

# Leading from the front

A report by  
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**T**ony Retallack, and his son Wayne, set up the launderette which became the foundation stone of the South West Laundry business in 1996, in St Just near Lands End, Cornwall. Like other service providers focusing on the tourist traffic of Cornwall, their concentration on delivering exceptional service coupled to a quality processed product, meant that the small launderette business rapidly grew to a fully fledged commercial laundry operation. The move was made in 2001 to a large building on the St Erth Industrial Estate, in Hayle.

South West Laundry (SWL), through dint of unceasing hard efforts by the directors, achieved a first year turnover in 1996 of £20,000 which, in the next 20 years, had grown to circa £7 million by the end of 2017. The concentration on the supply of the highest quality processed linen to the hotels and guesthouses across the Cornish peninsula had been the constant focus of the company on the laundry delivered to their customers.

By the beginning of 2017 South West Laundry, now operating from St Erth, the permanent staff had grown to 80 and plans were in place for major expansion of the processing capacity of the laundry by installing completely new production machinery throughout the plant. The management team now included several new line managers all fully trained in the skills and techniques to manage a modern laundry plant. There was also an additional director on the team, Julie Perkin, in the role of finance director, also a family member, the daughter of Tony and sister of Wayne.

A relatively new recruit to the growing business was Luke Edwards, who was brought in as operations manager bringing a wealth of practical laundry management and experience to the role, after serving other competitive businesses in the South West. This experience is of direct importance to the South West Laundry team where the whole field of laundry knowledge is visibly evident from the staff of the new plant at St Erth, where



South West Laundry's fleet of vehicles have eye catching branding and livery design

the best of the old is successfully merged with the energy and forward thinking approach of the entire family involved in driving the SWL success.

Thus, with several million pounds of capital expenditure committed for new equipment, and with new personnel in the management team to ensure that the forecast additional sales of £1.9 million would be satisfactorily coped with, the future looked extremely bright for SWL. Indeed, it was very bright, until, in the early morning of 24 March 2017, Retallack was called to the plant at 5.05am to find, when he arrived, that the laundry was ablaze from end to end and a considerable force of fire fighters struggling to stop the conflagration spreading.

The fire at South West Laundry marked a defining moment in the history of the 21 year old company. Of prime importance was the fact that the fire vividly demonstrated that the bonds of loyalty to the South West Laundry business spread far beyond those which characterised the commitment of the close family members and all other directly employed staff. All major suppliers in the UK and in Europe, were as committed to SWL and readily came to the aid

of the stricken business.

Within a very few days the Retallack family had implemented the corporate disaster plan and committed the entire organisation to implementing plans for survival, including not only rebuilding and redesigning the laundry equipment layout and arranging with eight other large commercial laundries to undertake the huge volume of processing capacity to be sub-contracted for the Summer season.

In a summary by Retallack, the disaster recovery plans for South West Laundry were clearly

*waiting to begin as customers. We also had a waiting list of new employees wishing to join our company. This made South West Laundry both a supplier and an employer of choice.*

*We commissioned the new plant in October 2017 and since then we have significantly reduced our production costs. A lot of this has been achieved by the new layout of the laundry machinery which has created a very effective workflow which, together with enhanced recycling of water and improved heat recovery within our processes, has achieved this result. We have also reduced*

**Low temperature washing has also enabled us to make significant savings, our steam usage has been reduced by 30 per cent and water consumption has been further reduced by 18 per cent**

laid out. This is an edited extract from a report about the scope and range of these critical plans:

*"Our original business plans went up in smoke - quite literally. Under extreme pressure we had to come up with a new plan but this time about survival and making sure our business didn't become part of another statistic - four out of five businesses don't reopen after a fire.*

*We had a great opportunity to design a near-perfect laundry, full of innovation and energy saving ideas. The first thing we did was to remove all of the dividing walls within the existing building. This enabled us to create a very long layout to give a logical work flow and deliver seamless efficiency to the output of processed laundry.*

*We designed the new laundry to be very powerful and we now have the potential to process up to and above 400 tonnes of laundry per week.*

*The new laundry equipment and layout has significantly contributed to our company's success. In early March 2017 we had a pipeline amounting to £1.9m of new business contracts*

*drying times by the use of a special airflow mechanism reducing gas consumption by 18 per cent.*

*When the fire happened we implemented our disaster recovery plan not knowing if it would work but praying for the best. We all write a disaster recovery plan but you never actually believe that one day it might have to be implemented and how beneficial the plan would be."*

This last paragraph in this summary report refers to some critically important advice concerning the company's business insurance given to Retallack by a then, fellow member of 'Brilliant Laundry Group', Richard Cope, managing director of Faversham Laundry in Kent. His advice was to ensure that a very strong clause concerning Business Interruption Cover, should be included in any future Insurance policy contracted by South West Laundry. This advice was acted on by the directors and was ultimately crucial to the survival of South West Laundry.

Our extensive tour of the bright and gleaming new SWL

plant with Retallack, enabled him to expand on the consistently excellent technical assistance which SWL had received from Ecolab the supplier of chemistry systems and energy advice during 15 years of supplying South West Laundry.

He commented as follows: "SWL have a longstanding partnership with Ecolab Textile Care which spans over a decade and a half. During this time, we have worked very closely together to achieve excellent results in all areas of the laundry from chemistry using Ecolab OxyGuard40 products, through to energy savings.

"Due to our rural Cornish location many of our customers are independent, family owned and run businesses, who have a particular eye for detail and high levels of expectation. We have to make sure that our products are of the highest laundered quality and deliver well-pressed, clean, fresh, bed linen, table linen and all types of towels.

"We are also very pleased and proud to be the preferred supplier to the well-known celebrity-restaurateur, Rick Stein. We are pleased to say that, with Ecolab Textile Care's help, we deliver a service to the Stein Group of companies with a reject level less than 0.05 per cent.

"SWL have previously had numerous audits by the Laundry Technology Centre achieving high marks of 'Excellent' for our brightness and whiteness and these accolades arise from our use

of Ecolab Textile Care Chemicals.

"Low temperature washing has also enabled us to make significant savings, our steam usage has been reduced by 30 per cent and water consumption has been further reduced by 18 per cent as a result of using Ecolab OxyGuard40 in the wash process. The partnership we have with Ecolab Textile Care products has been built over many years, the robust systems we now have in place to deliver consistently white, bright and clean linen, are a shining example of how the chemistry is key to our success and customer satisfaction."

South West Laundry presents a comprehensive image of a large, modern and supremely efficient laundry. The constant focus of the directors and managers is on delivered quality - which we saw in every department that we visited - and this focus leaves an abiding memory of this approach to business of SWL and its commitment to service delivery and customer satisfaction.

The Retallack family laundry - South West Laundry - is a classic of its kind and could readily serve as a benchmark for all other laundry businesses wishing to expand and grow. By their commitment to quality in every detail as it affects their company and in their commitment to their staff, as well as on their unrivalled approach to customer service, South West Laundry stands as an equal to the best medium-sized, family-owned laundries which we have seen in Europe.

Wayne Retallack (pictured) set up the business with his father Tony



Daughter and sister, Julie Perkin, joined the business as finance director