

**CELEBRITY LINKS:** (Top to bottom) Bruce Forsyth, Jimmy Tarbuck, Lionel Blair and Ronnie Corbett



## How the Holy Trinity of Brucie, Tarby and Lionel Blair helped Estepona's longest-running expat company, the Experience Group, make it to 50 years, writes Jon Clarke

**S**TANDING on the runway of Malaga airport, Alan James needed to do a double take. Parked up around him was a phalanx of planes - 20 in total - and most of them looked familiar. "It turned out they were all our planes, all of them chartered to bring tourists from all around Europe," recalls the boss of Estepona's Experience Group, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. That was 1988 and a time when the company had over 300 staff (three permanently at the airport) and thousands of tourists and property buyers coming to the Costa del Sol every month.

Very much the heyday of the coast, Alan would rub shoulders with global captains of industry on the local golf courses and socialise at night with the likes of Jimmy Tarbuck, Bruce Forsyth and Lionel Blair. "It was an amazing time and I was literally flying all the time and everywhere," explains the personable businessman, who at 81-years-old still works most days at the company HQ, in Benavista.

"We had offices all over the UK and one in Brussels and brought in 20 charter flights a week from every UK airport," he continues.

Something of a military operation, the Experience Group set up 17 different companies to take care of every aspect of its clients' visits to Spain. Each had its own distinct purpose, one dealing with travel, another with property sales, while others dealt with furniture and entertainment and the setting up of golf clubs and restaurants. One of Alan's favourites handled



**POWER COUPLE:** Alan James with wife Carol

ships and helped to launch one of the first cruises in the Med; a four-country trip, which went from Malaga to Gibraltar, then on to the Algarve and finally Morocco.

"It had 85 suites and made its way right up the Guadalquivir river to Sevilla, before returning to Malaga via Tangier," recalls Alan. "Tourists loved it and we would normally tag on a week on the Costa del Sol before or after the cruise."

But tourism, of course, was only a half of the company's business, which grew to become one of the key construction companies along the coast. "We built 5,000 homes from Torrox

**'You can't build homes like sheds, you need proper design and construction'**



**LEGACY:** Benamara was built by the Experience Group back in the 1970s

to Sotogrande between 1970 and 1990," he tells me proudly, as we walk around the leafy, low-density urbanisation of Benamara, one of his earliest and favourite developments.

The Experience Group built everything from great value two-bedroom apartments to stunning

front-line golf course villas. These include many around El Paraiso golf, as well as others built for his many golfing friends, including Gary Player and Nick Faldo, as well as Fred Trueman and showbiz pals including Lionel Blair and Jimmy Tarbuck.

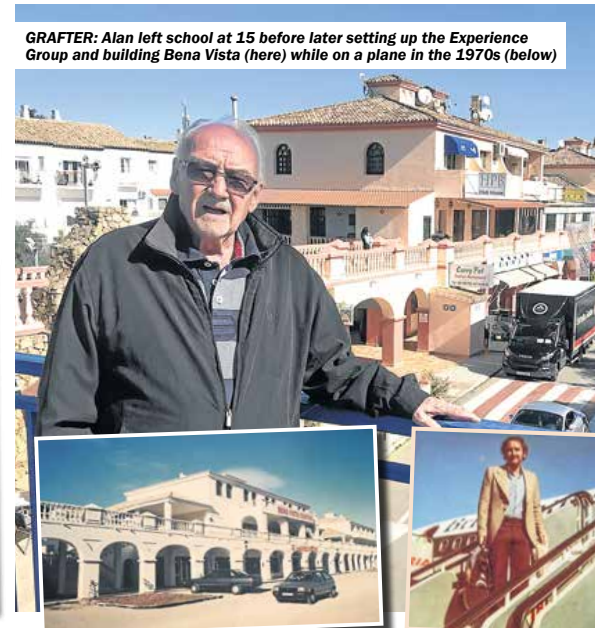
At Benavista alone he built the sho-

## Top 10 Experience Group projects

1. Centro Comercial Bena Vista - 50 Shops and offices and the footbridge over the main road. Developed, designed and constructed 1985
2. Urbanisation Bena Vista, 100 Apartments and Townhouses. Developed, designed and constructed - opened 1983
3. Las Palmeras de Bena Vista, 400 Apartments and Townhouses. Developed, designed and constructed - opened 1985
4. Benamara Pueblo, 100 Apartments and Townhouses. Marketed and designed - opened in 1974
5. Jasmin Villas, 15 Villas. Marketed and designed - opened in 1981
6. Benamara Gardens, 80 Apartments. Marketed and designed - opened in 1979
7. Dos Hermanas, 300 Apartments Townhouses and villas and Commercial Zone Marketed and designed - opened in 1983
8. Rincon Del Paraiso, Exclusive villas. Developed, constructed and designed - opened 1985
9. El Paraiso Golf Club. Purchased 1983 - now owned by the members.
10. Bena Vista Lawn Bowls Club. One of the best facilities on the coast. Developed, constructed and opened in 1984

