper to mop up the blue pool. 5 litres goes a long way. It had snowed that afternoon so I trudged off to my car. As I turned back to make sure I'd switched the unit lights off, I spotted a trail of blue footprints that had followed me to my car. Try as I might I couldn't get the stuff off my boots, so off they came and I drove home in stocking feet, confident that the car carpets will remain free of blue ink. Remember the sleeve?

Not only had I transferred ink from my sleeve to various bits of the car but, with the absence of a mirror I was oblivious to my blue face. This was going to take some cleaning!

My next door neighbour, Paul, was at a loose end so I persuaded him to help me take stuff to the tip.

We used my car and were able to take a lot of the wallpaper around to a large skip behind the mill. This involved multiple car journeys. Paul would load up the lift as we were on the second floor, I would drive back and forth to the skip. “Watch out for the blue ink on the floor Paul!” “OK”.

A hard day's graft and we were getting closer to moving in. I drove Paul home, thanked him for his efforts, removed my boots and went into the house. Paul opened his front door, entered without removing his shoes, went straight upstairs to shower. On the way back down he was confronted by blue footsteps on his beige carpet, down the hall, up the stairs and along the landing. Oops!

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The unit was clear of rubbish except for a sturdy bench (we still have it today). Now the floor needed to be cleaned. I hired a rotary floor scrubber and Jayne came to help one weekend to scrub the floor. Have you ever operated a rotary scrubber? If you tilt it ever so lightly while it is moving, the brush digs in with such force it either snatches the handle from your grasp and careers around like a demented Dalek, or transforms you into a Torvill and Dean routine where you take turns in throwing machine and operator around! 8 hours of scrubbing and hundreds of gallons of blue waste water later and we were ready to move in.

One weekend with a hired transit van, my two brothers, Dave and Alan plus my nephew, James, we moved everything out of my workshop and installed it in our first proper premises. Now we're in business!



The Tonetech Story

The Meadow Mill Stories.

The Meadow Mill unit had a fantastic view with windows on 3 sides. We had tremendous light from the single glazed windows that stretched from 1 metre above the floor to 3 metres high. We had steam pipes running around the unit at a height of about 2.8 metres. Needless to say the ceiling was very warm and the floor level was oh so cold. In winter, the temperature would rarely reach more than 15 degrees C by about 3pm in the afternoon, just as the coal-fired boiler was being switched off. This particular unit had a flat roof. It stuck out from the rest of the 6 storey building like an after-thought. In the winter, a 150 mm deep pool of water froze solid on the roof. No wonder the working temperature remained below the legal limit.

My enthusiasm for having my own business premises helped me to push the temperature concerns to one side. Before I knew it another year of Tonetech existence had passed by. I had moved to a new accountant, (one who could pronounce Tonetech correctly). I came across Chris Booth of McKellens Ltd at a chamber of commerce meeting. This meeting was held once a month, at 7:30 in the morning. The saving grace was they provided a cooked breakfast. As a member of the chamber I could pay £10 for a cooked breakfast, half an hour's networking and enjoy (or not) a 30 minute presentation from someone who knew what they were talking about. Chris was that man! Chris is still an integral member of the Tonetech family. He runs a monthly "business growth forum". This is where I learn about, or am reminded of, what we should be doing to "run a business".

It was January 2010. We'd forked out a chunk of money to hire the unit and to move all the stock, computers, packaging and other paraphernalia, into the mill, when Dan Macpherson phoned. He couldn't remain as an owner of Tonetech Ltd. The work to get Tonetech running had distracted him from making and repairing guitars. He was on the verge of running out of money and needed to refocus on doing stuff that earned him a living. I had 2 reactions. The first was "oh F... We've got all these overheads and now I'm on my own". The second was, "Poor Dan". He had no other source of income and, of course, the survival of DM Guitars (as it was then) was the priority.

