Montanaro European Companies Trust

Quarterly Commentary – Q1 2020

Before turning to investment matters, it is important to update you on how we are faring amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The team are working remotely and are thankfully all well. To a large extent, it is business as usual: our Analysts are speaking to the companies in which we invest; liquidity has not been a problem; and our operations are running smoothly. We have also just added to the team with the hire of a specialist Healthcare Analyst. We are fortunate that during the quarter we experienced net inflows and all Montanaro Funds outperformed their respective benchmarks. Our Quality investment style has again served us well in turbulent markets.

The first quarter of 2020 will enter the history books: the Bull Market came to a shocking end close to its 11th anniversary, as the S&P 500 recorded its second fastest 10% drop from peak since the Great Depression; the FTSE-100 suffered its worst one-day crash since Black Monday in 1987; the FTSE-250 fell for ten consecutive days, its worst run since 1998; UK SmallCap posted its second largest quarterly decline (-26%) since 1955; the European STOXX 600 Index experienced its worst ever one day fall (-11%); the oil price fell to levels not seen since 2002; and weekly jobless claims in the US exceeded 6.6 million (the highest weekly figure reached during the Great Financial Crisis of 2008 was less than 700,000). As financial markets saw large movements, the rest of the world halted: planes were grounded; shops, schools and factories closed; and by the end of March some 4 billion people had been instructed to stay at home. This was a true "Black Swan" event and one without precedent.

During the quarter, the NAV of the Trust declined by 12.8%, an outperformance of over 4% as the benchmark index fell by more than 17%. For the Financial Year as a whole, the NAV of the Trust declined by 5.6%, some 10% ahead of the benchmark index.

The strongest contribution during the quarter came from **Sartorius Stedim Biotech**, the developer of equipment used in the manufacture of biologic drugs, which posted a remarkable return of 24%, as investors rewarded it for a good set of results and a strong business model. **MIPS**, the helmet insert which prevents rotational impact to the brain during a fall, experienced good performance as customers in China began to return to work in March (Guangdong province is a major market for the company). **VZ Holding,** the Swiss based wealth manager, benefited due to the resilience of its business model.

The weakest contribution came from **MTU Aero Engines**, the aircraft engine manufacturer, which suffered due to the grounding of many passenger flights. **Loomis**, the provider of cash management services, declined amid concerns that the coronavirus would accelerate the transition away from cash payments. **Merlin Properties**, the Spanish REIT, weakened as shopping centres were forced to close across Spain.

The financial conditions stemming from the coronavirus most threaten businesses with structural weaknesses. Despite our Quality approach to investing – we invest in businesses with strong balance sheets who have a greater chance of weathering economic storms – we are taking nothing for granted.

We are speaking to our companies to understand how the crisis is changing their operating conditions and how it has impacted staff. We are also asking management about balance sheet stability, dividend payments (which in many cases are being rightly cut), the availability of credit facilities and the potential for future funding requirements. Finally, we are trying to assess what opportunities may emerge from the darkness of the pandemic.

Amid glimmers that Europe is beginning to see the benefits of social distancing measures, we wish all of our investors and their loved ones well. Please remain safe and take care during this difficult time.

References to the outlook for markets are intended simply to help investors with their thinking about markets and the multiple possible outcomes. Investors should always consult their advisers before investing. The information and opinions contained in this article are subject to change without notice.