



profile



in Scotland where there was a burgeoning cotton industry, so there was a cotton mill built on the island and the water wheel that drives the mill was fed by approximately 14km of waterways around the island which were designed by a brilliant engineer called Robert Thom.

'I'm not sure what the history of the mill was until my grandfather started the fabrics business in the '40's. The reason behind the business was primarily philanthropic – to provide employment on the island for de-mobbed servicemen and servicewomen. It was a traditional tweed mill then, producing high quality tweed products.

'It wasn't into contract at all until my father took it over. He dabbled into apparel fabric in the 1960's – making apparel fabrics for the likes of Hardy Amis. Then in the 1970's my father took on a brilliant Managing Director called Pat Grant, and he took them into contract. They started to do big volume work. I wasn't involved at all during this period – in fact I wasn't involved at all until my father's death in 1993.

'It was my father who transformed and modernised the company – we've just developed what he created out of the old company. The brand was always there, but it did need to be re-branded. It looks sharp now, I think.'

We couldn't agree more. This is very much the work of John and the current team, with a little external graphic design help of course (courtesy of Morag Myerscough). 'When we re-branded we weren't necessarily thinking that this would provide us access to members of the A&D community who were potential allies,' John admits. 'We really did think that company needed to be re-branded anyway because the brand that we took over was quite invisible. The corporate brand was pretty dated and the company was really underneath everybody's radar – particularly in the 1980's when Bute Fabrics was making huge volumes of fabric, but a lot of that was being sold through wholesalers in the United States, so the end user in a lot of cases would not even be aware that they were using Bute fabric. There was a time when we were making product for other retailers, like Kvadrat, and when we put our head above the parapet and re-branded ourselves we stopped making fabrics for these companies.

With the sharp new brand came another new initiative, with John and the team looking to bring external, celebrated design talent into the Bute fold. Was this a difficult decision for John? 'No, it wasn't actually,' he confesses. 'It was very, very rewarding to understand that these designers really admired the product and they liked the fact that it was designed and manufactured in the UK. They were all very easy to deal with and it's been a great pleasure to collaborate with them on all of those products. I feel we've been really lucky in that respect.'

For those of you who are unaware, Bute Fabrics has recently collaborated with the likes of leading British designers Ed Barber, Matthew Hilton, Jasper Morrison and Tom Dixon. We ask John whether it was a purposeful decision to work with British designers. 'No, it wasn't actually,' he muses. 'It just worked out that way. I've known most of the designers we've worked with for a number of years. Actually, the idea of working with designers in this way came from Sheridan Coakley of SCP – who is also a friend of mine. Years ago Sheridan brought a whole load of designers up to the island to have a good look around. I thought it was a great idea and quite frankly we all know that business and commerce is an international arena, but the fact of the matter is that we have fantastic British designers and architects – and Bute Fabrics is a fantastic British company. There is a synergy there.'





▶▶▶▶▶ One thing that John mentioned a little while back was Bute's export network through wholesalers, which soon led to increased attention from others. 'We were in markets like the Emirates relatively early,' John confirms. 'I think the majority of those contacts came through specifiers. We have various priorities right now. We have an extremely good agent in Sweden – and even in the current economic climate Scandinavia has been a growing market for us, so we want to carry on developing that. We've also appointed various new agents in Europe, including Germany, Holland, Spain and Italy – all of which are very important markets. The devaluation of Sterling should help us over the next few years in Europe, so we want to increase our European market. Obviously, we want to increase our UK market, although that's been very tough over the last year or so. We've got a very hard working sales team and Fiona (Armstrong) has made sure that we've maintained our contacts and we've carried on developing our contacts. As long as we do that we should be well placed when the UK starts coming out of recession.'

'The other market that's incredibly important for us is the USA. We are currently working on a new standard range for the US and have taken on a new agent over there. We are controlling the business very tightly right now, but are also keeping one eye firmly on the future.'

'Our range, in my opinion, has more integrity than others. We're very much geared to working with our clients and developing bespoke fabrics and maintaining a really, really high quality in terms of both durability and design. That won't change.'

John clearly loves the business and, for that matter, business per se. 'I appreciate excellence in engineering and design – that comes from my background in racing. Back then my interests were much more focused. Now my business interests have taken me into lots of different areas it's broadened my horizons considerably and I've learned an awful lot in the last 20-odd years. That's been an enjoyable process for me.'

'I split my time between London and the island nowadays – I feel incredibly privileged.'

We go on to talk about John's property business, architecture, conservation and heritage issues via his interest in the island. 'This is

all completely different from being a professional sportsman. That is an occupation that requires extreme dedication, focus and ambition. The focus, the dedication and the ambition have all stayed with me and, although it did take me a few years, I have completely moved on from motor racing. I'm not involved in motor racing in any way now. The legacy that it left me with has been very positive and has stood me in good stead in terms of applying myself to running my businesses.'

So, final question: does John still follow the sport? 'Not very closely,' he concedes. 'For the driver it's always about racing, but it's got even more political than it was when I was racing. I think politics in any sport are a bit tedious. It's a huge business and great brand, but it's quite vulnerable in my opinion.'

'Maybe the new teams with completely different budgets and completely different attitudes might make it all less corporate – and I think that is a good thing. When a driver like Raikkonen can't get a drive, something isn't quite right. He's an excellent driver – 100% commitment, that's what I like about him.' ●

