



Edison Insight

Strategic perspective

January 2020



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Welcome to the January edition of the Edison Insight. This special edition strays from our usual format as it does not include any company profiles. Instead, we look at the outlook for 2020. Healthcare companies are covered separately in Edison Healthcare Insight, which can be found on our website homepage.

Alastair George believes that in 2020, the biggest risk comes from elevated asset prices. The resolution of the US-China trade dispute and the convincing victory for the UK's Conservative party in December's election set markets alight in the closing days of 2019. After a 29% gain in 2019, the median US equity starts 2020 on a forward P/E of 18.4x, close to the top of its range for this cycle. Continental European equities are similarly aggressively valued relative to their own trading range. However, incoming survey data on both sides of the Atlantic remain stubbornly weak. While a positive qualitative narrative of a broadly defined Trump policy de-escalation in a US Presidential election year is not wrong, it has been overemphasised by investors, in our view. We reluctantly shift back to a cautious position on global equities and credit.

Readers wishing more detail should visit our website, where reports are freely available for download (www.edisongroup.com). All profit and earnings figures shown are normalised, excluding amortisation of acquired intangibles, exceptional items and share-based payments.

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We welcome any comments/suggestions our readers may have.

Neil Shah Director of research



Global perspectives: Fearful of missing out?

- In 2020, the biggest risk comes from elevated asset prices. The resolution of the US-China trade dispute and the convincing victory for the UK's Conservative party in December's election set markets alight in the closing days of 2019. After a 29% gain in 2019, the median US equity starts 2020 on a forward P/E of 18.4x, close to the top of its range for this cycle. Continental European equities are similarly aggressively valued relative to their own trading range at present.
- 2019 was a year of unanticipated monetary easing in the US, eurozone and China. In the US, the Federal Reserve cut rates and rapidly reversed its balance sheet contraction as repo rates surged in September. In the eurozone, the ECB responded to slowing growth by re-introducing quantitative easing (QE). China's bank reserve requirements have also been cut by the People's Bank of China. Nevertheless, we fear the sweet spot for central bank-linked equity gains may already have passed.
- Despite the material reduction in equity and credit risk premia since the beginning of Q419, survey data on both sides of the Atlantic remain stubbornly weak. For example, the US manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) is currently at 47.2x, indicating a contraction in US manufacturing activity lies ahead, even as the S&P 500 continues to gain. European PMI indices also remain in contractionary territory despite the re-introduction of ECB QE.
- A positive qualitative narrative of a broadly defined Trump policy deescalation in a US Presidential election year is not wrong – but overemphasised, in our view. It is getting worryingly late in the day for any expected recovery in economic activity to become evident in the incoming data. Given such a recovery already appears to be embedded in risk asset prices, we reluctantly shift back to cautious position on global equities and credit.

Analyst

Alastair George +44 (0)20 3077 5700 institutional@edisongroup.com

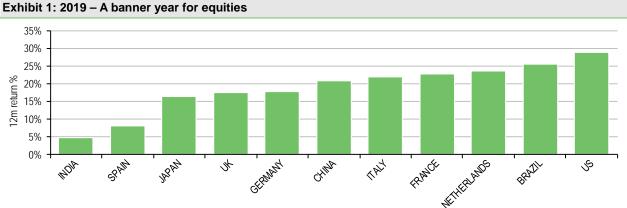


2020: Fearful of missing out?

Rich equity valuations risk disappointment, even if economy recovers

In our view investors have proved a little over eager to jump on the positive narrative of declining political risk in recent months. This has led to a sharp reduction in the risk premium for both global equities and credit markets. The situation is almost the reverse of 12 months ago when fears of a slowdown and overly tight monetary policy swept through markets. Then, at least cautious optimism seemed warranted, given the consistent track record of central banks in easing policy at the first sign of a slowdown. Now, market psychology appears to have swung too far towards optimism, as investors discount much-improved prospects for 2020 despite rather weak incoming economic data.

We certainly cannot take issue with the idea that there should be a positive response to the resolution of the US-China trade conflict, Brexit uncertainty or synchronised monetary policy easing. Not only have we previously highlighted that these fears were misplaced but each factor has steadily moved in investors' favour during the past 12 months. Starting from an oversold position at the end of 2018, 2019 ultimately proved to be a banner year for global equities (Exhibit 1).