I ended up buying Dan out of the Tonetech partnership and going on my own. The break-up was amicable and Dan continued to support me with his vast knowledge and guidance. He also stored my timber and machined it for me. I continued to travel to Southend to spend a day filling aerosol cans and for epic nights down the pub and staggering hangovers the following morning. I count Dan among my closest supporters and a true friend.

The following winter provided a shock to my system like no other. It was a harsh winter with freezing temperatures. The temperature in my unit was permanently below 12 degrees. I dressed for work in multiple layers including long johns, thermal hat and fingerless gloves. The coal-fired boiler was belting out steam like there was no tomorrow when PSSSHHH. The pumps failed. For a full 3 weeks, in the coldest spell of winter, there was no heating. The residual temperature slowly fell below 10 degrees, below 6 degrees, below 4 degrees, to minus 2! I broke the terms of my lease which forbade the use of gas powered heaters.

I hired a space heater from HSS plant hire. "We'll deliver it on Tuesday" they said. Tuesday came and went. "We'll deliver it on Thursday" they said. Thursday came and went. On Friday it finally arrived. When I turned the heater on the massive fan made so much noise I was unable to hear customers on the phone. (The air became sodden with moisture as the products of combustion were CO₂ and water). I had to open the door to let the CO₂ out, but that let the cold air in!

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This was the most miserable day/ week of my Tonetech life. After 3 weeks the boiler pump was repaired and the temperature in the unit rose to a tropical 14 degrees... Bliss!

This experience prompted me to look for another place in the mill. My contract was for 3 years, the flat roof was leaking water and the cold was crippling. I had installed some heat shrink film secondary glazing to try to deal with the cold but the low temperatures caused it to sag and split. I was on good terms with the maintenance man, Albert. He told me there was a unit 1 floor up, on the "sunny side" of the mill that was available for rent. A few conversations with the managing agent later and they agreed I could move to the new unit provided I took another 3 year lease.



A deal! Once again, brothers and nephew were commanded to move even more stuff from the first unit, up one floor and into the new space. The new space was larger. After another weekend of humping wood parts, paints, tools, racking, desks, computers and so much other stuff, I was now installed in the new unit on the 4th floor. Did I mention how supportive BT was?



The Tonetech Story

The lovely sales people at BT told me to let them know 3 weeks before the move and they would arrange engineers to move the phone and broadband line so that when I moved in there would be a seamless transition. They would set up a new broadband contract, keep my current number (I was after all moving within the same building) and “the jobs a good’un”.

Those who are interested can ask me for a look at the letter of complaint I compiled after 6 months of frustration. For those who are not interested in the detail; my internet-based business was without broadband for 10 days, I spent over 20 hours on the phone and emailing from home “communicating” with the worst providers of “customer service” I have experienced in my (at this time) 53 years on the planet.

I occasionally get calls from BT asking if I am interested in moving my business phone and broadband back to BT. When I tell them “as long as I have a hole in my a.. and a breath in my body, and even if BT are the only surviving provider of these services left on planet earth, I would rather eat hot coals and stick pins in my eyes”, they apologise and end the call.

New unit, new beginning.

Business is picking up. I’ve been in the new unit now for a year. The temperature has never fallen below 12 degrees so the thermal under-wear is sufficient to stave off the frostbite. I’m still earning a pittance so, it’s time to ramp up the business growth effort. I made a decision in 2011 that in order for me to focus on “growing the business” I needed someone else to be doing the day to day order processing and fulfilment. We already had a reputation for shipping orders out the same day or next day; unheard of in the luthier supply trade. My dilemma was, do I take on someone with experience who can slot in without too much hand holding, or do I take on someone young to train them to do the job? I thought back to when I left school in the 1870’s (sorry, 1970’s). My worry was “which job should I take”, not “will I ever get a job”. I decided to recruit an apprentice.

Governments make their living from their ability to design obstructive and complex processes to enact the simplest of actions. I produced processes, procedures, policies and safeguards to satisfy the system that I was a suitable person to take on an apprentice. I was given 3 learning providers to interview and it was their job to find me a suitable candidate.

