

See all Opinion



Nick Hungerford, co-founder of the website Nutmeg who pioneered low-cost saving for all – obituary

Having contracted a rare form of cancer, Hungerford set up Elizabeth’s Smile to give practical support to children left without a parent

By Telegraph Obituaries

12 July 2023 • 11:23am



Nick Hungerford, who has died aged 43 from Ewing sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer, was the co-founder in 2011 of Nutmeg, the online investment management company aimed at tech-savvy savers

who may not have large amounts of disposable cash, but still want to build up an investment portfolio.

Nutmeg, known as a “robo-adviser”, asks potential savers a set of questions through its website or mobile phone app to judge their risk appetite. It then automatically invests their money into funds that track stock-market indices such as the FTSE 100.

But rather than simply asking investors what “risk profile” they identify with, Nutmeg relates it to the outcome they are investing towards. “Before Nutmeg, you get asked if you are low, medium and high risk,” Hungerford, a former stockbroker, told The Times. “It’s absurd. We’ve reframed the question. What are you saving for? One person’s low risk is not the same as another’s.”

He explained how Nutmeg’s fees are much lower than those charged by traditional wealth managers because the platform relies on technology rather than people and ploughs savers’ money into automated low-cost tracker funds.

Rather than using expensive offices in financial districts such as Canary Wharf or the City, it operates from premises in a back street of south London, close to the headquarters of the secret service, MI6, where casually dressed staff gather once a week to watch an episode of the US drama Silicon Valley while eating ice cream.

“I want to set up a private banking service for everyone, not just the super-rich,” Hungerford, declared when launching Nutmeg in 2012 with William Todd, his uncle and co-founder. “The software we have developed allows us to tailor portfolios to individual needs. We want to generate an engaging experience where our customers feel involved.”



The Hungerford family | CREDIT: Katie Martin-Sperry

He described how the inspiration had come from a friend in Silicon Valley who needed his money managing. At first, he contemplated creating a dating-style website to match consumers with financial advisers, but soon realised that that advisers were interested in only a tiny proportion of customers, and instead he set up the online investment platform.

“I came across the idea of smashing together traditional wealth management and DIY investing, and pitched it to my classmates and my professors, including Google’s Eric Schmidt, who told me to get on and do it,” he said.

Despite receiving such strong encouragement, Hungerford was turned away by the first 45 wealthy investors to whom he pitched the idea. “It was horrible,” he told the BBC. “The feedback was very personal. Some investors said they liked the idea, but that I couldn’t do it. Others said they didn’t like the idea, and some simply said I wasn’t good enough. It was really brutal. I hugely questioned myself.”

This was autumn 2010 and at the time he was sleeping on the floor of a friend’s house and working out of a garage. “I was living the entrepreneurial dream that had turned into a horrific reality,” he said. He described using his personal credit cards to ensure that Nutmeg’s first employees were paid, adding that he gave himself until the end of that year to get the project off the ground.

Eventually he secured \$1.25 million (£760,000) from Tim Draper, a Silicon Valley investor who had

previously backed Hotmail and Skype. “I felt so vindicated,” he said. Yet rather than be based in the US, he was encouraged by a UK government trade delegation – and felt it was his duty – to site the fledgling business in Britain, where “the financial, operational and engineering talent in London is second to none.”

The name Nutmeg came about after 519 different names had been tested on potential clients over six months. It was chosen, he said, because nutmeg was once the most valuable spice in the world, with wars being fought over it, and is now available to almost anyone.

Some had their doubts, suggesting that the company’s aggressive marketing was a sign of desperation. Eventually even Hungerford began to distance himself from phrases such as “democratising finance” and “robo-advice” and in time human advisers were brought in alongside the automatic platforms. Traditional fund managers were soon paying attention.

Yet Nutmeg never did post a profit and in 2016 Hungerford, who was feted around the world as a darling of UK fintech, stepped down as chief executive. In 2019 the company raised a further £45 million from investors including Goldman Sachs and in 2021 it was sold to JP Morgan in a deal understood to value the business at about £700 million. By that time it was looking after more than £3.5 billion belonging to 140,000 customers.

Nicholas Walter Hungerford was born in Bristol on June 17 1980, the elder of two children of the Rev Robin Hungerford, an Anglican clergyman whose family once owned Farleigh Hungerford Castle, near Bath (now run by English Heritage), and his wife Judi, née Todd, a nurse; they survive him with his sister, Katie.

He attributed his passion for investing and finance to his grandmother, who gave him books on investment when he was about eight. After studying economics at the University of Exeter he began working as a manager at Barclays Wealth in 2002 before joining the stockbroker Brewin Dolphin. “I could have stayed working in the City, but I realised I wasn’t particularly fulfilled with my life,” he said.

In 2007 he moved to the US to complete an MBA at Stanford University in California, watching the global financial meltdown while rubbing shoulders with the brains behind Facebook and Twitter. “I got the entrepreneurial bug, and decided I needed to go to business school to learn how to run and grow a business,” he explained. “I wanted to try to be the person that I dreamed I could be.”

After leaving Nutmeg he became a venture partner at Portage, a financial services investment platform. He was also a digital ambassador for the Department for International Trade, was a member of the European Power 50 and received the Spear’s Entrepreneur of the Year award.



Hungerford set up Elizabeth's Smile, named after his daughter, above, to be his legacy: 'My daughter is not going to be condemned to a lifetime of grief, worry or disadvantage because of my illness'

Hungerford, a keen sports fan, also spent a couple of years in Singapore where his wife Nancy, née Hulgrave, was a presenter for CNBC, the American business news television channel. They had met through friends in a London pub in 2014 and were married two years later. More recently he sought treatment for his cancer in Washington, describing “playing whack-a-mole” with the tumours that left him in severe pain.

Nancy survives him with their daughter Elizabeth, who was born through IVF in December 2020. Last year he set up Elizabeth's Smile, named after his daughter, to give practical support to children who lose a parent.

In [a final piece in the Telegraph](#) Hungerford revealed that he had only a short time left to live: “In a strange way, the knowledge that my life is coming to an end makes me ‘privileged’,” he wrote. “It has given me the opportunity to really live, to make the most of every moment.”

Referring to the aims of the charity that would be his legacy, he said: “My daughter is not going to be condemned to a lifetime of grief, worry or disadvantage because of my illness.”

Nick Hungerford, born June 17 1980, died July 6 2023