Source: Refinitiv. Note: Price returns 31 December 2018 to 31 December 2019.

However, the sheer extent of this rebound in global markets and the resolution of practically all of the commonly discussed risks raises the possibility that it may be the fear of missing out that is now driving markets. We believe that in addition to the known risks, it is important the 'unknown unknowns' should also carry a risk premium. Most recently this was demonstrated, for a 48-hour period in the first few days of January at least, by renewed tensions in the Middle East holding markets hostage.

It has become a popular view that passive investment is the only option. However, at various times during this extended economic cycle there have been opportunities to tactically adjust risk exposures where a gap has arisen between market valuations and economic reality. Passive investment certainly has a cost benefit but can also imply a loss of control over an investor's risk/reward ratio if it means remaining permanently fully invested, regardless of equity valuations.



Exhibit 2: US high yield spread to risk-free rate - trading at cycle lows



Source: FRED St Louis Fed

Most recently, during 2019 markets became over focused on the near-term risks in both Q1 and Q3. At these times risk may have dominated the headlines but there was at the same point an opportunity to add to equity positions at expected returns substantially ahead of long-term government bonds.

This cycle may be atypical, given its continued reliance on monetary policy easing to keep it alive. Nevertheless, investors able to balance the competing dynamics of central bank policy, economic and earnings momentum and market valuations remain better positioned to deliver higher returns per unit of risk than those ignoring the valuation signals in our view.

Declining risk premia should not be equated with improving prospects

At present, it is clearly tempting to view the recent turn in investor sentiment during Q419 as a precursor to better growth prospects ahead. Instead, we believe the recent rally was driven by a predictable decline in an excessive market risk premium for political developments, notably US-China trade and the UK's Brexit and related political uncertainties.

With both of these risks apparently now consigned to 2019 (despite a difficult period of negotiation for a future trade agreement between the EU and UK ahead), equity valuations have surged back to cycle highs in both the US and continental Europe. It is, in our view, time to book some gains.

In Exhibits 3 and 4, we show the one-year forward P/E estimate for these markets. An 18.4x forward P/E ratio for the median US stock is close to the peak level for this cycle and the picture is similar in continental Europe. UK equities trade in line with their 15-year average and the disconnect between UK and continental European valuations after the EU referendum is clearly visible in the exhibit.

Exhibit 3: US equities closing in on peak median forward P/E ratio



Source: Refinitiv, Edison calculations



The argument for taking an overweight allocation to global equities at this point cannot therefore be based on low or even average valuations. In our view central banks, whose significant policy easing of 2019 brought many investors back into the markets, are not likely to continue to ease policy and risk a further juicing of asset prices, absent a meaningful growth or inflation scare.

Exhibit 4: Eurozone P/E 17% above average while UK equities trade in line



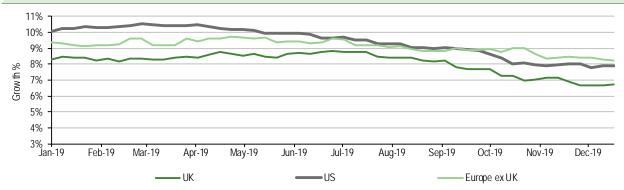
Source: Refinitiv, Edison calculations. Note: Chart shows median 12m forward P/E versus 15-year average.

Upgrades to outlook necessary to validate market gains

Without valuation or central bank support, any bullish view on equities can only be based on cogent arguments for a consensus-beating period for economic and corporate profits forecast upgrades. In this regard, while the situation is not as fragile as it was during autumn, the current incoming data is hardly encouraging.

It is true that 2020 earnings estimates appear to have stabilised during December, although the first few weeks of the new year will be an important test to confirm this stabilisation was not just because of the holiday period. Consensus forecasts now call for 6–8% earnings growth across US and European markets. These are not especially exciting growth figures, given the relatively high valuations of equity markets, but are consistent with maturity of the profit cycle. For example, EBIT margins for non-financials are expected to remain close to record levels.

Exhibit 5: 2020 Single-digit consensus earnings growth consistent with cycle maturity



Source: Refinitiv, Edison calculations

However, in terms of the outlook for the economy, we remain concerned that as we enter the year with sub 2% GDP forecasts for each of the major developed markets, there is a limited growth buffer against renewed recessionary fears, should there be any downgrades.

