



"What

RFH bears Rocco's name, and his image is stamped all over the marketing material. Rocco knows he has to get it right too: he has invested a large chunk of his family's wealth in the luxury hotel business - the hostile takeover netted the Fortes about £325m. Much of that was down to the aggressive defence campaign that Forte ran. It brought him recognition (at last) in the City, and jacked the price right up. "We were £2.30 before the bid and [the sale price] was £4," he says with quiet satisfaction.

Forte looks strong, fit and confident. "The business is starting to change. We've moved from seven to 15 properties almost within a year," he says. The business is the classic dinosaur shape of hotel groups, with a huge body and a tiny head. "We employ about 2,500 people, with 17 people in head office," says Forte. "Our turnover, once Brown's opens, will be £100m."

Having presided over an empire that employed 100,000 people, Forte clearly thinks he's running a small business. But he's obviously happy that way. As a fellow who'd been involved by his father in hotels and restaurants from his early teens, the business is in his blood. His determination is to keep things intimate and hands-on, but to have the scale to match his high profile.

"Once a hotel's up and operating, the system kicks in. But you still want to keep in touch. With 20, 25 hotels there's no reason why I shouldn't visit them all regularly. I've got no ambition to become a huge company. Twenty-five hotels would effectively make me the biggest operator in Europe in the luxury sector."

RFH owns hotels in London, Brussels, St Petersburg, Edinburgh, Rome, Beaujolais, Manchester, Cardiff and Florence, with three properties planned in Germany this year. Forte considers building the chain from scratch to be his greatest achievement in business. The idea came to him after Granada failed to sell back the luxury hotels, such as the George V in Paris, that were acquired as part of the THF deal. "It took me six months to raise around £1bn in the City, which was a bit too long. If Granada ever had the intention of selling them, they changed their minds. So I didn't do the deal."

And so Forte found himself with a name that was bankable, and plenty of cash. But he didn't have anything to do. "[The idea of buying back the luxury hotels] kept me going and stopped me thinking that things were all over. When that failed I decided to set up a new hotel business. It's clear that the luxury hotel market is fairly disorganised. No company has significant coverage of the major city centres in Europe. That was the way to go. Also, I like luxury hotels."

Forte may like his luxury, but he is famously fastidious about what he eats and near-obsessive about keeping fit. Forte's own shape is the opposite of that of his business: his head is large and the frame slender - if anything a little too slender for the lantern jaw and prominent nose. He has just turned 60, and is said to be sensitive about his age. But really he needn't be. His hair is still dark and glossy, and the exertions of a committed amateur athlete keep him in excellent shape. Far from looking 60, Forte looks nearer, er, 40.

As a little diversion, he has challenged other chief executives of companies turning over at least £2m to an "Iron Man" contest to raise money for charity. This will consist of a 3,800m swim in a mountain lake, a 180km bike ride and a marathon. This, clearly, is testosterone-fuelled competitiveness gone slightly mad. Forte fairly exudes confidence that he will not be beaten.

The iron man amid the soft furnishings of the luxury hotel is a neat image for Forte, who could be described as a series of paradoxes. He sounds like a toff (the posh

Catholic school of Downside and Pembroke College, Oxford, have given him a plummy, Michael York-type accent), completely unlike his father and grandfather, who were entrepreneurial and very Italian.

He still resents the City, particularly the fund managers and investors who deserted him during the Granada bid. "That was a real stab in the back," he says. Yet he has good contacts there, and reportedly wants their good opinion.

Forte has an appetite for conflict, and talks with relish of his days as personnel director at THF in the 1970s when the unions were trying to expand into the hotel industry. He refused to negotiate with the unions at the conciliation service Acas. "I wouldn't meet the area representative, because I didn't think he was acting in good faith. I wasn't going to be seen in the same room with him. In the end we won. The unions withdrew."

But that steeliness didn't extend to his father, who had nurtured his business career. He implicitly acknowledges that this may have left the door open for Granada's bid. "Maybe I should have been more forceful in the way I've done things or been cleverer in the way I handled my father. He's a very determined and clever man. But I think if I have a failure, that's my real failure."

But that was then, and this is now. All that drive and determination, when not being channelled into barmy boys' games, is going into the new business. Forte will not take RFH public, but he wants the City to know that he's back.

"People were laughing when we started," he says. "Now they take us seriously as a competitor."

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Rocco's forte
(Filed: 30/01/2005)

Just turned 60 and having created his own chain of luxury hotels, Sir Rocco Forte tells Martin Baker about how he has finally put behind him the disappointment of seeing the family firm snatched from him in 1996

It's said to be a mistake to return to the scene of the crime. But this is not always the case. Having misplaced some of my background material on the fast-growing Rocco Forte Hotels (RFH) group, which numbers 15 luxury city-centre sites in prime European locations and is shortly to include the refurbished Brown's Hotel in Mayfair, I popped into Sir Rocco Forte's Piccadilly headquarters to pick up a few glossy brochures

Only on the way back did I realise something had been missing. A portrait of Lord Forte, Sir Rocco's father, had been propped up in a prominent position for the interview appointment. On my second visit, Lord Forte was gone. Could this have significance for one of the most famous father-and-son relationships in the UK business world?

"Almost certainly just a coincidence," says a long-standing acquaintance of Forte junior. "Rocco loves his father, and sees him regularly. But Rocco's certainly enjoying running his own show." That may be. But Forte is a hotelier who understands the importance of first impressions, as he outlines during our interview.

"The most important feature [of the Rocco Forte chain] is the welcome you get walking into one of our hotels," he says. But as coincidences go, the disappearing picture is a strange one.

The relationship between the father who accepted a peerage from Margaret Thatcher and the son who was offered a knighthood by John Major came under intense scrutiny in 1996 when the giant Trust House Forte group was the subject of a hostile bid from Granada. That story has, in a sense, been done to death. But it is a defining event in Rocco Forte's career, and he is inevitably drawn to touch on it during our conversation.

Forte goes to some lengths to point out how he was misunderstood by the City when Granada bid for Trust House Forte. He was in charge and implementing sensible strategies to develop the brands in a business with 800 hotels and 1,000 restaurants. But the spin doctors got to work, and the father-son relationship was branded as nepotistic by his adversaries. There's no possibility of a repeat performance, however. The new business is very definitely Rocco's baby, and Forte senior is in his mid-90s and retired, though still available to offer advice.

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