# AJ Bell Passive funds – Q2 2019 review

## Introduction

We are delighted to bring you the quarterly report from AJ Bell Investments covering the Passive funds over Q2.

This report is designed to keep you up-to-date on what is happening with your AJ Bell managed investments. It covers the major macro-economic events of the past three months, looks at how these have impacted the portfolios, and highlights any changes made in the period.

## Summary

After a strong start to the year in Q1, Q2 broadly continued the theme, particularly for sterling investors who were helped by a strong tailwind from the weakening currency. Investors across the world were of the view that 'bad news was good news' as the chances of interest-rate cuts or further monetary stimulus seemed to increase as the quarter progressed.

In the UK, Brexit was once again in the spotlight with the date for leaving the EU pushed back again, this time until the end of October. However, this resulted in Theresa May resigning as Prime Minister, finally admitting defeat in getting her deal approved by parliament. Trade wars and tariffs were a feature of the quarter as the US/Chinese spat continued, while bond yields fell sharply as the bond market perceived increasing risk to the global economy.

## Economic and market review

The second quarter of 2019 saw a continuation of the first with broadly positive performance from both equities and bonds, although Asian and emerging markets equities struggled to progress. The positive performance was based upon indications from central banks in the major economies that they were ready to provide further support and stimulus to economies should they judge that the world was at risk of an economic slowdown. The positive feeling behind this seemed to outweigh increasing tensions towards the US/Chinese trade war and increased tensions in the Middle East that pushed both the oil and gold prices higher.

In a serious case of déjà vu, Brexit dominated the UK agenda over the past quarter as the original date for leaving the EU was extended, perhaps aptly, to 31 October, or Halloween! However, following disastrous European election results for the Conservative Party and a failure for parliament to pass the Withdrawal Agreement, Theresa May took the decision to resign, triggering a leadership contest and a market expectation that the risk of a no-deal Brexit had increased. With Boris Johnson the hot favourite, all eyes will be on the run up to the October deadline. During the period, UK economic performance was solid with continued low unemployment and GDP growth in line with expectations. The Brexit uncertainty saw sterling fall in value vs the US dollar, which helped the performance of larger stocks given their focus on overseas earnings while overall the FTSE All-Share Index was up 3.3%. With the weakening of sterling, overseas exposure in both equities and bonds was boosted in GBP terms.

The bond market predictably reacted to the increased risk of a no-deal Brexit with the yield on the 10-year gilt falling sharply, ending the period at just 0.82%. This helped the FTSE Actuaries UK Conventional Gilts All Stocks Index increase by 1.3% over the quarter. With the risk on environment, credit risk was rewarded, helping corporate bonds to perform well, with the iBoxx UK Sterling All Maturities Index increasing by 2.3% over the quarter, while high-yield bonds also performed well with the Bloomberg Barclays Global High Yield Bond Index increasing by 2.1% over the period.

*Source: Bloomberg LP, AJ Bell Investments, July 2019*

In the US, two major issues dominated the quarter: firstly, the ongoing trade war with China; and secondly, the shift in narrative from the Federal Reserve surrounding interest rates. The trade war escalated during the quarter as negotiations broke down and in May, the US increased the tariffs on $200bn of Chinese goods from 10% to 25% and threatened to extend this to another $300bn of goods. Naturally, the Chinese didn't take this lying down and responded by increasing the tariff on $60bn of US goods. This tit-for-tat battle has yet to truly be seen in economic data, but the risk is that a pick-up in inflation and a slowdown in growth could be seen in the second half of 2019. Turning to the Federal Reserve, during the quarter it became apparent that investors sense that the Fed may have to cut interest rates at some point this year. While initially the Fed appeared adamant that it was comfortable with the economic position, as the quarter progressed the narrative shifted with an indication that rate cuts could come if data deteriorated. With inflation remaining low and the boost from the Trump tax cuts about to leave the economy, there is a sense that a slowdown is occurring that will force the Fed's hand. As a result, market behaviour has become somewhat strange, with equities and bonds rallying on weaker data in the expectation that the Fed will be more likely to act sooner rather than later. This backdrop saw equities perform strongly with the S&P 500 Index increasing by 6.6% over the period. The more accommodative language from the Federal Reserve saw interest rate expectations change markedly, and as a result the US 10-year Treasury yield fell from 2.4% at the start of the year to 2.0% at the end of the quarter, resulting in a strong rally for US bonds.

