Rathbone Unit Trust Management

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Rathbones
Look forward

Rathbone Strategic Bond Fund

Quarterly update December 2022

Global bond markets have been through a very painful correction as investors came to terms with much, much higher interest rates than anyone expected at the start of 2022. It looks like 2023 will be a bad year for the economy, but a better one for bond markets.

	3 months	6 months	1 year	3 years	5 years
Rathbone Strategic Bond Fund	3.99%	-2.93%	-14.09%	-6.86%	-2.18%
IA UK Sterling Strategic Bond Sector	3.87%	-0.70%	-11.01%	-4.45%	1.81%

	30 Dec 21-30 Dec 22	30 Dec 20-30 Dec 21	30 Dec 19-30 Dec 20	30 Dec 18-30 Dec 19	30 Dec 17-30 Dec 18
Rathbone Strategic Bond Fund	-14.09%	0.84%	7.50%	6.47%	-1.36%
IA UK Sterling Strategic Bond Sector	-11.01%	0.77%	6.55%	9.26%	-2.49%

Source: FE Analytics; data to 31 December, I-class, mid price to mid price.

These figures refer to past performance, which isn't a reliable indicator of future returns.

How high will rates peak?

For most of 2022, global bond markets bore the brunt of one of the most aggressive rate-rising cycles on record as the world's biggest central banks quickly hiked rates in a bid to tame sky-high inflation. Higher rates and high inflation erode the value of bonds' fixed returns so global bond markets sold off very sharply (sending yields, which run in the opposite direction to bond prices, soaring to their highest levels in many years).

Central banks made it very clear that they'd keep hiking rates until the prices of goods and services stopped rising too fast, even if that meant engineering an economic slowdown and higher unemployment. Towards year-end, there was strong evidence that soaring goods prices, especially food and energy, were falling back fast. At the same time, it looked like recessions were looming for swathes of the global economy. The UK and the Eurozone already seem in the midst of a downturn, largely because they're at the epicentre of the energy crisis caused by the Ukraine war. The US is holding up better, but it too seems destined to slip into recession at some point as the economic handbrake exerted by higher borrowing costs resulting from central bank rate rises starts feeding through to households and businesses directly.

With inflation decelerating and growth slowing, bond investors grew more confident that policymakers were approaching the point where they'd call time on rate rises. As a result, government bond prices began to rally and yields to drift downwards. The yield on 10-year UK government bonds (gilts) stood at 4.10% at the start of October, falling to 3.67% by year-end.

The yield on 10-year Treasuries began the quarter at 3.83%, rose above 4.2% in late October and then fell back to 3.88% by year-end.

Further rate rises are likely as policymakers keep battling inflation. The US Federal Reserve (Fed) is particularly insistent that it's in no hurry to stop hiking. But the Fed, the Bank of England and the European Central Bank all opted for 0.50% rate increases in December, instead of the larger jumps they'd favoured for much of 2022. In his press conference following the December hike, Fed chair Jerome Powell again emphasised that US rates might peak at a higher level than it had previously indicated, with Fed policymakers now forecasting rates would max out at just more than 5% in 2023. That new forecast still implies that US rates aren't that far from peaking as they indicate that only about 0.50% to 0.75% of further tightening may be necessary. That certainly seems to be what bond investors now expect: they're pricing in that rates will peak just below 5% in the US, around 4.5% in the UK and near 3.5% in the Eurozone. And they're already turning their attention to what happens after rates peak.

Whether rates then stay unchanged for quite a while or start to fall back relatively quickly is shaping up to be one of the most important questions for 2023. It will have a big impact on how bond markets behave. But, given the huge shift in investor expectations about where rates were heading in 2022, the scope for further big shocks has diminished significantly, provided that inflation keeps on cooling. That's a big difference versus the start of 2022 and suggests to us that 2023 is shaping up to be a better year for bonds.

A "sea change" in fixed income?

While government debt enjoyed a good end to 2022, so too did corporate bonds. Indeed, the belief that central banks may be nearing the end of aggressive hiking has injected new life into corporate bonds. Credit spreads – the extra yield (or spread) that corporate debt offers relative to government bonds for taking on default risks – tightened significantly after blowing out earlier in the year. The iTraxx EuropeanCrossover Index, which measures this spread, began the quarter at 693 basis points (bps) and had narrowed to 474bps by its end.

Lots of corporate borrowers at the higher end of the credit quality spectrum are in solid shape. They went through a tough time only a couple of years ago when the pandemic hit. The ones that got through the shutdown have been managing their businesses and finances pretty conservatively even when their profitability recovered in the reopening boom. This suggests to us that we probably aren't going to see a big spike in defaults from higher quality borrowers even if the broader economic backdrop get worse.

The big surge in yields and spreads in 2022 (they're still much wider than they were at the start of last year despite the recent tightening noted above) means that investing in corporate bonds at the higher end of the credit-quality spectrum can lock in very decent yields, while being very amply compensated for any default risks. Broad indices of sterling investment grade credit now yield well over 5%, compared with just over 2% at the start of 2022 and 3.4% on average since 2010. For the first time in years, credit seems to offer a way to achieve long-term return objectives through income alone. And there's always the potential for attractive price returns when rates do eventually start to fall. Celebrated investor Howard Marks, who founded Oaktree Capital Management, is calling this a "sea change" in the relative appeal of credit, saying that its potential for "solid returns" means he believes investors no longer need to rely as much on "riskier instruments", in other words, equities, to achieve their "overall return targets."

Corporate bond prices have risen in the last few months given growing investor appetite for credit, but they're still a lot more appealing than they were at the start of 2022 and, on average, over the past couple of decades (both in absolute terms and relative to government bonds and relative to equities).

Investment grade credit prices have historically nearly always been much less volatile than equities, holding up well when equities falter as a result of tougher economic conditions. In particular, investment grade credit performance has tended to improve when rate hiking cycles come to an end. We're not at the point yet, but we might well get there in the first half of 2023. And, of course, now that corporate bond yields are much juicier, they provide a more solid buffer against any price volatility.

Buying higher-yielding bond funds

Given the revival in investor appetite for corporate bonds, we added to our holdings in several higher-yielding bond funds during November. These included the **Pareto Nordic Corporate Bond Fund**, which – as its name suggests – invests in a portfolio of diverse Nordic corporate bonds offering an attractive combination of high yields and low duration. We also invested in the **Muzinich Asia Credit Opportunities Fund**. We feel that China's relaxation of some of its stringent COVID-19 restrictions paves the way towards the country's reopening, which would prove positive for many corporates operating in wider Asia.

Higher rates have been raising the cost of borrowing for banks and building societies offering mortgages and other loans, making this lending more expensive. Because we expect this to drive down mortgage and loan demand in the UK in particular, we've been paring back our holdings of bonds issued by companies with direct exposure to the domestic housing market. In November, for example, we continued to sell the largest UK private residential landlord **Grainger 3.375% 202**8 and also sold property manager **Places for People 3.625% 2028**

We also continued to sell units in one of our very few equity investments, the Ireland listed **Greencoat Renewables** investment company. This investment has performed strongly, but we've been selling out of it for several months now. We bought the fund because it offered a strong income yield. As rates have risen, we're finding ample opportunities to buy attractive bonds offering similarly compelling yields.

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Any views and opinions are those of the investment manager, and coverage of any assets held must be taken in context of the constitution of the fund and in no way reflect an investment recommendation. Past performance should not be seen as an indication of future performance. The value of investments and the income from them may go down as well as up and you may not get back what you originally invested.

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