We note that despite the improvement in equity market sentiment, developed market government bond yields have barely changed over the past six months and remain close to their 10-year lows. US two-year rates are also unchanged over the same period and at 1.6% are only 20bp below 10 year rates, indicating only a modest GDP growth trajectory.



Bond investors may not be infallible, but in contrast to the relative exuberance on display in equity markets, there is clearly a sense of limited change in the longer-term outlook for economic growth and inflation, which in our view should not at this stage be wholly ignored.

In contrast to the US, eurozone long-term rates have been rising in recent months. 10-year German government bunds currently yield -0.21%, over 50bp higher than the August lows of -0.74%, levels that may have prompted the ECB to re-introduce QE during Q319. Eurozone two-year rates have also continued to drift higher and are now at -0.6%, having been as low as -0.93% in August 2019.

In part, this improved sentiment towards growth from eurozone bond investors will have been due to the avoidance of a no-deal Brexit during Q4 and the progress in the US-China trade conflict, which was disproportionately affecting the German and eurozone export sector.

Nevertheless, consensus forecasts across the major economies of the eurozone suggest real GDP growth will struggle to exceed 1% in 2020. Such an anaemic growth performance appears insufficient to maintain equity investors' Keynesian 'animal spirits', in the absence of further upgrades.

Time is running out for looser policy to feed into real economy

However, expectations for an improvement in the data remain in the realm of economic modelling, as actual evidence of improving data remains unfortunately scant. During the growth scare in Q319 we highlighted the possibility of a turn in the data around Q419 or Q120, given the typical time-lags between an easing of financial conditions and the resulting improvement in the real economy. It is unfortunately getting rather late in the day, in our view, for this modelled improvement to turn into a reality.

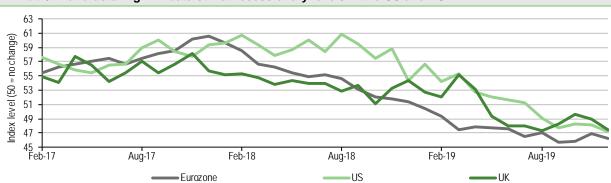


Exhibit 6: Manufacturing PMI data still at recessionary levels in the US and EU

Source: Refinitiv

At present, manufacturing survey data remain remarkably subdued, especially given the improvement in investor sentiment. Purchasing manager's indices remain locked deep in contractionary territory – at levels matched only by 2015 and the run-up to the financial crisis of 2008 (Exhibit 6). The risk is that time is running out for the stimulus from 2019's credit impulse to show up in the economic data.

Clearly, we cannot rule out an improvement in the data in coming months; but even if it occurs, it would appear fully embedded in market expectations. This leads us to the conclusion that equity risks are now asymmetric. Disappointments are likely to be more harshly punished than data that surprises to the upside.

In our view, the better position to take is one of cautious pessimism, rather than falling victim to a fear of missing further upside. This is after a quite exceptional 12-month equity rally. It is not a portfolio thought crime to reduce exposure to under-priced risks, in our view.



In this environment of low risk premiums and easing political risks, an increase in corporate activity is likely during H120, should volatility remain low. Investors should therefore continue to screen portfolios for potential M&A targets or other corporate activity.

Conclusion

2019 was the year in which markets were buffeted by political risk. The risk in 2020 is high asset prices that are still yet to be validated by any meaningful improvement in the data. We understand it is not easy to reduce equity exposure when so many political risks appear to be resolved, or at least mitigated. It is even more difficult, especially in an institutional context, to argue the case for reducing risk exposures in the absence of any obvious near-term danger to the outlook.

While suggesting that now may be a good time to crystallise profits to bring portfolios back to a cautious positioning, we are not making a case for a short-term relapse but merely highlight the relatively unattractive risk/reward currently on offer in global markets.

Equity market valuations are close to cycle highs and credit risk premium lows. Furthermore, the primary and most effective joker card for short-term gains regardless of the outlook – which is an unanticipated dovish shift in central banks' policies – has already been played aggressively during 2019. We believe central banks are unlikely to add significantly to current policy initiatives, at least for the remainder of Q120.

