

Rathbone Multi-Asset Defensive Growth Portfolio

Monthly update October 2023

Autumn is often a tough time for stock markets. The weather has turned pants, the days are shorter, the light fades and people's moods along with it. When all the technology, valuation measures and retrospective rationalisations are stripped away, the stock market is nothing but a barometer for the optimism and caution that battle themselves out in the minds of millions of investors. This year October was tough indeed.

While little, really, has changed in the big issues of the day – the paths of inflation, GDP growth and interest rates – the mood of investors definitely darkened. And it seems more for human reasons than cold, hard financial logic. There's comfort in that. It has seemed an especially dark couple of months, where every week brought another storm, where terrorism, war and worry have dominated our screens. There's solace in shared experience – in seeing humanity in even the most impersonal devices we've created.

Adding to beaten-up companies

Global stocks dropped about 2% over the month and almost 4% over the three months to 31 October – in sterling terms at least. A roughly 5% jump in the value of the dollar against its main trading partners actually cushioned losses for most foreign investors: in dollar terms, global stocks fell 9% in the past three months.

We sold US logistics and warehouse supplier **Zebra Technologies** because we wanted to reduce our investments in industrial areas of the economy. We think that a mild recession is very possible in the coming year or so and Zebra, which supplies RFID gadgets and inventory management software to consumer-facing businesses, could be vulnerable. We wanted to swap this investment for medical technology businesses **Dexcom**, **Smith & Nephew**, **Abbott Labs** and **Edwards Lifesciences**, which were hit hard by **new weight loss drugs**, and household retail brands **Coca-Cola**, **Estée Lauder** and **McDonald's**. Also, we added to pest control company **Rentokil Initial** after it was sold aggressively because of a cautious outlook about the coming year and a slight decrease in expected 2023 profits.

We sold our holding in **Premier Foods Finance 3.5% 2026** bonds, which finance the holding company that owns an array of British food brands, such as Oxo, Lloyd Grossman sauces, Mr Kipling and Angel Delight. We had bought the bonds during rocky markets in mid-2022 and thought it made sense to cash out after a substantial reduction in credit spreads, or the extra return above government bonds that corporate bonds offer to compensate for the risk of default.

The mechanism for the sharp drop in stocks and the rise in the dollar was the same: a substantial rise in the prevailing yield of US Treasury bonds. Three months ago, a 10-year US Treasury bond yielded below 4%; in October the yield breached 5.0% and ended the month at 4.9%. And, of course, a rise in a bond's yield means its price must drop alongside, so bond markets dipped in value as well. Because the interest rate you get from investing in American bonds became more attractive, more investors sell other nations' assets – and their currencies – and buy dollars and US investments. As with anything, selling pressure pushes a currency lower, while buying demand makes it stronger. And so you get the ascendant dollar.

Why did bond yields suddenly rise? After a summer of growing confidence that the US central bank was going to pull off the mythical 'soft landing' – reining inflation in to the 2% target without causing a recession – many investors reconsidered their conviction. In October, after a few months of higher inflation in the US and a quarter of particularly strong GDP growth, people were spooked by the thought that the US Federal Reserve (Fed) may yet hike rates significantly more. The Fed itself actually dismissed the idea. It has kept open the option of one more 25-basis-point increase, but it has been pretty clear that it plans to wait and assess the effects of the medicine it has already administered to the economy. Regardless, bond investors ratcheted yields (borrowing costs, in English) higher in lieu of the Fed.

We're on the side of the Fed here. We think the already large uplift in the central bank's short-term benchmark rates has yet to be truly felt by households and businesses. But it is having an effect that is increasing with each passing month as debts roll over to higher interest rates, as businesses reassess the viability of projects now that financing is substantially more expensive, as people find less money left after the monthly bills. **We think interest rates have now peaked** – and if not, that only one more hike is on the cards.



Trading bonds, buying volatility

Because we think rates have peaked, both here and in the US, we've been in the habit of buying government bonds when yields pop higher. These included the **US Treasury 3.5% 2033** and **1.875% 2032** and the **UK Treasury 3.75% 2052, 0.875% 2033, 4.5% 2042** and **1.125% 2039**. Since month-end it's worked quite well, as investors have done an about-face: in the first fortnight of November the 10-year US Treasury bond yield slumped about 0.35bps to roughly 4.6%.

This whiplash-inducing, post-month-end change in narrative sent share prices higher in early November too. The jittery, pessimistic sort of market mood in October made for a thorny set of quarterly company results. Companies that disappoint, even slightly – even only on throwaway comments about the outlook that no-one can predict – have been absolutely hammered by sellers. Businesses that deliver have been rewarded only modestly. Except for those that had already been completely written off by investors, which have bounced quite high indeed.

We expect this sort of jerky volatility – both up and down – to continue for the foreseeable future, which is why we've been buying the **JPMorgan 5.13% Dispersion Note 2025** structured product. Structured products are contracts with investment banks that pay specific returns when triggered by certain scenarios. This one pays us a quarterly coupon amounting to 5.1% each year, as well as a return based on the 'dispersion', or volatility of a basket of stocks relative to the volatility of the S&P 500 stock market index. By volatility, we mean that the prices of underlying stocks within the index move up and down more than the price of the index itself. This structured product will repay our capital and then some if the difference in volatility between the basket and the index widens between when we bought it and the October 2025 maturity. If the volatility difference decreases over the period, we will lose money.

As the year has worn on, geopolitical risks have remained in the forefront. The awful events in the Middle East appear unlikely to stop anytime soon. The financial effects pale in comparison to the human suffering, yet we do need to keep an eye on how worsening geopolitics could affect our portfolios. That mechanism will be through the oil price and the global price of energy. While Israel and Palestine don't have any meaningful oil industries, yet Iran and its neighbours do. For now, the oil price has stayed relatively calm, yet if the conflict spreads beyond

Israel and the Palestinian territories the oil price could rise to account for sanctions, the threat of reduced production or disruption to supplies running through the neighbouring Strait of Hormuz.

There is continuing tension between the US and China over digital technology and AI, which has the capacity to fissure the intricate supply chains between East and West that helped deliver cheaper, better goods for global consumers over the past few decades. All sorts from cars and fridges to computer chips and clothing is manufactured in China or in its orbit using innovative designs, high-end manufacturing equipment and intellectual property delivered by Western nations. It's in the interests of both sides to continue – it keeps goods prices low and creates jobs for China. However, the leadership of both sides have seen it politically expedient to be bellicose about trade in recent years.

Added to this strain between East and West is the ongoing war in Ukraine. Russian oil and gas is flowing at a discount through emerging markets which are then using it or selling it on to Western nations that aren't allowed to buy it directly because of sanctions. This is creating a shadow market for oil and gas that's operating outside the sphere of developed markets. The ramifications of this are yet to be truly known, but as the Ukraine war has ground into what's looking like a long stalemate, these divisions in commodity markets may become entrenched.

There's a lot going on in today's world, both in public view and away from the headlines. We're trying to ensure we're keeping tabs on all risks – not just the ones, like interest rates and inflation, that everyone is currently fixated on.



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If you require further clarification on this commentary, then please contact your adviser or Rathbones at the contact details below.

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