

Don't dare say you know everything about...Talbot Designs and Signtrade Ltd

Sign World travelled north, to North London that is, to meet up with one of the most interesting companies involved with the sign trade today

Do you remember the arctic palace set from the James Bond film "Die Another Day", and the scene with that translucent furniture that was designed to look as if it was fashioned from ice? And have you ever wondered about those strange domes on the skirts of Dr Who's daleks, what they are and where they came from? Well why not now take a look in the Guinness book of records and check out the

bemused Richard told us that he was getting used to all this media attention, indeed just recently he had been interviewed by the BBC about the rising price of oil!

Richard's Grandfather, Sidney Woolff, set up a company called Albion (named after the pub next door to the premises, and quite often access was blocked by dray horses) which means that we are currently dealing with both the second and third generations of a family of plastics specialists. The firm was originally launched by the unexpected opening of a commercial opportunity created by the ending of the second-world war – what exactly was to be done with all those blocks of Perspex now that the RAF didn't need quite so many aircraft canopies anymore? The Woolffs had the answer: lots of different things.

Albion was a company that specialised in the manufacture of acrylic doorknobs...yes you read that correctly ...and were very successful at it. During the 1950s and 60s if you were watching British TV or at the movies and saw a crystal-cut door knob in a luxury home in anything from "The Saint" to "Upstairs Downstairs" the chances are you were looking at a knob from Albion. You might say that there was something of an explosion in the faux cut-glass knob market; the Stoke Newington-based manufacturer was exporting them as far afield as Australia as well as supplying them to the Queen and the Dorchester Hotel; things were looking good – then they got better.

In 1968 Albion was given a design to be fabricated in acrylic, a prototype machine that could be used to convert old pence to new (12d = five new pence, five shillings = 25 new pence, those were the days) – and in 1969 the prototype



These hand-cut letter moulds are decades old

Fitted with LED'S for a halo effect



entry for "The world's largest beer bottle" at 2.54 metres high and built for Kingfisher. Finally did you see the campaign pic published here in Sign World in which Lenny Henry was trapped inside a giant light bulb for red nose day? Now the question is, do you know what connects all of the above?

The link is that the Finchley-based bespoke plastic items manufacturer, Talbot Designs, created all of these things, and a lot more besides; as we found when we were talking to MD Richard Woolff, and the chairman, his father, Charles. A

was realised for them by a talented contractor called Jim Talbot of Talbot Designs.

Established back in 1947 Talbot had a range of extraordinary talents; so it was no surprise when Albion saw the potential and bought not just the company name but also ten of its staff. Talbot was to be run by brothers Charles and Malcolm while



A sample of a pedestrian crossing sign



Moulded lettering

Albion would remain under the control of MD Malcolm Woolff. Malcolm had another string to his bow outside of the strictly business world – he was the session drummer with cult band Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Titch and also played



Preparing the next batch

for The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band (but if you want more information about either of those you will just have to Google them).

(In August 1970 Albion burned to the ground, everything went including the wages on the table "Thank God it was the tea break" said Charles, "nobody was hurt, because they were all out having a brew, including the bosses; I wonder

what would have been the result if the same thing happened today?"

When Malcolm finally retired in 2003 Albion was sold off away from the Woolff family – and is now a well-known supplier to the sign trade; but

tomorrow, although we can be sure of one thing – it's always busy.

"We used do work that ranged from producing prototypes for the Permutit water softener people to making screens for submarines, we even used to make screens for radar consoles but that dried-up thanks to new technology coming on line. "We made the very first all-plastic theatre set in

Charles Woolff

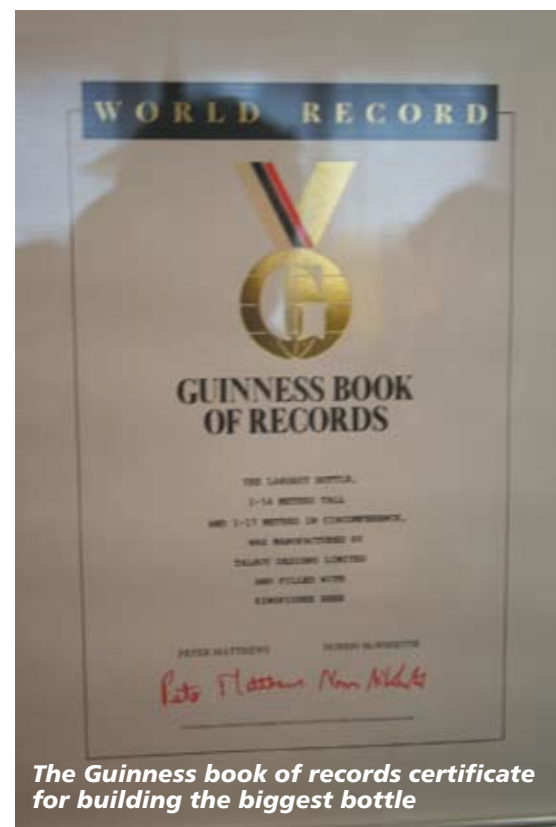


Not Madonna's next stage outfit, but perfect domes

that is a different story for another issue.