The 3 representatives of these learning providers made appointments to visit me. Each pitched their credentials and processes. Two were woeful. One was fantastic. Damar Training based in Stockport was my choice. They (along with the other candidates), submitted CVs of young people who fitted my employee brief. Of the 10 submissions I selected 6 for interview. Of those 6 only 3 showed up for interview, and of those 3, 2 were exceptional and one of those was put forward by Damar, and the second by another provider.

It was a tough choice. Both were young "girls". (At 16 years old they are still classified as children). The Damar representative phoned me every few days to ask how the decision was progressing and telling me the candidate was really interested in the role. The other company representative was silent.



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My decision was made. On the 31st of May 2011, I welcomed my first apprentice Ms. Ciara Marie Fletcher, all 5 feet 1.5 inches of her, to the world of Tonetech.

One of the first jobs I did to accommodate Ciara was to saw 6 inches of the legs of the packing bench so she could reach across the bench!

Ciara was enthusiastic and she soon picked up the order processing activities. We had a tutor visit her every couple of weeks and she progressed well. She was even suggesting ideas to improve the store layout and better ways of processing the orders. Within 6 months she could work unsupervised. In November 2011 Ciara received a visit from her tutor, accompanied by the MD of Damar Training. Her first reaction was "Oh Sh.., what have I done wrong?" The MD was in fact there to present Ciara with a Learner of the Month Certificate. She was beaming with pride for weeks.

With Ciara on board, I was able to take a full week of holiday and go abroad with my wife Jayne for the first time in 3 years. It seems crazy now that I left a 17-year-old in charge of the business, but she did a fantastic job!

Ciara continued to progress in her studies and completed her Level 2 apprenticeship in February 2012. We now had to start looking for the next phase of her education. Later in the year we received an invite to attend Damar Trainings Annual Award dinner in Stockport. We went along one Friday night to Stockport County's football stadium conference suite. There were a couple of hundred people there. There were awards for a whole variety of achievements. Names were called out; young apprentices nervously walked up to receive their award and sat down again. The final and most prestigious award was for Damar's Achiever of the Year. "And the winner is... Ms. Ciara Fletcher!"

Ciara panicked a bit, gathered herself and made her way past the tables of guests to the front to receive a trophy almost as tall as she is. She was overwhelmed with pride as she had never won anything before. I was filling up with tears of pride and joy. This was a very special night in the history of a small company called Tonetech Ltd.

Later in 2012 Ciara enrolled for a level 3 apprenticeship in Business Enterprise. This course had been co-designed with Peter Jones of Dragon's Den fame. The course was very demanding and I found some of the assignments Ciara had to produce quite challenging. Ciara stuck at the course and continued to develop her business skills. Her final assignment was to produce a complete business plan. We agreed she could develop the plan around an idea she had for Petite Women's work wear. She struggles to find suitable business wear so she had ideas to have suitable clothing designed and produced for her to sell.

She passed the course with flying colours in December 2013, and her business plan was submitted for funding from a start-up grant. The plan was so good she was awarded the funding!



The Tonetech Story

Clouds on the Horizon.

Meadow Mill was becoming more run down and in winter we were both cold and miserable. The lease on the unit was up for renewal and I had constant arguments with the managing agent about money. Their set of accounts didn't tally with mine and they constantly threatened action if I didn't pay. I set about looking for better premises.

Steve Lally, a local guitar tech, worked in Pear Mill about a mile away from our location. I set the ball rolling to move to Pear Mill when the current lease ended on Feb 1st 2014.

I'd paid a small fortune to have the lease verified by my solicitor and was all set to move when I spotted a clause mid-way through the 45 page lease. According to the lease we couldn't bring solvent based paints into the mill! This was a deal breaker and I had already served notice on my current premises.

