



Craven Dunnill Jackfield was commissioned to restore the flooring of St George's Hall in Liverpool

HERITAGE is our beating heart but it doesn't guarantee our FUTURE'

British tile distributor and manufacturer, the Craven Dunnill Group, is forging ahead with major investment, including the opening of a 10,000sq ft warehouse facility at its HQ in Bridgnorth. **Rebecca Nottingham** went to meet new managing director **Simon Howells** to find out more

From its manufacturing roots, this 148-year old family-run business has developed into one of the UK's leading tile distributors.

Simon Howells – the fifth generation of the Howells family to be involved in the business – may have only recently stepped up from his position as commercial director to take on the role of MD, but he's already putting his stamp on the business and its future.

Under his leadership, the company recently embarked on a major expansion of its warehouse in Bridgnorth in order to improve efficiency and enhance the service it offers its customers.

"As a business, we pride ourselves on giving our customers an exceptional service," he explains. "Our new warehouse extension is an important element of our long-term growth strategy. Having

a nearly 150-year history is fantastic and is absolutely our beating heart, but it doesn't guarantee us anything for the future. So, we have to make sure we continually stay on top of our game and continue to invest in the business to ensure that our value doesn't diminish."

Q&A

Q: How are you settling into the new role and what are your plans moving forward?

A: This is really a continuation of what I was doing in my previous role as commercial director but, as managing director, I've now taken full control of day-to-day operations. And with that, I'm continuing the strategic moves we were making before. A key part of that is the finalisation – and



A brief history of the Craven Dunnill Group

1872 Craven Dunnill & Co was founded in Jackfield, in the Ironbridge Gorge, Shropshire – the global centre of the tile industry.

1880s-1930s Craven Dunnill became renowned throughout the British Empire for its ceramic floor and wall tiles.

1940 During the Second World War, the Craven Dunnill factory was requisitioned to manufacture magazine cases for machine guns.

1950s Craven Dunnill & Co moved its headquarters to Bridgnorth and the original factory was acquired by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, becoming one of its main museums in the world heritage site.

1970s Craven Dunnill began importing product into the UK from Europe. As one of the UK's leading tile distributors, the company still has relationships with suppliers in Italy and Spain that have been going strong for more than 40 years.

1980s Since the 1980s, the company has been growing within the contract specification market and also in retail, served by its distribution offering.

2000 Manufacturing returned to the original Craven Dunnill & Co site in 2000, where today Craven Dunnill Jackfield (the manufacturing arm of the Craven Dunnill Group) is the leading manufacturer of traditionally-styled, decorative tiles for projects all over the world.

Traditional methods of tile production are still used at the Craven Dunnill Jackfield manufacturing site



now implementation – of a business plan for the next three years, which includes the investment in a new warehouse facility as part of our long-term growth strategy.

Q: Tell us more about the recent expansion at your HQ in Bridgnorth. What does it mean for the business and your customers?

A: We strive to offer an exceptional service to every single customer – whether that is retailers, installers, architects or conservationists. To enable us to continue to do that, we recognised that we needed to make significant upgrades to our warehousing to make us more efficient.

The new, 10,000sq ft facility has enabled us to increase our stockholding capacity by 60% and the expansion also supports the move towards large-format tiles we're seeing in the market.

It is the single largest investment we have made to the business in 20 years, so it is a significant move. We are a family business and that means we don't have to offer quick returns for shareholders and we make use of that by reinvesting, making sure we're not trying to gain quick wins or chase quick profits at anyone's expense. This update will allow us to continue to be a successful distributor and one that – we hope – will be here for the next 50 years.

Q: You're probably best known in the KBB industry as a tile distributor, but there is more to the Craven Dunnill business, isn't there?

A: Essentially the Craven Dunnill Group is made

up of three divisions: the distributor Craven Dunnill, Craven Dunnill Project Ceramics – servicing architects and interior designers, and Craven Dunnill Jackfield – our manufacturing facility. This is where we handcraft tiles for contract and specification projects around the world and also some rather important restoration projects.

Q: How's business looking at the moment?

A: As a group, we've been enjoying continued growth, which, in the current climate, is something to be proud of. Broadly speaking, turnover is broken down by three sectors: distribution, which makes up a little over half of turnover; with specification and retail sales combining for the rest. That breakdown is reflective of the market and of our current skill set.

Ten years ago, the breakdown of the business looked very different from this – we had a higher proportion of distribution division and did less specification work.

Strategically, we are intentionally diverse,

because it's better for the health of the business in the long term.

Q: Can you explain a little more about the kind of specification projects you work on?

A: We brought back tile manufacturing in 2000 and are now one of the leading manufacturers of traditionally-styled, decorative tiles for projects all over the world, including some

very high-profile restoration work in The Palace of Westminster, St George's Hall in Liverpool and the London Underground, as well as contemporary projects across the commercial, hospitality and residential sectors.

