

Union Gears Up For War



Company chairman Paul Schofield's New Year message in 2001 was remarkably prescient.

Sharing a traditional start of the year glass of champagne with his 65 staff at Union Industries in Leeds, he announced: "We're at war on two fronts: the competition – that's not a problem - and terrorism which is going to be a big problem and a possible opportunity for our Environmental Division."

Eschewing a planned comfortable retirement at his house in Aix en Provence, Schofield introduced Union's new Chemical, Biological, Radiation and Nuclear Division (CBRN) with its survival capsules and filtration systems as key products. Geared to protect from the effects of bio-chemical warfare and potential pandemics such as avian flu, it has attracted interest from the military, government and security organisations, emergency planners and hospital isolation specialists.

Co-incidentally, it has made the workforce of the unique £5m turnover company the safest in the UK. An unobtrusive isolating cabinet in the firm's administration wing expands in seconds into a 50 sq m fully-equipped survival capsule for 40 people. Union has formed a partnership with an Israeli company, one of the world's leading toxic air filtration system manufacturers to equip the capsules.

Schofield describes his product range development logically: "From an industrial textiles background, we launched an environmental division and became involved in decontamination units for the asbestos dismantling industry 25 years ago. Then we applied the same principles to nuclear power stations and cross-contamination in aircraft maintenance hangars. Our Autostack Rapid Deployment sealed curtain-walling system can save £50,000 a day during aircraft spraying and stripping procedures.

"These products have been winners on the export front to countries in the Far East and Europe and our fitters have just returned from completing another major contract in Singapore."

High Speed Doors

Following a spell as a director of a pioneering retail discounting business, Schofield launched his own company 34 years ago, working out of a stone shed in Meanwood, Leeds supplying and repairing tarpaulin covers. As the margins for that market declined, he realised that heat retention and toxic containment screening would be the way forward and 16 years ago came the first major diversification – the design, manufacture and installation of hi-speed industrial doors. .

Union transformed itself into an engineering company, developing from scratch to become the country's number one high-speed industrial door manufacturer. With a raft of unique technical advancements, Union swiftly became market leader, supplying all the major supermarket groups, British Airways and a multitude of highly satisfied blue chip clients, as witnessed by their comments on the company's website.

The super performance high-speed doors have become Union's core business, making significant savings on energy costs by retaining heat or cold and preventing ice-build-up on cold store doorways. Six superbly equipped fitting teams travel the world installing, backed by a 24-hour technical response and engineering team at head office.

The computer aided design department sits comfortably and spaciouly in a beautifully restored early 19th century building where the in-house engineers work to the closest tolerances and highest quality, which contrasts superbly with the show-piece gleaming steel archways and hand polished rivets, reminiscent of Brunel, that link the wings of the business.

Union is arguably the North's most attractive workplace, the core of which revolves around a tree lined atrium courtyard where customers to the factory can see not only the company's latest products, but also some of the artefacts from the company's history.

"We even have the facility to turn day into night and with our theatrical lighting system and can stage some quite impressive customer demonstrations – mind you one of the problems is nobody wants to go home, particularly after we have served drinks and nibbles – just like a wine bar!" Schofield says.

The "Angel's Wings buildings – I, II and III" are guarded by gilded winged messengers, suspended in the atriums and have become landmarks for commuters to and from the Leeds end of the M1. The whole business exudes character, all of which must help to maintain the high level of morale clearly tangible on touring the company.

"We certainly are not the cheapest, but we do provide top quality, low maintenance and high reliability, and, therefore, good value at the end of the day. We do not subscribe to built-in obsolescence," says Schofield. "And we have 65 wonderful staff who have never knowingly let down a customer." How many companies today can say that?

Great Cover Up – General Trading Division

Isobel Schofield joined her husband in the business in 1973 on the acquisition of Ellerkers, an 18th Century York business engaged in the supply of tarpaulins, rope, twine, saddles and harnesses.

Now as managing director but still wearing her trademark dungarees, she remains heavily involved in the design of new products. "Today, I concentrate on overseeing improvements to our current manufacturing processes, in addition to enhancing our already high standard of quality, reliability and customer after-care that we provide for Union's many thousands of loyal customers."

As traditional canvas gave way to modern materials, expensive new plant had to be installed throughout the factory and “Mrs S” is proud to demonstrate some of the company’s latest machinery.

“For our General Trading Division, one of our biggest orders from Africa is for massive traditional canvas sheets that protect the cocoa bean crops”.

Old Beginnings – Never Forgotten

Today Union is a market leader in its hi-tech products for the aerospace, military, food processing and blue chip industries, yet still retains its connections with its traditional customers. “Let’s face it”, says Schofield “Without their bread of yesterday, we wouldn’t have the jam of today!”

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