

BEHIND THE SCENES

WE TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT SOME OF THE ROYAL WARRANT HOLDERS THAT ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT TONY WHEELER HAS VISITED IN 2019, AND LEARN THE SECRETS OF THEIR SUCCESS

What connects three very different Royal Warrant holders – a glove maker, a chemicals formulator and an organic dairy? Tony Wheeler has visited all of them during his tenure as RWHa President, and found that, while they may span very different sectors, service different customers and have different pedigrees, they share much common ground. This includes a passion for quality, impressive employee retention, and a forward-looking mentality that has seen them through changing times, whether they have been in business for decades, or for centuries.

TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

Glove and leather goods maker **Dents** is firmly among the latter. The company was founded in Worcester in 1777 by John Dent. "The way we make gloves today is the same as it was then," says Dents chief executive Deborah Moore. "The only addition is electric sewing machines!"

So what makes a Dents glove? "It's a combination of design, cutting and the finest materials," says Deborah. "There are no manufacturing short cuts; every pair is so distinctive."

That traditional craftsmanship is paired with a modern commercial

sensibility: "We're making what we can sell, not selling what we can make," notes Deborah. "Web sales are booming, we have built our export market to 27 countries, we have concessions. As a business, you have to remain light on your feet and be able to change direction very quickly if something isn't working."

For Deborah, the most essential component of Dents' success is its staff: "People take such pride in

their work – I don't have to do quality control, because they come to me and say 'I can't give you this, it's not good enough,'" she says.

The company has many loyal staff, as the RWHa's Tony Wheeler and Richard Peck witnessed first-hand

during a tour of Dents' factory in Warminster this summer: "On the day we presented long-service awards to four employees, who between them had worked here for 200 years," says Deborah. "I told Tony when he arrived that gloving gets in your blood; and by the end of the day he said: 'I see what you mean, it really does!'"

Dents has established a museum to the art of glovemaking: "It's important to capture that heritage, not just for Dents, but for the industry as a whole," says Deborah.



LEFT: DENTS LEATHER GLOVES HAVE BEEN MADE FOR 242 YEARS ABOVE: THE RWHa'S RICHARD PECK, DENTS' DEBORAH MOORE AND RWHa PRESIDENT TONY WHEELER

"I told Tony when he arrived that gloving gets in your blood; and by the end of the day he said: 'I see what you mean, it really does!'"



ABOVE LEFT: DENTS' LONG-SERVING STAFF ABOVE RIGHT: GLOVES IN THE MAKING BELOW: AGMA MARKED 50 YEARS IN BUSINESS IN 2018 BELOW, INSET: AN AGMA VAN



The collection contains many treasures, including a glove worn by Elizabeth I. Dents itself has made gloves for many monarchs, and has held its Royal Warrant of Appointment to HRH The Prince of Wales since 2016. "We were spurred on to apply by a visit from The Duchess of Cornwall, and it has made a big difference," says Deborah. "You meet so many like-minded people through the RWHa, and the seminars are really relevant. The archiving session encouraged me to hire an archivist."

Deborah thinks John Dent would be proud to see the company still going so strong today. "Another 200-plus years would be nice," she smiles.

NORTHERN STAR

Many companies talk about embracing change – but **AGMA Ltd** actually does it. Based in Haltwhistle in rural Northumberland, the cleaning and hygiene product specialist celebrated 50 years in 2018, and has held a Royal Warrant to HM The Queen for 37 of those.

The firm started out by manufacturing janitorial products, but has evolved into a specialist

formulator of chemicals. It now supplies sterile disinfectants to the NHS and pharmaceutical companies, preservatives to the oil and gas industry, specialised solvent cleaners to the engineering sector and a range of cleaning products to the equine industry.

"We take pride in our adaptability and our ability to 'punch above our weight'," says AGMA managing director and Grantee Malcolm Franklin. "For example, we're currently working in



partnership with Durham University to investigate the next generation of preservatives.”

That adaptability came to the fore in the wake of the financial crash of 2008, when the family-owned company looked overseas to broaden its customer base. It now exports to 37 countries worldwide, and is currently investing in new processes and equipment to streamline production.

By the time of the company’s 50th anniversary last year, the 30-strong workforce had clocked up more than 400 years of service between them, with the longest-serving employee having started at AGMA in 1974.

“For over half a century we have worked to build a reputation for our formulation expertise, quality of product and exceptional customer service in the sectors we serve,” says Malcolm. “Where will the next half century take us?”

“We were very pleased to be able to invite Richard Peck and Tony Wheeler to Haltwhistle in August as we take great pride in our facility, quality standards and our workforce,” he continues. “The Royal Warrant is an honour to hold, and is as important to AGMA now as it was when it was first granted in 1982.