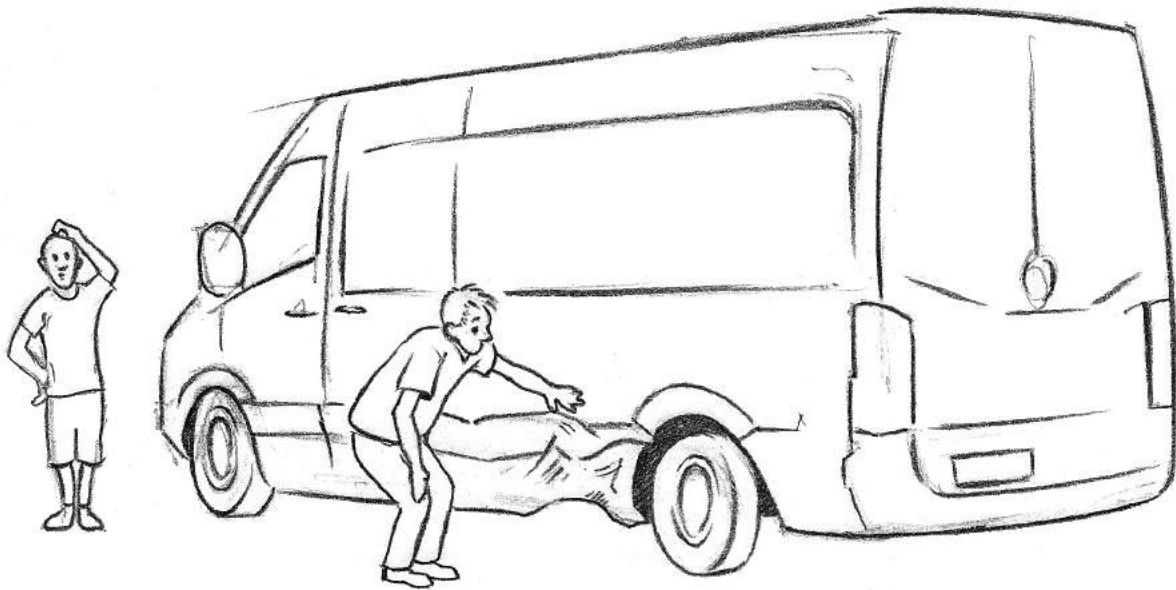
After a number of fraught phone calls with the owners of the mill we found a compromise that allowed me to store paints away from the unit and the Pear Mill insurers were happy.

The cost of moving was a real challenge, so we decided, with family and a few friends (who were also customers); we could hire a van and move out ourselves.

The weekend of 1st February was chosen, an enormous white van hired, we were ready to go. Ciara and I had packed most of the products into sturdy crates during the week leading up to the move. I hired the van from Northgate Vehicle hire who were based in Pear Mill. "Do you want the collision waiver?" asked the Northgate agent. "No, I'm only driving a mile down the road" said I.

We filled the first van load. This took about 3 hours as everything had to come down 4 floors in the lift. I set off with my brother and nephew in the van and left the rest of the crew to continue bringing stuff down in the lift. I was turning the van around a sharp corner of the mill building and we all heard a loud bump. I'd caught the back of the extended transit on the wall and badly dented 2 of the panels. "Collision Damage waiver sir?"

Over the next 2 days everything owned by Tonetech was brought down 4 floors in a goods lift, moved 1 mile across town, and then taken up 4 floors in another goods lift. The work was exhausting, but by 9pm on the Sunday night, everything was in the new unit.



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By the following Thursday, with lots more help from my brother, Steve Lally and his wife Anne, and the mighty Ciara, we had everything working and could once more ship out orders.

I had to spend the next 2 weeks decorating and cleaning the old unit to avoid crazy dilapidation charges!

The move coincided with a downturn in business. Cash flow was being severely stretched. By April 2014 it was clear that if things didn't change then we would run out of money by August. The cost of moving, solicitors, business disruption and a slowdown in sales conspired to leave me no choice. I could no longer afford to employ Ciara.

