Richard Edwards qualified in 1989 at Cambridge after fulfilling his childhood dream. “It was a bit of a struggle getting there – but in the end, I made it,” he said with a smile. “From the start I wanted to be a practice owner so I could forge my own interests. In the early days I made a concerted effort to gain as much experience as possible in what was involved in running a practice by working for several small practices in Kent and Sussex.”

Richard, together with Sandra Leatherdale (VN and wife-to-be) and fellow vet Katie Rook, came across a closed video shop in Bognor Regis in a small out of town shopping mall, along with another property in Birdham, near Chichester. After securing financial support from several sources including family and locum work, both practices opened in September 1993. “It was also a learning curve in ‘do it yourself’ – we did everything from painting to building extensions and fitting out the surgeries. Passers-by were interested and little did we know at the time it was free advertising as there was a nice park next door where dog walkers came every day. We had a queue of new clients at our opening day event!”

Twenty-five years later as writer of this feature I am sitting with Richard in his practice office at AlphaPet Veterinary Hospital (it achieved accreditation as a Small Animal Veterinary Hospital from the RCVS in 2016). There are 13 vets in all at the three practices, plus a dedicated nursing, reception and admin team. The Birdham and Chichester surgeries are rural and have two vets working in each. They like to make sure there is regular continuity, so clients see the same vets each time. The practice also encourages new graduates in training, and several have returned to join the team.

“There is a current trend in the profession for corporate development of practices. We set this practice up from day one, and we want to retain it as our own – it’s all about staff loyalty – their future and, most important of all, the way we want to run our practice. Since I qualified I have had an interest in wildlife, and it is something I want to encourage a lot more in the veterinary profession. Having my own practice has given me this wonderful opportunity to turn my interest into reality.”

It all started with the RSPCA bringing two badgers to them in the 1990s and asking if they could do a post mortem to see what caused their deaths – it was an horrific baiting issue, which Richard still remembers to this day!

“After that I decided the practice would take in more wildlife cases. I was my own boss so there were no issues. I’ve proved that it does not use a lot of practice resources or funds. Yes, it will take up some of our time but the results are well worth it. I refer to a case where a fox had been rescued from a hunt and was brought to me one Saturday afternoon, when I was on duty. For some reason the media got hold of the story and we got the most amazing amount of publicity as a result. I try to steer away from personal publicity, but this really helped the practice and changed my views on foxhunting.

“We can see anything, from birds caught by cats, bats, feral cats, urban foxes, hedgehogs, deer right up to stranded seals and..."