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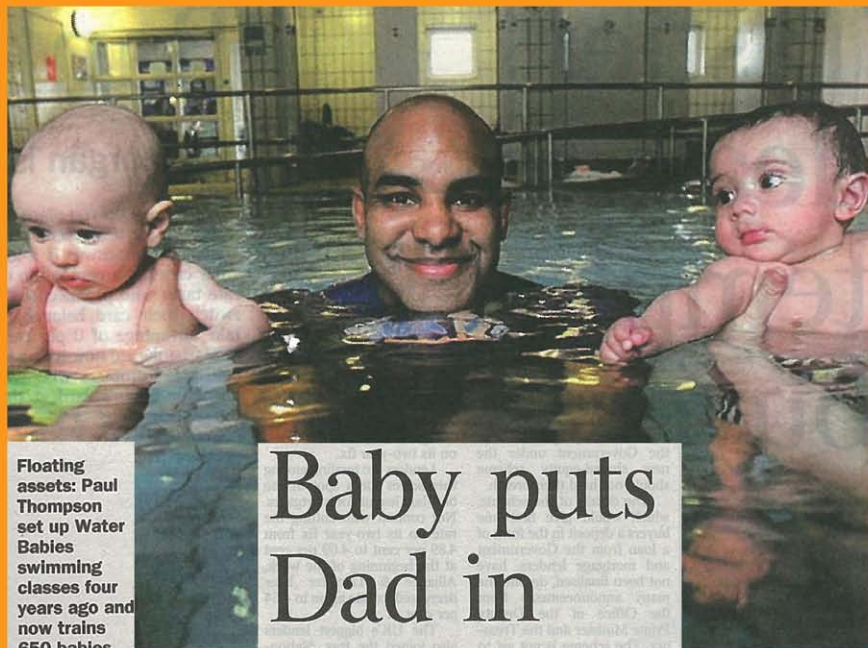
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INSIDE



Waterbabies help a family business make a splash

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Floating assets: Paul Thompson set up Water Babies swimming classes four years ago and now trains 650 babies a year

Baby puts Dad in the swim

Michelle Henery reports on the birth of a watertight success

FOUR years ago Paul Thompson was a househusband taking his baby daughter to swimming classes. He enjoyed swimming with her so much that he trained as an instructor and now he and his wife Jess own and operate Water Babies, one of the most successful franchises in the UK.

The Thompsons quit their jobs in 1999 and left the UK for a new life on the Caribbean island of Dominica with their newborn daughter Imani. But they returned a year later.

"Jess and I wanted to drop out of the rat race to spend more time with Imani," Paul says. "At first, it was lovely. With my previous training as a scuba diver I got a job easily, but Jess felt isolated as there were few services catering to young mothers and babies."

Upon returning, Jess, 38, got a job in PR again, while Paul, 39, became a stay-at-home dad. In 2001, after deciding to set up the business, the couple made an initial investment of £15,000 from their savings. "We had a logo and website designed, brochures printed, and obtained office equipment as well as thermal wetsuit tops with our logo on

them and a branded Smart car," Paul says. "We also located five pools in Leeds and secured an hour at each. We decided that we needed at least 40 clients and, within three weeks, we had 80."

Water Babies offers a 40-week course to help babies feel confident in the water. The Thompsons train 650 babies a week and have a waiting list of 200. "The youngest child we have had was two days old," Paul says. "People take the course to learn about water safety as drowning is the third biggest killer of children in the UK. Studies have also proven that babies who swim are fitter and have improved mental development."

There was so much interest in the business that franchises were set up. The franchisee pays £12,750 plus VAT for the brand. This fee covers swimming and business training, a place on Water Babies' website, bespoke literature, pool equipment, PR and ongoing help.

Paul says: "We now have five businesses [Leeds, Bristol, Edinburgh, Milton Keynes and Gwent] with hopes to expand to Liverpool, Birmingham and Newcastle."