There is little sign of any real threat to the profitability of some of the world's largest global corporations, which are also the primary beneficiaries of lower political risks and easing trade tensions. Within a cautious portfolio positioning, we would emphasise holdings that have the benefits of market liquidity should volatility increase and a sustainable, high-margin business model should be preferred over generic market exposure and cyclical risks.

2020 may yet prove to be the year in which active managers can outperform. Although January is a seasonally slower period, lower risk premiums and volatility are typically associated with increased corporate activity and this should also be a focus for equity investors at this point.

We have a neutral view on government bond markets as yields are low but unlikely to move significantly higher until there is much greater confidence in the outlook for economic activity. Despite investors' new-found appetite for risk, current survey data on both sides of the Atlantic points to a still dismal picture for manufacturing activity for the coming quarter and time is running out for 2019's monetary stimulus to demonstrate its effect on the real economy.



Edison dividend list

Company name	FY0 period end	Currency	DPS FY0	DPS FY1	DPS FY2
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4imprint Group	2018/12	USD	70.00	82.50	92.50
Appreciate Group	2019/03	GBP	3.20	3.20	3.35
Avon Rubber	2019/09	GBP	20.80	27.10	35.20
Borussia Dortmund	2019/06	EUR	6.00	6.00	6.00
Carr's Group	2019/08	GBP	4.75	4.90	5.10
Cenkos Securities	2018/12	GBP	4.50	4.00	4.50
China Aviation Oil (Singapore)	2018/12	USD	3.20	3.20	3.20
China Water Affairs Group	2019/03	HKD	28.00	33.00	38.00
Circle Property	2019/03	GBP	6.30	6.50	7.00
Civitas Social Housing	2019/03	GBP	5.00	5.34	5.46
Cohort	2019/04	GBP	9.10	10.10	11.10
CREALOGIX Group	2019/06	CHF	0.00	0.00	25.00
Custodian REIT	2019/03	GBP	6.55	6.65	6.72
De La Rue	2019/03	GBP	25.00	0.00	0.00
DeA Capital	2018/12	EUR	0.12	0.12	0.12
Deinove	2018/12	EUR	0.00	100.00	200.00
discoverIE Group	2019/03	GBP	9.60	10.00	10.40
Diversified Gas & Oil	2018/12	USD	11.20	14.90	16.00
Duke Royalty	2019/03	GBP	2.70	3.00	4.00
Ebiquity	2018/12	GBP	0.71	0.85	0.95
Epwin Group	2018/12	GBP	4.90	5.00	5.30
Esker	2018/12	EUR	41.00	45.00	50.00
Euromoney Institutional Investor	2019/09	GBP	33.10	33.70	35.00
FCR Immobilien	2018/12	EUR	16.86	27.24	56.25
Focusrite	2019/08	GBP	3.80	3.90	4.00
Gamesys Group	2018/12	GBP	0.00	0.00	30.00
GB Group	2019/03	GBP	3.00	3.40	3.80
Gemfields Group	2018/12	USD	0.00	0.80	0.00
Globalworth Real Estate Investments	2018/12	EUR	54.00	60.00	60.00
Greggs	2018/12	GBP	35.70	46.40	50.20
Hellenic Petroleum	2018/12	EUR	75.00	50.00	50.00
John Laing Group	2018/12	GBP	9.50	8.32	11.24
Kape Technologies	2017/12	USD	4.93	0.00	0.00
La Doria	2018/12	EUR	18.00	20.00	21.00
London Stock Exchange Group	2018/12	GBP	60.40		
Lookers	2018/12	GBP	4.08	4.08	4.08
Low & Bonar	2018/11	GBP	1.20		
Marshall Motor Holdings	2018/12	GBP	8.54	8.54	8.54
Medserv	2018/12	EUR	0.00	0.00	2.00
Norcros	2019/03	GBP	8.40	9.30	9.80
Numis Corporation	2019/09	GBP	12.00	12.00	74.00
Ocean Wilsons Holdings	2018/12	USD	70.00	70.00	74.00
OPAP	2018/12	EUR	70.00	124.11	92.12
OTC Markets Group	2018/12	USD	123.00	125.00	133.00
Piteco	2018/12	EUR	15.00	17.50	20.00
Polypipe	2018/12	GBP	11.60	12.50	13.30
PPHE Hotel Group	2018/12	GBP	35.00	38.00	41.00
Primary Health Properties	2018/12	GBP	5.40	5.60	5.80
QinetiQ Group	2018/03	GBP	6.30		
Record	2019/03	GBP	2.30	2.30	2.30
Renewi	2019/03	EUR	1.70	1.70	2.50
S&U	2019/01	GBP	118.00	124.00	128.00
Secure Trust Bank	2018/12	GBP	83.00	87.20	91.50
Severfield	2019/03	GBP	2.80	3.00	3.30