Back to Talbot, which grew to become one of the most prolific acrylic fabricators in the UK, and they specialised then as now in bespoke jobs for all and sundry. Using clear acrylic, Talbot was able to create almost anything: a working model tractor for Massey Ferguson, an enlarging lens that allowed people a better view of the tiny, earlier TV screens (what we call TV now would have been called cinema back then). Talbot made screens for the MOD using paper-thin acrylic with polished edges; it made the first prototype riot shields for the police force, and it supplied the scene-of-crime rulers that we have all seen in forensic photographs.

Richard explained what was happening: "Talbot is staffed with acrylic engineers, specialists in bespoke work, and the fun is in the fact that we never know what job will be in the workshops



The Guinness book of records certificate for building the biggest bottle



A specially-built circular work table and clamps

the world for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) under the design direction of Ralph Koltai; and he was so pleased with the result that he always uses us whenever he needs acrylic work in his productions.

"We made the pound sign for the Money Programme and we've done work for the Dr Who



The sales team, a brief lull in a hard day

TV series as well as exhibitions and museums. Once we had to develop a special display case to house the jacket that was worn by Admiral Lord Nelson on the day he was shot, it had to be UV

resistant amongst other things to ensure that the blood wouldn't fade."

1973 saw the team building the first ever acrylic spiral staircase, then in 1986 they made the canopy for the Popemobile, and while all this was going on Talbot was doing steady business with the sign trade supplying one-off bespoke display work as well as the moulded domes that are its trademark item – if there could be such a thing as a trademark item for such a diversely talented skill bank of a company. Now the company has invested heavily in new kit, which enables Talbot to stock 27 sizes of dome - and supply those domes faster and cheaper, too.

Talbot Designs is a small team, just 26 people, and although Richard is now the MD he had to start on the shop floor when he joined the family firm in 1989 – literally: "On my first day I was handed a broom and a cloth and I became a floor sweeper and plastic cleaner," Richard smiled, "we cleaned the plastic with chloroform in those days – it was legal back then; which was more than I could say about the state of me after a day on the stuff."

Talbot has a motto, or perhaps an ethos: "Only limited by the imagination..." and this is reflected by the company's diversity, which may just be the key to Talbot's survival and the reason that it has acquired so many customers over the years.

And we are talking years here; Talbot has been over 13 years on its current site and has been a local name for all of its six decades – people can address a letter to "Talbot, Finchley" and the mail still arrives. Some staff have been with the firm for up to 47 years, they joined from school and have never left; they are both loyal and local and one of the most positive things about them is that they can be on call when all hands are needed on deck, a not infrequent event.

Since 2003, Richard has been running SignTrade Letters Ltd, from the same north London premises as Talbot. SignTrade Letters makes a range of signage and lettering products, including illuminated signage, but is best known for its pioneering production of real chrome lettering for signage – named ChromaSign. Always keen to innovate the Woolff family are never prepared to sit on their laurels, and just as Talbot has made significant investment in its dome-manufacturing equipment, so SignTrade has been raised to the next level of development and this autumn (2008) will see the launch of two ranges of ready-made chrome letters.

Until now, chrome lettering has been available only as a bespoke item, made to special order, and



We're OK so long as the customer wants Times New Roman

as with the domes, the benefits include reduced cost and improved delivery times. SignTrade now aims to deliver orders in the UK within one week instead of the four or more weeks that special orders have required previously. The two new ranges are letters in Helvetica Bold and Times New Roman. They come in sizes of 6, 9, 12 or 15 inches and are available in upper and lower case in Helvetica and in upper case only in Times New Roman.

Richard Woolff is proud of this product range: "We have made enormous impact with our real chrome lettering ranges because these have the



Imagine having to store your fonts like this

appearance of solid chrome but without the expense or the weight – in contrast to those who make imitation chrome, besides which ours won't lose their lustre over time and are weather resistant".

Just 20 years ago there were 40 manufacturers in the local borough of Barnet, and now there are only five, which makes Talbot an important part of its landscape, a fact recognised by the local press; but the problem has always been that because a lot of what they do is trade work and discretion is therefore guaranteed nobody has ever been able to show any of it – and we can't show you any of it either. So why not do what this London-based company's customers have been doing for so many years, let your imaginations run riot, ring the welkins, and we're betting you won't be far off the mark.

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Richard Woolff calm in a busy workshop