

Business

Bowcock is tipped to be new chief of William Hill

Gareth Davis has indicated that he will give up the chairmanship of William Hill next year once a new chief executive is bedded in and a successor as chairman has been identified (Dominic Walsh writes).

The news comes amid speculation that Mr Davis, formerly chief executive of Imperial Tobacco, now Imperial Brands, is preparing to appoint Philip Bowcock, the interim chief executive, on a full-time basis.

Writing in the annual report, Mr Davis, 66, who was appointed to the £300,000-a-year role in 2010, said that

although his third and final term of office did not expire until August 2019, he envisaged retiring at the annual

meeting next year as part of an "orderly and structured succession process". Some investors had hoped

that the group would accompany its results with the appointment of a chief executive. Mr Bowcock, a

former finance director of companies including Cineworld, joined the bookmaker as chief financial officer in 2015

10:53 THUNDER ALLEY		VIRTUAL	
10	JOSH CHAPMAN	8/2	
10	STEVIE COTTAM	8/2	
5	BUZZ PLATINI	11/2	
9	LEE WILLIAMS	13/2	
8	JOHNNY WATSON	15/2	
3	FABIAN DA SILVA	9	

LAST CHANCE TO BET		0.04	
10	STEVIE COTTAM	8/2	JF
12	JOSH CHAPMAN	34/28	9/2 JF
5	BUZZ PLATINI	23/46	11/2
9	LEE WILLIAMS	76/20	13/2
8	JOHNNY WATSON	48/48	15/2
3	FABIAN DA SILVA	11/10	9/1

10:52 PORTMAN PARK		14 HEROIC EPIC		12 SHIN		13 ALL	
11	MATT O NEILL	11					
14	ALFIE HOWARTH	14					
16	ISAAC HIGGINS	16					
	LEO WOODS						
	LEE BACON						
	BOBBY HOLLY						

Profits at William Hill fell by 10 per cent after a "challenging year"

and took the helm on an interim basis after the sacking of James Henderson last July amid poor trading in its online operation from around the world.

William Hill sought to put a "challenging year" behind it yesterday after reporting positive trends in amounts wagered in all four of its divisions this year.

The group, which suffered three profit alerts during the year, said it was maintaining the final dividend at 8.4p, reflecting its strong cashflow and the board's confidence in its turnaround strategy.

The group said it had delivered profits of £261.5 million, down by 10 per cent, from revenues up 1 per cent at £1.6 billion.

Shares of William Hill rose 6½p to 268½p.

First social booking service for theatre

A Scottish technology firm has launched what it believes is the first social booking service for theatre tickets in London.

Make It Social's software works with online booking systems to allow people to reserve tickets in a group but pay individually. The Edinburgh company is getting together with the Ambassador Theatre Group to provide the service to visitors to *Wicked* at the Apollo Victoria.

Barry Grant from Ambassador said: "There is a real need to make organising social groups easier for everyone and harnessing this new technology does that."

Eddie Robb, who founded Make It Social four years ago, said: "We are delighted that people going to see *Wicked* will be able to benefit from our social platform."

Bitcoin on a high on fund approval talk

The price of a bitcoin hit a record, passing \$1,200 for the first time as speculators bet the US securities watchdog would approve the country's first investment fund to track the digital currency.

The Securities and Exchange Commission is considering whether to approve three exchange-traded funds that track its value. One application was submitted by Winklevoss Capital, the investment firm run by the Winklevoss twins, who sued Mark Zuckerberg, the boss of Facebook, over allegations that he stole their idea for a social network.

JC Penney shuts 140 stores as sales fall

JC Penney, the American department store operator, has said that it would close as many as 140 stores after it reported disappointing trading over the holiday period.

Comparable store sales fell by 0.7 per cent in the fourth quarter, more than the 0.5 per cent decline estimated by analysts, amid strong competition from online retailers. The store closures represent as much as 14 per cent of JC Penney's total number of stores.

Shares fell by 8.8 per cent to \$6.26 in early trading in New York.

Fitness First Asia merges with rival

The break-up of what was once the world's biggest health club operator has been completed after Fitness First's Asian operation was merged with a rival.