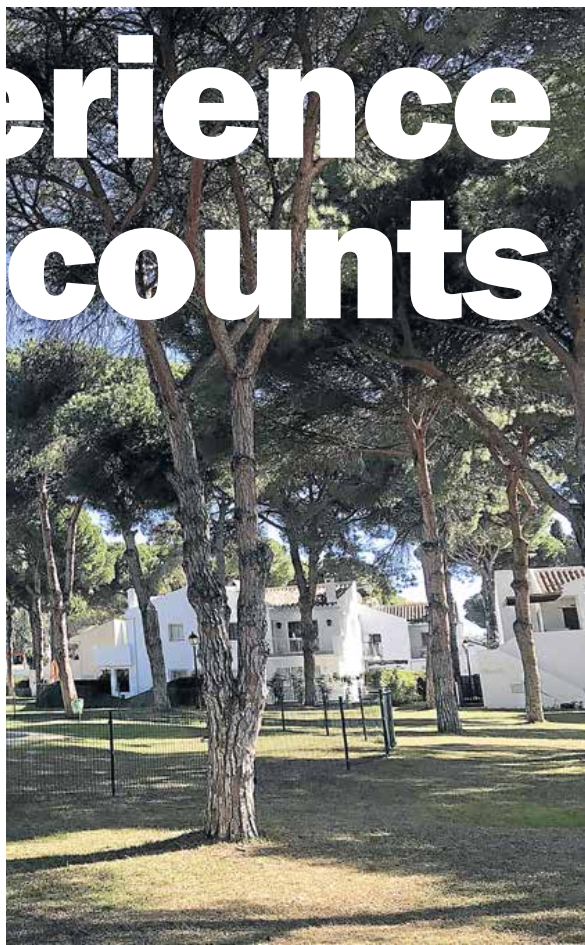


For more info call 617403103 or visit [www.experiencegroupspain.com](http://www.experiencegroupspain.com)



**GRAFTER:** Alan left school at 15 before later setting up the Experience Group and building Bena Vista (here) while on a plane in the 1970s (below)

# Experience counts



pping centre, the bowls club, the footbridge and most of the houses nearby.

"By 1973 we had built 400 homes and in the 1980s built and sold over 4,000 homes," he explains. "So much of it was knowing what the clients wanted. And we used a good team of architects and worked

on the basis of letting in sunshine and light and offering big terraces and pools.

"You can't build homes like sheds, you need proper design and proper construction.

"We didn't cut corners and built to a high spec with cavity walls, copper pipes and proper electrics and the clients appreciated it.

"We also liked to use old fashioned Andalucian pantile roofs and classic local style, not modern box-like stuff," he adds.

Alan's links to the Costa del Sol began in 1969 when already wealthy from a UK quarrying business he made his first foray down to Malaga.

## Building roots

Born in 1938, at the age of 15 Alan left school to work in the timber industry in London's East End.

Working for the UK's biggest importer of timber into Portsmouth and Canning Town he got to spend a lot of time thinking and talking about construction. This naturally led to working in quarries and he eventually headed up one of the biggest concrete companies in the Midlands.

"I ended up with six quarries, most of them limestone," he says.

At the same time he trained as an accountant and even built his own accounting systems, which he still uses today.

"You always need to know what's happening in your company and we have over 2000 movements a month so it's important that the system works," he explains.



**FIELDS OF GREEN:** Experience organised many tournaments at El Paraiso

## Golfing paradise

**T**he Experience Group helped to turn the Costa del Sol into a 12-month resort.

"I didn't want empty planes and decided the best way forward was to attack the golf market.

"Heading up the team was Nick Faldo and with some clever marketing we were soon bringing in tens of thousands of tourists every winter.

"Prices were cheaper in the winter which was a big draw. And punters could have an all-inclu-

sive holiday with flights, golf and buggies for about £100 all in.

"We also started the *Tarbucket Classic* golf tournament to boost the image of the Costa del Sol and brought in 25 teams each year, captained by various England stars and managers such as

Matt Busby and actors such as Robert Powell.

"We took over four courses, including the famous Valderrama and did around four tournaments a year. It was a must-attend for so many celebrities and really helped to raise the profile of the coast."



**MEMORIES:** Les Dawson played in a 1982 tournament, while (left) Matt Busby and Nick Faldo

While here, he met a Swiss builder in La Cala de Mijas who asked him to help him with a project there, before being introduced to a wealthy landowner, who was also conveniently a minister in dictator Franco's then government.

The following year he started working with both - plus two local architects - to develop his first project in Benamara, Estepona, and moved to Spain permanently with his wife Carol, now 72.

The main architect was his friend John Littlejohn, while they also used local planning svengali Jose Maria Santos Rein, an architect, who 'made things work with the town halls'.

## A TRIBUTE TO MY DAD!

**D**ad became an entrepreneur while still at school, so he always expected us to work too. Both myself and my sister Allyson started at 10/11 years old in his office, filling mailshot envelopes after school, then answering phones and booking holidays for clients of Bena Travel and using one of the many terminals linked to the huge mainframe computer - in the mid 70's it was one of the first of its kind.

Holidays were spent helping couriers shepherd clients in and out of their accommodation along the coast and handling the manual check-in at Malaga airport, a much less security-con-

sious affair in those days.

The Celebrity-Am golf weeks and other tournaments we organised, including the *Jimmy Tarbucket Classic* and the *Les Dawson Trophy*, made for a colourful childhood. My Dad and Carol became firm friends with many celebrities such as Frank Carson and Fred Trueman. Having the opportunity to work backstage on charity galas over the years, it was a logical step for me to go on to work backstage at concerts, Stage Managing in theatre and then in Production and Art Directing in TV and film. Our father taught us to be fearless and resilient. His drive and optimism in business gave us courage and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.



**DAUGHTER:** Claire James

## Charity work

**A strong believer in charity, Alan has raised thousands of euros for various organisations including the Aspenden handicapped children's charity in Marbella.**

**As well as running golf tournaments to raise money, he brought in famous singer Petula Clark (left) for a big concert at the Don Carlos Hotel, as well as comedian Ronnie Corbett the following year.**

