

insider



HOT STUFF

WHY HOTTER SHOES IS MARCHING FORWARD

42 UNDER 42

MEET THE CLASS OF 2015

PAGE 17



SOAPBOX

'AGELESS' ANGELA SPINDLER

PAGE 11



ANDY HOLT

WHAM MEETS ACCRINGTON STANLEY

PAGE 20



MORE THAN MANUFACTURING: BRAND-BUILDING IN EAST LANCs

PERCEPTIONS OF GRIMY FACTORIES, DIRTY RAGS AND METAL-BASHING ARE FAR REMOVED FROM TODAY'S REALITY OF PRECISION ENGINEERING. CHRIS MAGUIRE CATCHES UP WITH ANDY HOLT OF WHAT MORE UK TO FIND OUT HOW MANUFACTURERS ARE CHANGING THEIR IMAGE, WITH MORE EMPHASIS ON MARKETING AND BRANDING

What have 1960s pop music, plastic manufacturing and professional football got in common? The answer is entrepreneur Andy Holt and, more precisely, What More UK, his thriving business based in East Lancashire. Founded in 1999 the company has grown rapidly to become the UK's largest manufacturer and brand leader of plastic housewares, gardening and storage products, under the brand name Wham, which now turns over £55m.

Earlier this year, What More UK signed a £200,000 sponsorship deal with local football club Accrington Stanley and the League Two outfit renamed its ground the Wham Stadium, prompting several jokes about the pop group featuring George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley. In a separate deal, the company's PlasticBoxShop brand has been emblazoned across the club's shirt.

The deals are a good example of how manufacturing is changing, although Holt admits the choice of the name Wham was more through luck than design.

"We couldn't internationally register What More UK," he says. "There were objections in France and Germany and they said the logo looks like Volkswagen. The name Wham was a last resort. The 'Wha' came from 'What' and the 'm' was from 'More'. It will raise the company's profile because more people will have heard of the Wham Stadium. As far as Accrington Stanley goes, I'm a local lad so I'll help if I can."

Although What More UK makes three million products a month, employs 230 people and exports into 63 countries, the business still falls into the "best kept secret" category, which probably reflects Holt's low-profile personality.

The 50-year-old is the owner, chief executive and driving force behind What More

UK. Born in Burnley, he says he's been an entrepreneur all his life.

"I had more money than my dad, even though my dad worked," he says. "I used to get things off scrap tips and build and sell bikes. I'd be about ten. I sold anything. I always had £50 to £100 in my pocket and I'd lend money to my dad."

"At school when they said 'what do you want to be?' I said 'I'm going to be a millionaire'. When you come from a council house it creates a desire for some people to get out of it. Half of the kids I used to knock about with would see a nice car and say 'I'm going to scratch it' and two or three of us would say 'I'm going to have one better than that' and I was one."

Holt is probably the most down-to-earth entrepreneur I've met, evidenced by the fact that him and his wife chose a new bathroom over a holiday this year – even though they could comfortably have afforded both.

"I would never drive a Ferrari or wear a £2,000 suit or do any of that," he says with a broad East Lancashire accent. "I'm happiest walking around the factories and being with people."

Holt left school at the age of 16 when his father Joe died of a brain haemorrhage aged 38. He qualified as a toolmaker and saw the value in precision injection moulds.

His first business, Smalshaw Precision Plastics in Burnley, went into administration so he put everything on the line to launch What More UK in 1999.

"We couldn't think of a name," admits Holt.

"Whatever we tried had either gone at Companies House or the website domain name had already been taken. We thought of 'More Plastics' and 'What Plastics' and eventually settled on 'What More'. I vowed

then that we won't make



"I'd never drive a Ferrari or wear a £2,000 suit. I'm happiest walking around the factories, being with people."

www.northeastbusinessinsider.com

insider OCTOBER 2015 35

MANUFACTURING

MARKETING WITHIN MANUFACTURING

products for other people. We'll make the products we want to make to our standard. We were always the third party."

It proved to be a good decision. Today the company produces 1,000 products, ranging from drinking beakers to garden furniture and storage boxes. They sell to the main supermarkets, Labeled, B&Q and small independent market stalls. The business has diversified into bakeware and has just acquired PushPan. The brand will be distributed with immediate effect and its inventor Ian Wilkinson will continue to work with the brand.

The company's head office is in Burnley and its burgeoning manufacturing facilities are in nearby Hyndburn. As the company's profile has increased so has the number of approaches from people wanting to buy the business.

"It's not for sale," says Holt emphatically. "I get regular letters and they go in the bin. Why would you sell something that you've spent all your life building?"

"I consider our people to be our biggest asset. I'd be selling them down the river if I sold. We're at the beginning of a long jour-

ney. Everything that we've done so far has just been about getting here. The story is not told yet. I think we can be a global player in the manufacturer of household products.

"Our brand is critical to everything. We know it's good because we make it and the public want to buy it. We probably spend £750,000 on marketing and branding a year and £15m on new product development. Social media is really important too. Manufacturers can't stand still. Without new products you haven't got a business. You have to be agile and fleet of foot."