Q: Are traditional manufacturing methods really sustainable in a market that's driven by technological advancements?

A: This area of the business has been growing steadily since we reintroduced manufacturing 20 years ago. There is worldwide demand for traditional tiles, whether for commercial or residential projects or important restoration projects. This side of the business is extremely important to the future of the whole group.

There are two strategic ways to strengthening the Craven Dunnill Jackfield business – one is creating more demand and the other is to increase efficiency and productivity. They almost go hand-in-hand with each other. We have no intention of replacing the old production techniques, or



Craven Dunnill Jackfield supplied the tiles for this striking bar front at The Old Queens Head pub in Angel, London



We pride ourselves on giving customers exceptional service. Our new warehouse extension is an important element of our long-term growth strategy

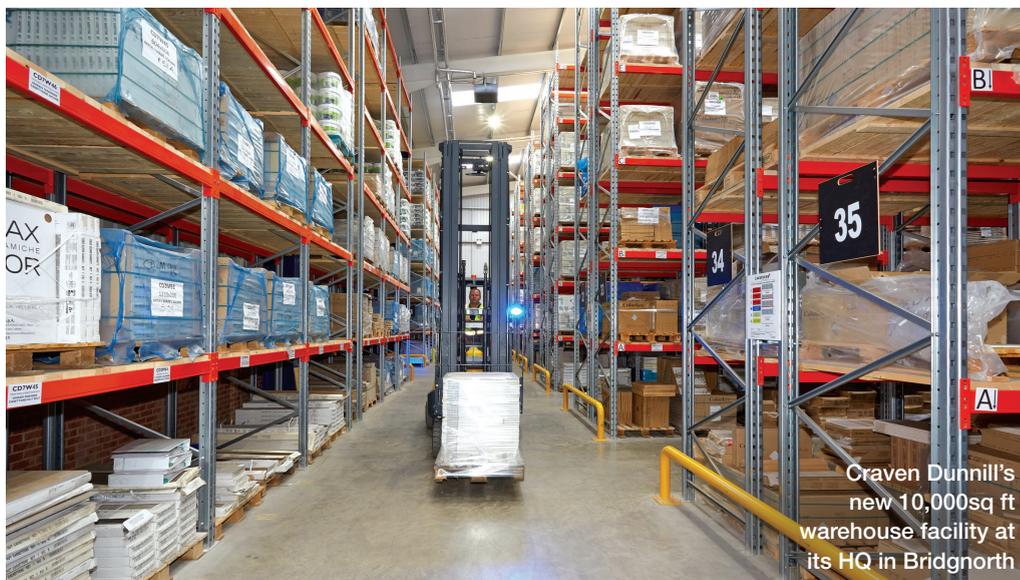
the skilled labour we use, because that is at the heart of what we do. But, to support it, we've been looking at how we use technology and innovation alongside craftsmanship to preserve the tradition – that's the journey. Two years ago, we introduced 3D technology as part of a Knowledge Transfer Partnership programme (KTP) with the University of the West of England. It has transformed our design processes and significantly reduced lead times, making our proposition for specialist projects around the world even more desirable.

Q: The market is changing, with the introduction of other products, such as wall panelling. Are you worried that tiles are on their way out?

A: I'm not going to speak ill of other products. There are some great innovations that are becoming popular. There is absolutely a market for them and, to be honest, I think it's good to have competition because it keeps us all on our game.

Ultimately, though, if you want something hard-wearing and that's not going to deteriorate in wet areas then, in my opinion, you can't beat a tile.

We work with the best tile manufacturers and suppliers around the world, so the products we



Craven Dunnill's new 10,000sq ft warehouse facility at its HQ in Bridgnorth

bring to market in the UK are the highest quality, fit for purpose and are durable for the long-term.

Q: A question that is often raised in the KBB industry is whether there is room for distribution in a changing market?

A: Aside from the expertise and understanding of the industry you operate in, distribution is fundamentally about logistics and there are a lot of people that underestimate that.

Funnily enough, the ones that appreciate it most are the ones that have – as a supplier – tried to sell direct or – as a retail customer – tried to buy direct, and failed. It's very easy to look at distribution as margin out of your chain that you need – until you try and manage what we do yourself. Then you

realise the value in it. A key part of our value proposition is about being that quality filter and having a strong supply chain. We have a solid relationship with all of our suppliers – we know they won't let us down so we won't let our customers down.

Q: What's the next part of your strategy?

A: The next stage of development is the expansion of our merchandising and sampling service and the upgrade of our showroom facility here at the Bridgnorth HQ. Over and above that, my job is to ensure we continue to deliver an exceptional service to our customers in order to deliver sustained growth and invest in the long-term health of the business. **kbb**