I've experienced a number of ups and downs during my working life and faced redundancy myself. The hardest thing I've ever done is to sit Ciara down and explain she had to go.

Having broken this news and helped Ciara through her emotional reaction we got some news that should have been uplifting. We'd been shortlisted for the Greater Manchester Skills for Business awards taking place in May. Mine and Ciara's efforts to develop Ciara were being recognised.

I was asked by our training partner to buy tickets for the grand awards ceremony taking place at the Hilton in Manchester. I couldn't really afford them but Ciara wanted to go. She'd never been to a "posh do".

The big day came and even though I felt I'd let Ciara down, I put on a brave face and Jayne, Ciara and I turned up in our finery. Dara O'Brian was the compere and he was commenting on the fact no-one was making any acceptance speeches.

Later in the evening Dara announced that the next category for Skills for Business was for the Retail sector. The shortlisted candidates were shown on a big screen and the third candidate was Tonetech Ltd. A representative of a training company opened the envelope, and "the winner is... Tonetech Ltd"!

Ciara and I were both shocked. We gathered ourselves and went up on to the stage to accept our award. I decided I had something to say and made a passionate speech about the wonderful young people gathered at the Hilton and how important it is for all companies to get involved with apprenticeships. This was the pinnacle of Tonetech's history so far and yet tinged with the sadness of having to say goodbye to Ciara.



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Back down to earth, Ciara and I focused on ensuring she got another job which she soon did. We keep in contact and regularly meet for catch ups. She's 23 this year (2017), has a good job and is studying for a degree in Business Management part time.

Tonetech had taken a step backwards. I still believed that we would be successful. I had to find ways of improving our sales and creating profits to invest in growth.

I was introduced to a business coach called Peter Beard who was part of a government funded business growth scheme called Growth Accelerator. I hadn't had any funding for Tonetech so I grabbed it with both hands. Peter helped me see how to plan the growth of Tonetech and over several months we put together a 5 year plan. This was a huge help and to have someone as experienced as Peter to bounce ideas off was invaluable. To this day, Peter is still my business coach.

In order to deliver on the business plan I needed some decent software to maintain the customer records. Another of my contacts via McKellens' meetings was Chris Moran. Chris' company sells Zoho software. After a few introductory discussions on the software I decided to buy the Zoho product. The long-term plan is to automate a lot of the back office transactions to leave me free to enjoy life! We're getting there slowly.

My long term supplier of my website told me he could no longer develop the site. Dave Smart had been a great supporter, but his business had grown to the extent he couldn't continue to give me what I needed. I had to begin a search for another website developer.

A great source of inspiration and techniques to grow your business, I was still attending (and still do today), the McKellens Masterclass. Over the past few months I'd met a couple there who ran their own website and design business. Will and Heather seemed to be an ideal partnership to take on my website. We agreed to develop a new website, to upgrade it, modernise it and ensure it was fit for mobile and tablet use. Heather did some great design work and came up with the current "retro" style logo for Tonetech. Will developed a website based on "opencart" and over 6-8 months (they said it would take 3); the site was ready for launch. I arranged with Dave Smart to hand over the domain settings and on 1st April 2015 the new site would be launched.

Within 1 hour traffic was down to 10% of normal and sales were zero. Within a day my site didn't appear anywhere. I couldn't get hold of Will. I eventually got hold of Heather who told me he was in prison. I called Dave Smart and asked him to re-instate my old website, which he did within 24 hours. (Thanks Dave!).

Will had conned me, other customers and Heather (his fiancée). Nothing he had told any of us was true and I'd lost a few thousand pounds into the bargain.



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Dave Smart continued to support me and Heather, even though she'd lost everything and now had huge debts created by Will, carried on with providing my web design work.

I searched for a new website partner and found Marcus, of Marlin Web Services. Marcus did a great job for me and by October we had a new site working well.