*Source: Bloomberg LP, AJ Bell Investments, July 2019*

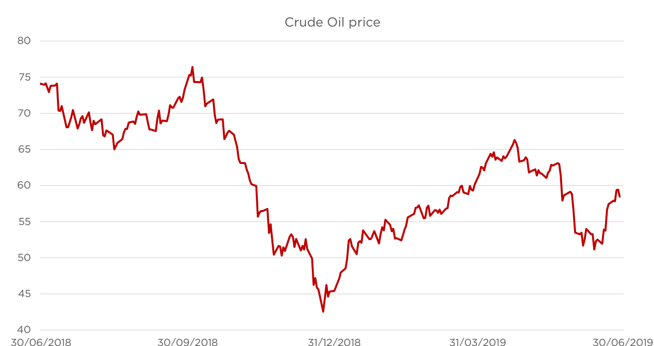
With a myriad of economic and social problems in Europe, investors have been nervous of the region for some time. However, after solid performance from the equity market during the quarter, European equities have actually had their best first half of a year for 21 years, providing a healthy reminder that investing in companies is not always representative of the underlying economies. At an economic level, data has been mixed with a very poor performance of the manufacturing side of the economy as the global economy – notably China – slows down, but a stronger performance from the services element of the economy, which is less relaint on overseas consumption. The ECB has been alive to the risks and Mario Draghi has talked of the possiblity of restarting quantitative easing in some form should the economy need it. These comments saw bond yields fall sharply, with the 10-year German Bond turning negative again and actually reaching a lower level than it saw even in the eye of the Euro crisis storm back in 2014. In Italy, the government remained at loggerheads with the EU, with talk of the potential introduction of a parallel 'currency' called mini-BOTs to stimulate their economy. Over the period, the MSCI Europe ex UK Index increased by 8.3%.

In Asia, China was the dominant factor as the previously mentioned trade war was prevalent. As Trump's trade tariffs kicked in, investors began to digest how much this could impact on Chinese growth and the Chinese central bank acted quickly, providing a cut to the amount capital banks have to hold in a hope of stimulating lending. They also cut both personal and corporate tax rates in a sign that they were prepared to act decisively. Away from China, India had a general election in what is said to be the largest democratic election in the world, with nearly 1 billion voters. Prime Minister Modi was re-elected with a majority, which should enable him to continue his reform agenda. Over the period, the MSCI AC Asia ex Japan Index fell in local currency terms, but increased by 1.7% in sterling.

In Japan, economic data showed strong growth in the first quarter, catching experts, who had expected the economy to contract, off guard. However, as ever, the devil is in the detail and analysis of the data showed that the GDP was pulled up by a sharp fall in imports rather than any strong underlying demand. In fact, a fall in exports and private demand pointed to a continued challenging outlook, particularly given the slowdown in neighbouring China. Over the quarter, the Topix Index was the worst performing major market, but for UK investors, the weakness in sterling actually meant that the Topix Index increased by 2.7% over the period.