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Share	2018/12	GBP	0.55	0.70	0.75
Stobart Group	2018/02	GBP	18.00	18.00	18.00
Stride Gaming	2018/08	GBP	3.00		
Sureserve Group	2018/09	GBP	0.25	0.25	0.25
Target Healthcare REIT	2018/06	GBP	6.45	6.58	6.71
Thrace Plastics	2018/12	EUR	4.00	4.00	4.00
TransContainer	2018/12	RUB	480.40	451.80	586.20
Treatt	2019/09	GBP	5.50	5.80	6.20
TXT e-solutions	2018/12	EUR	50.00	13.00	15.00
Tyman	2018/12	GBP	12.00	12.30	12.90
Ultra Electronics Holdings	2017/12	GBP	49.60	49.60	52.10
Walker Greenbank	2019/01	GBP	3.20	2.50	2.70
Wheaton Precious Metals	2018/12	USD	36.00	36.00	53.00
YouGov	2019/07	GBP	4.00	5.00	6.30



Company	Sector	Most recent note	Date published
1Spatial	Software & comp services	Flash	08/01/20
32Red	Travel & leisure	Update	13/03/17
4imprint Group	Media	Update	16/01/20
AAC Microtec	Aerospace & defence	Update	16/10/19
Aberdeen Asian Income Fund	Investment companies	Investment company review	16/08/19
Aberdeen Diversified Inc & Growth Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	27/09/19
Aberdeen Latin American Income Fund	Investment companies	Investment company review	19/08/19
Aberdeen New Dawn Investment Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	23/07/15
Aberdeen New Thai Investment Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	11/11/19
Aberdeen Standard Equity Income Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	07/02/19
Aberdeen UK Tracker Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	31/07/15
Accsys Technologies	General industrials	Update	14/10/19
Acorn Income Fund	Investment companies	Investment company review	25/04/19
ADMIE Holding	Utilities	Update	11/12/19
AFH Financial Group	Financials	Update	26/01/16
African Petroleum Corporation	Oil & gas	Update	18/03/16
AJ Lucas Group	Oil & gas	Update	13/05/19
Alabama Graphite	Metals & mining	Update	15/03/18
Aladdin Blockchain Technologies	Software & comp services	Update	08/10/18
Alkane Resources	Metals & mining	Update	24/09/19
Allied Minds	Investment companies	Update	13/12/19
Amur Minerals	Metals & mining	Update	03/12/19
Appreciate Group	Financial services	Update	16/12/19
appScatter	Software & comp services	 Flash	12/04/18
Arbuthnot Banking Group	Financials	Update	16/08/16
Ariana Resources	Metals & mining	Update	02/03/16
Atlantis Japan Growth Fund	Investment companies	Investment company review	10/10/19
Attica Bank	Banks	Update	22/05/19
Augean	Industrial support services	Update	18/10/19
Auriant Mining	Metals & mining	Update	19/12/18
Avanti Communications Group	Fixed satellite services	Update	01/10/18
Avesco Group	Media	Update	03/10/16
Avon Rubber	Aerospace & defence	Update	03/01/20
Baker Steel Resources Trust	Investment companies	Initiation	21/06/19
BB Biotech	Investment companies	Investment company review	18/06/19
BCI Minerals	Metals & mining	Update	30/10/19
bet-at-home	Travel & leisure	Update	04/11/19
BioPharma Credit	Investment companies	Investment company review	14/11/19
Biotech Growth Trust (The)	Investment companies	Investment company review	29/07/19
BlackRock Emerging Europe	Investment companies	Initiation	29/01/18
BlackRock Greater Europe Inv. Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	07/11/19
BlackRock Latin American Inv. Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	09/10/19
Boku	Software & comp services	Update	14/01/20
Borussia Dortmund	Travel & leisure	Update	15/11/19
Brady	Technology	Flash	16/10/19
Bragg Gaming Group	Technology	Update	12/11/19
Brunner Investment Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	12/11/19
Canacol Energy	Oil & gas	Flash	10/12/19
Canadian General Investments	Investment companies	Investment company review	07/11/19
Carbios	Alternative energy	Update	30/09/19
Carclo	Technology	Flash	02/01/20
Carr's Group	Food & drink	Update	14/01/20
Cenkos Securities	Financial services	Initiation	07/11/19
China Aviation Oil (Singapore)	Industrial support services	Update	03/09/19
China Water Affairs Group	Utilities	Update	03/12/19
Circle Property	Real estate	Outlook	12/11/19
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Company	Sector	Most recent note	Date published