Oaktree Capital Management, the private equity firm, said that it was putting its Fitness First Asia business in with Celebrity Fitness to create a group, dubbed Evolution Wellness Holdings, with 152 clubs and revenues of \$295 million.

Fitness First sold its remaining 62 UK clubs to Dave Whelan, the former JJB Sports owner, in October in a deal worth £70 million.

Pearson boss has board's backing after £2.6bn loss

Alex Ralph

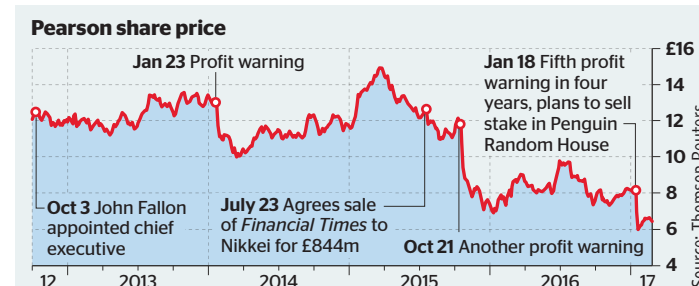
The chief executive of Pearson has said that he has the backing of the board to lead the turnaround of the struggling education publisher after it posted a record £2.6 billion loss.

John Fallon, who was appointed in October 2012 and has come under pressure after the group slumped to its fifth profit warning in four months in January, said the directors had asked him to "lead the company through this change".

Pearson is reeling from a transformation in its US higher education courseware market, which has suffered a fall in college enrolment because of the strength of America's economy and jobs market and sales as students shun printed text books for rental copies.

Mr Fallon, 54, said yesterday that the pain could continue for two years as he seeks to turn Pearson into a leader in digital education. "It's a realistic view that says we face another couple of years of difficult, painful change."

He has accepted that Pearson failed to read the shift in the courseware market towards renting textbooks and the company has responded by reducing ebook



rental prices and is launching a print rental programme.

Shares in Pearson have fallen from £12.30 when Mr Fallon was appointed to 573p after January's profit warning.

Mr Fallon was given some respite yesterday when the company's full-year results showed no renewed deterioration in its operating performance since January's profit warning, which had sent shares crashing by almost a third. In afternoon trading they were 650½p, down 4½p, valuing Pearson at about £5.4 billion.

The FTSE 100-listed company posted a statutory loss for 2016 of £2.6 billion, up from the £433 million loss in 2015.

The fall deeper into the red was driven by a £2.5 billion goodwill

impairment charge in its US business, which accounts for about 65 per cent of group sales, as it "became clear that the underlying issues in the North American courseware market were more severe than anticipated".

Group sales rose 2 per cent to £4.6 billion and adjusted operating profit fell 12 per cent to £635 million. Pearson stuck to January's 2017 forecast of profits of between £570 million and £630 million, £180 million lower than it had expected.

Analysts at Citi said Pearson's net debt of £1.1 billion was much better than feared and helped to alleviate concerns that the previously announced plans to offload its stake in Penguin Random House pointed to a weak balance sheet.

Edinburgh laboratory to bring 35 jobs

Greig Cameron

A Hong Kong company is to set up a research and development laboratory focused on blockchain technology at Edinburgh University.

The venture will be run from the School of Informatics in Edinburgh and could create 35 jobs.

Charles Hoskinson, founder and chief executive of IOHK, a Hong Kong-based cryptocurrency

research and development company, said that there would initially be six post-doctoral and professorial positions but the plan was to have more.

Blockchain is a type of database technology that is publicly accessible and a reliable ledger of transactions. It has been tipped to revolutionise financial services by reducing the cost of transactions and is best known as the system

underpinning Bitcoin, the cryptocurrency.

The Edinburgh lab will be IOHK's international research headquarters as it works with additional university partners around the world.

It established a presence this month at the Tokyo Institute of Technology and hopes to have agreements in Greece and the United States this year.

Deborah Haynes outflanks the top brass



Our Defence Editor exposed a leaked report revealing Russia's military superiority

over Britain. Then we went further, opening up the story with in-depth analysis and investigative journalism to keep you well informed.

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