

A name for Quality, design, fit & fabric

Ashley Franklin visits David Nieper, the 50-year-old family firm with an order book that spans the world

Photography by Roy Riley

For 50 years, David Nieper has been championing the Derbyshire fashion industry 'keeping the quality of British goods in the forefront of the market'. Its clothes are 'beautiful' and 'well made' and it also 'maintains high standards, attention to detail and attractive designs'.

These are not the boasts of the company: they are all extracts from 'thank you' letters sent by highly satisfied customers. One of the most pertinent messages came from an ex-pat living in Hong Kong who thanked David Nieper for 'making practical and elegant clothes for that endangered species: The English Lady.'

David Nieper celebrates its Golden Jubilee as the flagship brand for the discerning mature woman, with its 'Made in England' hallmark stretching worldwide. Although other lingerie firms such as Janet Reger have had associations with our county, the David Nieper story is more purely and proudly a Derbyshire one.

Visiting the company's Alfreton factory at Saulgrove House is a fond

throwback to TV's *The Rag Trade*, albeit in larger surroundings, with its female worker bees busily cutting, sewing and machining fabrics. However, you'll not find a Miriam Karlin figure here crying 'Everybody out!' Here, she is more likely to say 'We're one big happy family,' a phrase sung out by several employees I met.

The 'father' of this family – David Nieper himself – should rightfully be

[An ex-pat living in Hong Kong thanked David Nieper for 'making practical and elegant clothes for that endangered species: The English Lady'](#)

enjoying retirement but his passion for fashion keeps him clocking in. 'My work is my hobby,' he tells me, 'but I can afford for it to be, as my son Christopher is now managing director and we have such a top team around us.'

Coincidentally, David Nieper launched the company in the same year *The Rag Trade* began – 1961 – although he had already long been in

that trade, the product of a family steeped in art and design. His grandfather was an acclaimed portrait painter and his grandmother a concert pianist. David's father Ronald worked in knitwear with John Smedley of Matlock, as did David himself initially. David's sister Sally became a wardrobe mistress for the BBC, but it was in design that David excelled. This skill together with a belief in the importance

of high quality production, were the defining factors of the fashion house he later established.

In 1973, David moved the company into Saulgrove House. There is high excitement at the news that the Princess Royal is to visit there on 12th September. It's a very fitting visit, too, as Christopher Nieper points out:

'The Princess Royal is a long-standing President of UK Fashion >





Export Awards, and she is known for her support of British fashion and knitwear. I am sure she will enjoy seeing our products and learning about our constant efforts to nurture fashion and manufacturing skills in the East Midlands.'

Christopher joined the firm 25 years ago and, ironically, it was his initial resistance to working in the family business that helped the company to prosper further. 'I actually did a mechanical engineering degree,' reveals Christopher, 'and I ended up here through a sequence of unintended events. What it meant, though, was that I was able to merge my business skills with my father's artistic flair. We complemented each other.'

Christopher's decision to join the business also coincided with a sea change in the ebb and flow of retail trade. For the first 20 years David

Nieper sold its garments wholesale, eventually servicing over 300 UK boutiques and department stores, including Harrods and Selfridges. However, in the 1980s upmarket boutiques began to be swallowed up by chain stores.

'Our customer base vanished,' explains Christopher, 'so we decided to advertise in newspapers, selling direct to the customer. It was the era of the coupon and the stamped addressed envelope. We also started producing our own catalogues which were very basic, with just pencil line drawings and a price list.'

Mail order increased, and so did the inventory. For example, when Christopher joined the firm had about 25 styles. Today their designs have about 25,000 different combinations of colour, style, size and length. This complexity led them to write more than

1,000 computer programmes in-house to handle all the customer data and manufacturing systems.

The big advantage of selling direct was that it brought David Nieper closer to its customers, with feedback continually helping to influence and shape subsequent designs. Whatever is produced, there are constants to David Nieper's garments, as David explains: 'Our customers keep on buying because they know that our designs are feminine and beautifully made in the finest fabrics. We also understand what suits a particular body shape. This isn't theory learned from a book; it's practical knowledge gained from that close relationship with our customers.'

'We have three main cornerstones,' Christopher points out, 'design, fabrics and fit, and our customers rely on us to get all of them right all of the time!'

