

Built on history

Hale & Co (Drybrook) has operated from the same site in the Forest of Dean in some form or another for at least 150 years. In that time, five generations of the Hale family have worked on perfecting the offering

Clouds, by and large, do have silver linings and no-one knows that more than the managing director of Hales & Co (Drybrook), the one-site builders merchant nestled in the heart of the Forest of Dean.

The company's brand-new, purpose built kitchen showroom is the silver lining result of a fire that spread through one part of the site in 2009. The company had just opened a new plumbing centre when the fire hit, and were getting ready to fit out a new showroom.

"We had eight fire engines here," says md Leslie Hale. "It was pretty massive and had started to spread to the other warehouses. It was pretty devastating, but luckily we're covered pretty well by insurance, so we took the opportunity to put a new standalone building up, which has given us room in the middle for goods inwards. Also, by having a standalone building, if we ever have a fire again it won't affect all the stock. It's quite good to have split buildings on any one site, if you've got the room to do it."

Due to the size of the operation, the company was able to open the next day, despite the damage done by the fire. Staff simply cordoned off part of the site and moved the plumbing operation into the main shop until the new building was completed.

Hale & Co has been on the same site in Gloucestershire for at least 150 years and has remained a one-branch operation.

The company started as a

blacksmith at least as far back as the early 19th century. Hale is able to trace his family back to the 1700s thanks to the sterling work of his father, Jim, who ran the business between 1953 and 1996.

"There were quite a few blacksmiths in the family," he says. "My great grandfather ran a blacksmith on this site, and his father before him was a blacksmith here as well."

The site itself is now huge, having gradually expanded over the years. The company bought up a large section of land in the 1960s, after the closure of the railway line that ran through the area. "Over the years, we've acquired a couple of the cottages here and taken some of the land from them," says Hale. "We still own the cottages and rent them out."

With such a huge site, the company is able to hold a very large and broad range of stock. The business now does everything from heavyside materials to bathrooms, kitchens and even, as an add-on, some cookware. In fact, there are very few product lines that the company does not stock, but then again, there is the room for it.

Hale, mulls over the possibility of becoming a multi-branch operation. "We still think we've got a way to go here yet, before we contemplate that," he says. "There is always the thought that we could expand when the timing and location is right, but it hasn't got to that stage yet."

"We've got a lot from this one site, and we can sell a lot more



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NOVEMBER 2011

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An aerial view of the Hale & Co site. Below, an earlier incarnation of the business on the same site.



from it. If we opened some satellite depots, what would we gain? It all comes down to profit at the end of the day. You might gain more turnover from an additional branch, but would you gain more profit? You still have all your overheads: rent, rates, staff, etc.”

The company is currently concentrating on streamlining the site's layout to improve traffic flow make it easier for customers to navigate the company's many departments. Signage around the site will also be improved to help with this. The finishing touches are also being put on the kitchen showroom, freeing up more room in the main shop for more off-the-shelf products.

“The devastating thing is if you lose your business for a period of time, your customers have got to go elsewhere, and you worry whether they'll come back,” says Hale. “Luckily because of the size of the site, we were able to keep going during the aftermath of the fire.”

Hale has been working on the site since he was 12, alongside his father, his brother Roger and mother Dorrie. After Jim Hale died in 1996, Roger Hale took over the business before retiring in 2000, leaving the running of the business to Leslie.

“It was originally just a blacksmith's shop, with no additional land at all,” says Hale.

“Then we acquired new land for the sawmill, and there was a shed over the other side of the road. It's just grown organically over time, as and when we could afford to put more buildings up, and it's just grown slowly.”

The company has predominantly recruited from within the local area, and the Hale family have been based there for at least 200 years. This has given the company an in depth local knowledge that it has used to its advantage.

Where Hale & Co is based, between the major towns in the Forest of Dean, has proved to be an advantage. Trade and retail customers from different towns will come to the company because it's a central point, Hale says: “People from Cinderford wouldn't necessarily go to Coleford, where there are other merchants, and vice versa. Our geographical location does put us in good stead, here.”

The business is very much focused on serving the jobbing builder and the smaller trade operations. Hale says that the company is not particularly interested in attracting larger contractors. “We'd prefer to deal with lots of small businesses, and of course that spreads the risk for us as well.”

The local area is a web of tiny lanes that HGVs can easily get stuck in. It's another area in which the company has used its local knowledge to its advantage, running several smaller vehicles in addition to larger lorries. It has also come up with an ingenious way of dealing with large orders that are only accessible by a narrow lane – two vehicles are sent to deliver the goods: a large one to carry the goods in bulk, and a smaller one to deliver the goods in batches.

The plumbing and heating centre has been back up and running for eight months, and the kitchen and bathroom showroom will be open within the next few weeks. The company is then going to look at extending the shop, which still incorporates the original blacksmith's building.

The next generation of the Hale family is now getting involved in the business; Hale's son, Jake, set up a tool hire business this year. His other son Sam helps out from time to time. Roger Hale's children, Steve, Jon and Becky, are also all involved in the business. For the foreseeable future, it seems that Hale & Co will remain a part of the family for some time to come.

“We've had approaches by bigger merchants, like most family businesses,” says Hale. “But we've always decided to keep going.”