Anyone who knows anything about websites will tell you that good old Google doesn't like change. Over the period April to October we lost sales as our site was not as high in Google rankings. Between October and December the new website, with retro branding, started to perform well again.

During this period I had been acting as an apprentice ambassador for the Greater Manchester Learning Providers Network. This involved me going to various meetings of business people and delivering a presentation extolling the virtues of the apprentice system. While doing this, I discovered that job agencies ran a system called "Traineeships". Young people who were out of work and claiming benefits were required to get 100 hours work experience. The job agencies were looking for employers to provide this experience. I didn't have the money to employ anyone, but I could give a youngster some work experience. I signed up to the scheme. I also signed up to another scheme to provide mentoring for school students aged 16-18.

I had my first trainee in September 2015. He was OK but didn't suit the work. In December 2015 I received my second traineeship candidate Dan Horsfield. This young man had left school at 16 and for a variety of reasons was unable to secure a job.

He came to work with me for 16 hours a week and what impressed me was his attitude. He wanted to keep busy; he was enthusiastic, always on time and asked lots of questions. Dan was a trainee until February 2016. At the end of his allotted time I offered him a position as an apprentice. The bad news was he is a Man City fan. The good news was he accepted the role.

Within a few short months Dan was managing most of the day to day orders and I was focused on marketing. We eventually got Dan enrolled on an apprenticeship with Damar Training. He's had fantastic support from two of Damar's staff, Jeanie and Maria. For a young man who lacked self-confidence he has developed tremendously, so much so he won an award as Learner of the Month and in February 2017 won a special award, "The Mark Aspinall Memorial Award", for his achievements.



The Tonetech Story

I was offered a mentoring student at Wythenshawe's Academy and that started in January 2016. Once a week for an hour I'd meet with a student and see how I could help. Sometimes just listening is enough and sometimes offering advice, ideas or encouragement was needed.

I mentioned Peter Beard. I went along to a talk he was giving and got chatting to a lady called Lucy Rennie. Lucy is a corporate communications expert and had recently set up her own business. I invited her in to see if she could support Tonetech's communications. From a combination of discussions with Peter and meetings with Lucy, the Tonebar Newsletter was born. This newsletter is aimed at professional luthiers, so we have some contributing authors: Alex McCann on social media, Lars Mullen on our industry, me on all things Tonetech and other occasional contributors. Lucy was relentless in driving me to hit deadlines and make time bound plans. At some point she asked for feedback on how she was doing. "An Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove" was my reply!

Sales began to improve and in December 2016 we won a sole distributor agreement for a new range of guitar parts from the Tone Up brand. Tone Up is a new company from Slovenia which was developed as a spin off from an existing guitar making business Sever Instruments. "Sever" is the owner of the business and he contacted me to ask if I would help him launch a new bass bridge at the London Bass Show in early March 2017. I said yes and for the next 6 weeks we were frantically preparing literature, publicity, a show stand and accommodation for the show. The show was a great success however our ears were assaulted every 45 minutes by a free-for-all demonstration of all the basses and amplifiers in the hall. Everyone was playing slap bass at full volume for 15 minutes then it would all calm down again. Next year I will be taking industrial ear defenders!

We've just set up a cooperation with Bailey Guitars who, apart from making stunning instruments, run and sell a range of online guitar-making courses. Tonetech is working with them to supply the tools and parts for the courses and to help to publicise them. Mark and Carol are great fun to work with so I expect this part of the journey to be a blast.

Brexit is on the horizon, but we are undeterred. Our mission is to be Europe's favourite luthier supplier. There'll be ups and downs, but 10 years on from the formation of Tonetech, we're getting there!





Thanks to everyone who has played a part, however small, in the Tonetech Story. The names below all contributed in some way and if your name is missing, write it in the space at the bottom.

Ian Brewer	Dave Quinn
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Peta Williams	Brian Aungiers
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Sue Robb	Dan Darrell
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Last and Most importantly thanks to my wonderful wife Jayne, without who's support I would not have met any of you (apart from my Family!)