

# Work starts on Newcastle student development as businessman returns to city

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Malaysian businessman Johnny Chen Yee Wong, who studied in the North East, was inspired to invest in the region after visiting in 2013



JSK's proposed new student development on Pitt St

A high-spec, 65-bed student housing development is to be built in an up-and-coming area of Newcastle after a Malaysian businessman who once studied in the city returned to find a “booming” property market.

Johnny Chen Yee Wong graduated from a quantity surveying course at what was then Newcastle Polytechnic in 1984, before returning to his home country to found one of Malaysia’s biggest property development firms, The W Group.

On visiting Newcastle again in 2013, he found it had grown significantly and recognised that, with two universities to cater for, student accommodation represented an obvious investment choice.

Forming a new company, JSK Property Development, he brought his former housemate Clint Woo in as a director, before buying up land on Pitt Street - close to St James’ Park - at the former base of historic food processing company Henry Hirst.

Contractors Hallgate Construction Ltd will build a timber-clad development featuring 65 studio apartments for students, each furnished to a high standard and featuring a kitchen, bathroom and high speed broadband connection.

Speaking at the formal signing of the £2.5m contract, Mr Woo, who is also a civil servant, said: “First, Johnny came over for a holiday, at which point we had a chat about the possibility of investments. At that point, he wasn’t as keen.

"Then last year, he came back again and decided the time was right to invest. He saw there were some quite exciting opportunities, that Newcastle city centre was changing and that there was a booming market.

"We decided to start small, but we are now looking for other sites and have one in mind for a much bigger project."

Working alongside JSK on the project is Washington-based architects Mario Minchella Ltd and the Newcastle-based quantity surveyors, CD Associates (UK) Ltd, among others.

Mr Woo acknowledged that there were many different student developments now appearing around Newcastle. However, the company saw this as a good thing, indicating a strong market.

"We want to go for a high standard and would like this particular project to stand out, " he said.

"We're a lot smaller than the big boys, so we have to prove ourselves through the quality we provide."

Pitt Street has been at the centre of a number of student developments in recent years, including St James' Point, the 216-bed accommodation block, and the Newcastle University Business School, which was built in 2011 on the site of the former Newcastle and Scottish brewery.

"We see it as an up-and-coming location and an attractive one for students," Mr Woo added. "It will be right next door to Science City, for example, as well as the business school."

It is anticipated that the project will be completed by August 2015, with the first students moving in at the beginning of the September term.

Malcolm Hart, joint director at the Sunderland-based Hallgate Construction, said: "We tend to be selective with our contracts, taking on larger jobs rather than lots of smaller contracts. In the past, we've been heavily involved in care homes.

"This is first venture into student accommodation, but it is a similar kind of work."

Mr Wong said: "Newcastle has so much growth potential; it is hard not to invest into such a beautiful place as Newcastle, where I have lived, growing up, and trained as a quantity surveyor."

The new studio flats will be available for rent or to buy.

Through the JSK group of companies, Mr Wong is also planning developments in China and Australia.