

Turnstyle prides itself on its British craftsmanship

# DESIGNS ON DETAIL

Turnstyle Designs from premises in deepest Devon exports its high end product all over the world which secured it the prestigious Queen's Award for Export in 2018. **Nicky Roger** talks to Steve Roberts, the managing director, about the business's success

**T**he Queen's award last year marked a period of rapid growth for you. How did that come about? What was the strategy behind it?

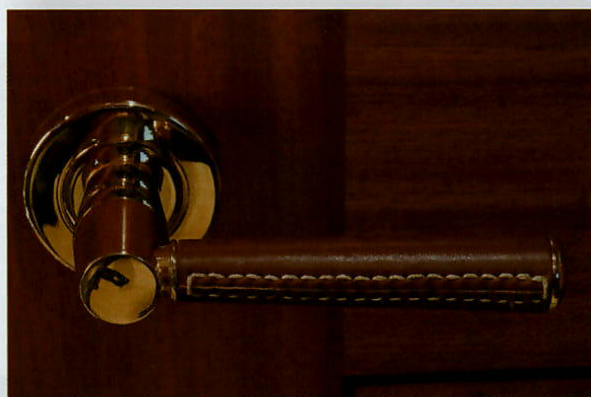
We have been fortunate enough to enjoy continued growth for the past 20-odd years, but it has always been controlled growth. The last thing we need is unsustainable growth, or unmanageable rapid growth. Some elements of our production are automated but the majority of it is hand made. We need time to train up skilled craftsmen and engineers to ramp up our production, which we have been doing steadily over the years, adding on more space to the factory and bringing on new production staff every year. The growth from the past three/





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**Steve Roberts**



We also produce a comprehensive annual price book to make it easy for our dealers to navigate our huge range of products as well as brochures. Fortunately, we have one of the more photogenic ranges of hardware on the market and work hard with the press to gain as much PR as we can.

Finally, our London showroom in the Design Centre, Chelsea is a fantastic amenity for designers and dealers, where they can see the largest range of our products.

**A complex design process lies behind all of Turnstyle's products**

**Your reputation for exquisite design and craftsmanship is not by accident. It's clear you have a passion for detail, quality, levels of finish and innovation. Where does inspiration come from?**

I believe that what we make and how we conduct ourselves in business are inseparable. Our handle is the button on the coat, the final part of the design process, the detail that has to look fabulous, feel fantastic and function effectively for years to come. A Savile Row tailor would not spend countless hours on design and making only to finish his creation with an inferior button. We make detail and that detail has to be attended to at every level of business, design, manufacturing, packaging of course customer service.

For every design and product that we launch, there will be a dozen or so ideas that have been put forward, possibly prototyped and then rejected for whatever reason. My wife Christina is our main designer. I work closely with her to develop our ideas before progressing to our design engineer who will translate it into CAD and 3D printing before we prototype for market testing. Ideas are coming from every walk of life. Both of us look at all sorts of things, in particular nature, and think 'that might make a lovely handle'. I am constantly working on new processes, experimenting with new materials and looking at ways to improve our current products. Designing and making is the best part of the business for me, I love seeing an idea on paper come to life and finally end up in production. »»

four years has come from all sectors across the board, initially from the USA but in the past year from Europe and Russia. We have employed a new export sales manager and expanded our USA subsidiary to push sales and open new dealerships and distributors. We have also put a lot of energy into working with our dealers in the UK, with dedicated training programs and increased marketing activity, all of which has paid off in spades.

**The vast majority of your work is exported – where does business come from and how do you market your products?**

We won The Queen's Award for Export last year, and we export over 75% of our business to over 45 countries. Our largest single market is the USA where we have a sales office subsidiary and over 150 dealers. Recent growth has come from markets closer to home which we have previously neglected, Europe and Russia. Our new export manager has been very successful in opening up new markets that are already doing very well, in particular Germany, Spain, Ireland and Russia.

We work hard to market Turnstyle Designs: we exhibit at a number of different exhibitions, two in the USA, two in Europe and this year we will also be showing in China which is a developing market for us.

I think our website is the best in our industry, with every product we make being fully configurable, so clients can view any design in any combination of finish, so up to 52 options per design. This has been a great tool for designers and dealers alike.





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**Steve Roberts**



**What are the challenges for your business in the high end market?**

The current challenge facing us all, regardless of what end of the market you are in is Brexit: as exporters this is no doubt going to hit us hard. With no plan in place by the Government for a no deal the uncertainty is difficult to deal with. We are building stocks at the moment in anticipation of shortfalls of raw materials and talking to our distributors but we shall have to wait and see what the outcome is.

Probably one of the biggest challenges supplying the high end of the market is the amount of custom work that is required. This may be a solution for one door on a yacht, but if that is what the client wants, that is what we provide. However, it takes the same amount of design and development energy to produce one bespoke handle as thousands of production parts.

Another challenge is the amount of copying. We are always trying to stay two steps ahead of what the market is doing and trying to lead, not follow. Inevitably there are plenty of competitors watching what we are coming out with and simply trying to copy. Currently we have four cases that we are defending, all our designs are registered and we have a slush fund put aside to defend our design rights, nevertheless it is time consuming and energy-sapping.

**Steve Roberts**  
the managing  
director of  
Turnstyle Designs

**You pride yourself on being made in the UK. Is the skills gap a challenge for you? How do you find and train staff?**

When I started Turnstyle Designs in 1992, North Devon was a very different place, and it was much easier to find staff who wanted to work with their hands and learn new skills. Nowadays employment is high and it is far harder to persuade young people that working in a factory is not what it used to be, our factory is clean, bright and warm with a interesting mixture of staff from all sorts of backgrounds. We spend a lot of time bringing on and training our staff in house, in a multiple of skills and crafts.

**What are the plans for the future of Turnstyle Designs?**

To keep doing what we do, maintaining a steady growth, developing new products, designs and materials. I am only 55 so hopefully have a few years left in me and I love what I do, I have two fantastic directors and a son who has just joined the business as our London based sales rep, and brilliant staff who are all dedicated to the business. We have survived a few previous recessions and still managed to grow through those tough years. We are just completing a brand new office suite for all our sales, admin and design staff, open plan with capacity for a further 75% seating, which no doubt will be full in a few years. We are not trying to take over the world, we know who we are and what we are good at and will continue to strive to be the best we can be, if we can do that then the business will follow and we will still be here for a few more generations. ■