“In an uncertain world, the Royal Warrant is a mark of quality and consistency that mirrors our values and our commitment to excellence.”



CREAM OF THE CROP

Another company setting high standards for itself is one of the newest members of the Warrant-holding family, **Ivy House Farm Dairy Ltd.** The Somerset-based business was granted its Royal Warrant to HRH The Prince of Wales for the supply of organic dairy products in spring 2019. Currently boasting a 120-strong herd of Jersey cows, the farm went fully organic around 20 years ago and has never looked back.

“We are dairy farmers, producers and processors, and we also deliver all of our products to give us total control and traceability,” says Grantee Geoff Bowles. “Gaining the Warrant has been a great accolade to the efforts of family and staff.”

The business is a family affair, with Geoff’s son Darren working as one of

“We are dairy farmers, producers and processors, and we also deliver all of our products to give us total control and traceability”

two managers handling the day-to-day running of the farm and Geoff’s wife Kim doing the accounts, plus a small team processing and delivering the milk, butter and cream.

Geoff sees their diversification into organic as a way for a small business to get by in today’s dairy market. “I am so pleased that our customers have recognised the need to buy quality food and sustain the existence of small-scale producers,” he says. “Without our supportive customers, this farm would not survive.”

All products are processed and packaged on site, as the team demonstrated to Tony Wheeler on his recent visit: “We were able to show him the cows being milked and the cream being separated just minutes later,” says Geoff. “And he seemed to enjoy the cream tea!”



MAIN IMAGE: IVY HOUSE FARM DAIRY FOUNDERS KIM AND GEOFF BOWLES
ABOVE: BUTTER BEING MADE THE TRADITIONAL WAY



HISTORY IN THE MAKING

THE JOHN SMEDLEY ARCHIVE CHARITABLE TRUST IS HELPING PRESERVE THE UNIQUE 235-YEAR HERITAGE OF A BRITISH MANUFACTURING SUCCESS STORY

In 2009, John Smedley celebrated 225 years of manufacturing fine knitwear at Lea Mills in Derbyshire. In celebration of the milestone, the firm decided to start gathering together its heritage and researching the story of the family behind the brand. The John Smedley Archive project was born, led by archivist Jane Middleton-Smith.

Ten years on, and with the help of a growing team of volunteers, the archive has catalogued more than 20,000 items. Along with all the paperwork of a long-running business, the collection has grown to include photographs, letters, paintings and personal artefacts linked to the families who have owned and worked at Lea Mills over the decades.

A MUSEUM-IN-WAITING

Treasured pieces include founder’s son John Smedley II’s apprenticeship papers as a ‘wool comber and hosier’, dated 1825, and the purchase deeds of the factory freehold signed by its seller, Florence Nightingale, in 1893. Most remarkable, however, are the garments, with over 10,000 items being retained

as a study collection and resource for today’s design team.

From the outset, the archive has acted as a ‘museum-in-waiting’, leading factory tours, working with the media and offering an open-door policy for researchers. The writing of the company history is now under way, with research published yearly – the first being the stories of the 110 Lea Mills men who fought in the First World War.

In 2016, consideration by the company board of the benefits of charitable trust status for the future preservation of archive assets led to the formation of the John Smedley Archive Charitable Trust.

In 2018, the Trust was awarded a Resilient Heritage Grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, enabling a team of heritage professionals and architects to scope out a possible museum on the Lea Mills site. These exciting plans, and other projects, will form the next stage in the development of the John Smedley Archive Charitable Trust.

johnsmedley.com



EXPERT TIPS FOR ARCHIVING

THIS ADVICE FROM THE RWA ARCHIVING SEMINAR IN JULY WILL HELP YOU GET STARTED

- 1 Conduct an inventory and avoid archiving everything; keep what best represents the business at each point in time.
- 2 Think big, but start small. Don’t worry about what you don’t have; work with what you’ve got.
- 3 Shop around for a Collections Management System (CMS). Draw up a list of your needs and ask vendors for short-term trials, to see if their systems work for you.
- 4 If using digitisation companies or photographers, ensure contracts are in place to clarify ownership of material. Digitise the most valuable items first to ensure their preservation.
- 5 Don’t be afraid to ask for help. The Business Archives Council is a great place to start – visit businessarchivescouncil.org.uk
- 6 Develop a plan. Identify the resource required (such as help from a qualified archivist) and demonstrate how an archive can deliver value to the business. Share this with key stakeholders to get them excited about the potential and provide investment.

ABOVE LEFT: ARCHIVIST JANE MIDDLETON-SMITH WITH A GARMENT **ABOVE:** PANEL OF EXPERTS AT THE RWA ARCHIVING SEMINAR