It's this reliability that enabled David



Unique to David Nieper is that every garment label is signed by the seamstress who made it. 'It's a nice touch,' believes Christopher, 'because it shows confidence in her workmanship and pride'

Nieper to thrive when the company moved into mail order. 'Selling direct saves customers from getting in the car, parking in city centres and searching around stores to find they haven't got your size or colour,' states Christopher, 'and I know customers can't touch and feel the fabric in a photograph, but we've earned a reputation for using quality fabrics. If you buy a nightdress from our catalogue for £75, you can trust our quality and know it's worth spending that much.'

There is great pride in the brand, too. Unique to David Nieper is that every garment label is signed by the seamstress who made it. 'It's a nice touch,' believes Christopher, 'because it shows confidence in her workmanship and the pride taken in making a unique garment for a real customer.'

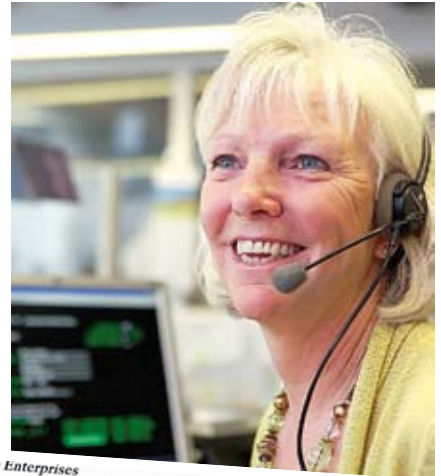
One can add loyalty to pride: half of the 200-strong workforce have been

with the company for more than ten years. It's an impressive, well-oiled and harmonious set-up, too. Christopher's glass-walled office sits accessibly beside the factory floor and all the staff are on first-name terms with their managing director. 'No one is in an ivory tower here,' states Christopher; 'just as the customers can tell us about the product, so the staff can tell me things – and they do.'

Almost half of David Nieper's customers live in Europe, and many in Paris and the other fashion-conscious European cities. The company produces its own catalogues in five different languages, all of which are created and mailed in-house, with all the images photographed in its own Alfreton studio. It also houses its own factory shop and a busy call centre, though there are no buttons to press, operators to by-pass or automated ▶



BUSINESS PROFILE



voices telling you to hold: phone calls go directly to friendly customer services staff, who also reply in writing to every one of the hundreds of letters received per year, even the ‘thank you’ ones. It’s a family company that even has its own gardener, flower arranger, carpenter and cook!

A more recent and important innovation is the David Nieper Fashion Academy which, explains Christopher, aims to restore Derbyshire’s reputation as a heartland of the textile industry: ‘Twenty years ago, all the many textile companies would train staff and there was a pool of skilled labour. Today we are almost alone in fashion production, so we decided to use the company as a training faculty alongside colleges and universities.’

I met a former Academy student, Charlotte Bryan, who won a David Nieper graduate design competition and was subsequently offered a six month placement and, eventually, a permanent post in David Nieper’s design studio. ‘I love the quality of the brand and am enjoying every moment here,’ says Charlotte. While Charlotte is still in her first year, Janice Stone is celebrating 40 years as a designer. As

her experience has told her, ‘Looks change but the customer need stays the same: a need for something feminine, soft and comfy. In that area, I don’t think there’s anyone to touch us.’

As I gaze on the lingerie designs, I delicately ask Christopher how he feels being a man in a world of intimate apparel. He smiles and recounts the time he was still a 19-year-old at university and attended a trade fair in Harrogate, where his father’s company had a stand in the lingerie marque. What he saw had his eyes popping out of their stalks. ‘All the companies had hired models to walk around in high heels wearing nothing but bra and briefs,’ recalls Christopher. ‘I said to our sales director: “How can you possibly concentrate with all this going on?” and he replied: “Well, lad, after a while, you just come to appreciate the lace.”’

As to whether Christopher’s customers will continue to appreciate the lace as the firm contemplates the next 50 years, he strikes an optimistic

note: ‘The future depends upon our reputation, and I’m reassured by all the thank-you letters we receive from our customers. Tell me this: did you ever write a thank you letter for a suit or shirt you bought? You can only get our kind of letters if you exceed a customer’s expectations.’

‘It’s a team effort building respect for our fashion label,’ continues Christopher. ‘We aren’t recession proof but it’s heartening to know that 90 per cent of our customers are repeat buyers. You see, this is not throwaway fashion – it’s long lasting, and that’s how I see David Nieper.’ □

www.davidnieper.co.uk