City Natural Resources	Investment companies	Investment company review	22/01/15
Civitas Social Housing	Real estate	Initiation	25/06/19
Claranova	Software & comp services	Update	08/11/19
Codere	Travel & leisure	Update	18/11/19
Cohort	Aerospace & Defence	Update	13/12/19
Cooks Global Foods	Food & drink	Update	02/08/17
Coro Energy	Oil & gas	Flash	04/12/19
CREALOGIX Group	Software & comp services	Outlook	16/10/19
Custodian REIT	Property	Outlook	20/12/19
CVC Credit Partners European Opps	Investment companies	Investment company review	08/08/19
DeA Capital	Investment companies	Update	10/12/19
De La Rue	Industrial support services	Update	06/12/19
Deutsche Beteiligungs	Investment companies	Investment company review	14/01/20
discoverIE Group	Electronics & electrical equipment	Update	09/12/19
Diverse Income Trust (The)	Investment companies	Investment company review	18/10/19
Diversified Gas & Oil	Oil & gas	Update	06/12/19
Duke Royalty	Financial services	Initiation	04/10/19
Dunedin Enterprise Investment Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	05/10/15
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Eckoh	Technology	Flash	21/01/16
Eddie Stobart Logistics	Industrial support services	Update	15/07/19
Edinburgh Worldwide Investment Trust	Investment companies	Initiation	13/10/14
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EJF Investments	Investment companies	Update	08/10/19
EMIS Group	Software & comp services	Flash	21/10/19
Endeavour Mining	Metals & mining	Update	11/11/19
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Epwin Group	Industrials	Update	12/08/19
EQS Group	Media	Outlook	10/01/20
ERM Power	Utilities	Flash	23/08/19
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Euromoney Institutional Investor	Media	Update	27/11/19
European Assets Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	10/07/19
European Investment Trust (The)	Investment companies	Investment company review	19/06/19
Evolva	Food & beverages	Update	27/08/19
Expert System	Technology	Update	09/12/19
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Fidelity Asian Values	Investment trusts	Investment company review	31/10/19
Fidelity China Special Situations	Investment companies	Investment company review	11/11/19
Fidelity European Values	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	Investment company review	16/01/20
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Fidelity Special Values	Investment companies	Investment company review	07/11/19
Fidelity Special Values	Investment companies	Investment company review	28/11/19
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Gemfields Group	Metals & mining	Update	03/12/19
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Company	Sector	Most recent note	Date published
Greggs	Food & drink	Update	08/01/20
GVC Holdings	Travel & leisure	Update	15/11/18
Hansa Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	12/07/19
HarbourVest Global Private Equity	Investment companies	Investment company review	19/09/19
HBM Healthcare Investments	Investment companies	Investment company review	06/08/19
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Seneca Global Income & Growth Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	26/11/19
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Share plc	Financials	Update	02/10/19
Shore Capital Group	_· · · ·	Update	11/04/19
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Standard Life Private Equity Trust	Investment companies	Investment company review	13/03/19
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STV Group	Media	Update	26/08/16
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Sureserve Group	Industrial support services	Update	13/11/19
Target Healthcare REIT	Property	Update	20/08/19
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Technicolor	Media	Update	15/11/19
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The Scottish Investment Trust	Investment trusts	Investment company review	01/10/19
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XP Power	Electronic & electrical equipment	Update	13/01/20
YouGov	Media	Update	21/10/19
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