*Source: Bloomberg LP, AJ Bell Investments, July 2019*

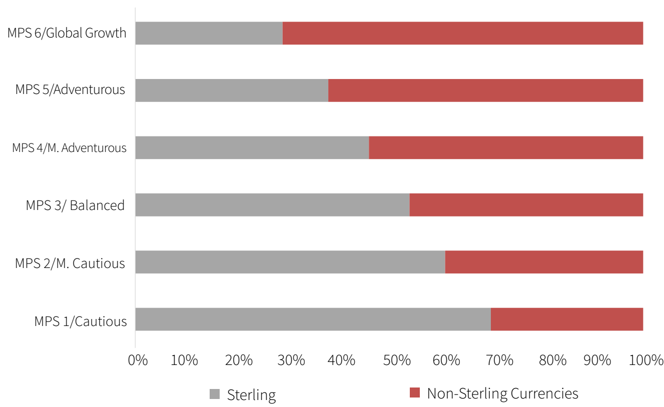
In the emerging markets, Russia was a very strong performer, as the country benefited from the rise in the oil price this year. With Gazprom and Lukoil making up a third of the Russian index, the rally in the price of 'black gold' this year has seen their share prices rally sharply, with Gazprom announcing a significant increase in its dividend. In Brazil, the stock market hit an all-time high despite the economy showing a contraction as confidence in President Bolsonaro fell and the growth rate for 2019 was slashed. During the period, MSCI announced changes to its emerging markers index which will see Saudi Arabia and Argentina added to the index while the weight of domestic Chinese equities continues to be increased. Over the period, this index was up by 3.0% while emerging markets fixed interest was the best performing asset class, with the JPMorgan GBI Emerging Market Global Composite Bond Index increasing by 8.3% over the period.




*Source: Bloomberg LP, AJ Bell Investments, July 2019*

## Asset allocation positioning

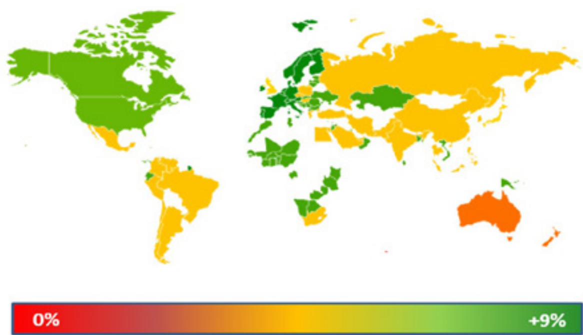
As already highlighted, sterling fell against all major currencies over the last quarter. As sterling falls, the value of international assets increases when converted back into sterling, providing a boost to UK-based investors. Currency fluctuations provide extra volatility to the return of a portfolio, therefore our lower risk funds tend to be more focused towards sterling-based assets (or those hedged back to sterling), whereas our higher risk funds tend to have predominantly international holdings, allowing investments into higher risk equity markets such as Asia and Latin America. Therefore sterling falling up to 5% against major currencies provided a boost to returns, especially in the three highest risk funds, which hold a majority of non-sterling assets.




*Source: AJ Bell Investments, July 2019*

Although returns in UK stocks in general were muted, UK Large Cap equities tend to be international in nature: it is estimated that over 70% of profits from FTSE 100 companies are generated overseas and, therefore, also benefit from a falling pound. This means that UK large cap equities actually outperformed some international regions in the quarter. A combination of currency moves and equity market moves meant all equity regions delivered positive returns to portfolios in Q2.

## Q2 equity market returns




*Source: AJ Bell Investments, Bloomberg LP, July 2019*

Alongside equity regions, we also split our equity allocations across sectors, with each portfolio having allocations to at least two sectors from technology, health care and consumer staples. Health care and consumer staples delivered performance broadly in line with global markets, whereas technology performed particularly well, given the risk on environment. It was one of the top contributors in the funds (where held), with global technology stocks up nearly 9% for the quarter.

As both equity markets rallied and government bond yields fell globally, the sweet spot for bonds over the quarter was in corporate and emerging market bonds, benefitting from falling treasury yields and tightening credit spreads.

All bond classes also delivered positive performances over the quarter, as such, and there were no detrators to the funds in absolute terms.

## Asset Allocation Contributors

| | Portfolio | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Top contributors* | MPS 1 | MPS 2 | MPS 3 | MPS 4 | MPS 5 | MPS 6 |
| 1 | Emerging Market Bonds | UK Corporate Bonds | UK Large Cap Equities | UK Large Cap Equities | North American Equities | North American Equities |
| 2 | North American Corporate Bonds | Health Care Equities | North American Equities | North American Equities | UK Large Cap Equities | Emerging Market Equities |
| 3 | UK Corporate Bonds | North American Equities | Technology Equities | Technology Equities | Technology Equities | Technology Equities |

*Source: AJ Bell Investments, Bloomberg LP, July 2019*

## AJ Bell Passive funds review – Q2 2019

### Fund performance

Within the passive funds the majority of performance is driven by asset allocation. However the benchmark the team has chosen to track can lead to performance differentials, especially in bigger regions such as emerging markets and Asia. The country–by-country classification – being either a frontier, emerging or developed nation – is still at the discretion of the index provider and as such, the performance of indices in these regions can diverge, when certain countries perform particularly well (or badly).

When selecting an ETF to use in the portfolios, we consider both the benchmark tracked and the cost to implement the strategy. Within Asia, due to the high investment costs associated with investing in products that cover both developed and emerging countries in the region, we have taken the decision to use the iShares MSCI Pacific ex-Japan ETF. This tracks the developed Asian Pacific nations. Unlike FTSE, MCSI classify South Korea as an emerging nation, so the exclusion of this region sees the index concentrated towards Australia. Following the rise in commodity prices, the Australian stock market has performed well and, as such, our chosen product has outperformed the all-country Asia Pacific index by around 4%. This has helped performance, especially in the higher risk portfolios, where the allocation to Asia is higher.

In the Global Growth Fund we hold an Automation and Robotics ETF as part of our technology allocation. Although this position delivered a return of over 5% in Q2, it lagged behind technology in general. This is due to its tilt towards Asia and away from the US – US markets significantly outperformed Asia in Q2.

The final area to highlight over the quarter is the performance of our UK property holdings. We produced an article in May explaining how we implement property passively in the funds. This involves a combination of REITs (through an ETF) and short dated index-linked bonds (held directly). The idea is that the blend provides performance much closer to physical property, by dampening the volatility caused by the inherent leverage in REITs and also avoiding the liquidity concerns surrounding active property funds. Over the quarter, an ETF tracking just UK REITS was down 2.2%. On the other hand, the blend was down 1%, protecting on the downside.

All other areas of the portfolios performed in line with expectations, with returns ranging from 3% for the Cautious Fund, to 5.5% for the Global Growth Fund.

## Fund changes

After making significant changes to the funds in the first three months of the year, the second quarter was a period of calm, with no changes implemented. We continue to monitor the market place to ensure our implementation represents the most cost-effective route, whilst remaining cognisant of any costs incurred if we did switch positions. With the emergence of new ETF providers – such as L&G, Amundi and Lyxor – providing fierce price competition, we would expect OCFs to continue to fall.

## Performance summary (all models)

| Fund Name | 3 months | 6 months | 1 year | Inception* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| VT AJ Bell Passive Cautious | 3.20% | 7.05% | 4.40% | 6.79% |
| VT AJ Bell Passive Moderately Cautious | 3.96% | 9.32% | 5.34% | 9.54% |
| VT AJ Bell Passive Balanced | 4.55% | 11.40% | 5.74% | 12.49% |
| VT AJ Bell Passive Moderately Adventurous | 4.88% | 12.26% | 5.41% | 13.48% |
| VT AJ Bell Passive Adventurous | 5.24% | 13.65% | 5.48% | 14.60% |
| VT AJ Bell Passive Global Growth | 5.49% | 14.18% | 5.68% | 3.65% |

**All the funds launched on 18 April 2017, with the exception of the Global Growth Fund, which has a launch date of 11 June 2018. All performance is net of fees.*
*Source: Bloomberg LP, AJ Bell Investments, July 2019*

This report provides general information about the AJ Bell Passive funds. It should not be read or construed as investment advice. It is your responsibility to assess your client's circumstances and make a personal recommendation that is suitable for their needs.

The value of investments can go down as well as up and your client may not get back their original investment.

Past performance is not a guide to future performance and some investments need to be held for the long term.

AJ Bell Management Limited (company number 03948391), AJ Bell Securities Limited (company number 02723420) and AJ Bell Asset Management Limited (company number 09742568) are authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. All companies are registered in England and Wales at 4 Exchange Quay, Salford Quays, Manchester M5 3EE. See website for full details.

AJB/QR/PF/20190715