

# The men behind some iconic designs

By Mary  
McConnell



WITHOUT realising it, a small company helped to create one of the most iconic characters in film history.

Talbot Designs may be small, with a modest company headquarters in Finchley, but the family-run firm has

had a far-reaching impact on the world and created many an influential piece of plastic.

If it had not been for Talbot Designs, Darth Vader would have struggled to breathe and James Bond would have had nowhere to sit down and sip his martini.

Father and son team Charles and Richard Woolff have had the business in their family since 1964 and they employ a team of 28 to create all manner of plastic products, ranging from giant beer bottles and mirrors to the podium used for the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year awards.

Some of the more kooky pieces the company has created include domes for King Hussain of Jordan's underwater bar, panels for a spiral staircase used in the opening of New York's Longchamp shop and domes used in the Arctic to view the Northern Lights.

But Talbot Designs began by manufacturing a rather less glamorous product.

Melaphones, which the company still produces today, are the small plastic grills found in ticket booths which amplify sound.

Richard said: "It's one of those simple

designs that you can't improve. It's got just four components.

"The clear membrane at the back vibrates and amplifies sound – it works really well just as it is.

"It's still such a valuable asset to the company that we make about 100 a month."

The company has been based at the same Long Lane address since 1947.

Richard explained how the company works: "People come to us with a design idea or a sketch and we see if we can make it.

"We tweak people's concepts if we

decide that what they want can't be done, but we try to make it as close as possible to their original request."

And he insisted that no challenge was too great and that they had never said no to a job request.

"This job is all about common sense and lateral thinking.

"We're faced with a problem and we've got to find a solution to it – you can't learn this kind of thing in a classroom."

He added: "When Longchamp came to us and asked us to make the panelling, they had already been to two other companies who had said that what they were asking couldn't be done. But we took on the challenge.

"There's never been a job where I've said we can't make it. We'll always give it a go. We're a small firm but we are very specialised. There aren't any other companies that do the work we do."

One of Talbot Designs' most significant achievements was part of Darth Vader's costume in the original Star Wars film.

Richard said: "The actor who played Vader couldn't breathe out of the costume, so we were asked to create a small ventilation panel which allowed air through – if it hadn't been for us, Darth Vader would have suffocated."

More recently, the company created furniture used in a James Bond film, domes and dishes for the Harry Potter films and giant mirrors for the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

The company also produces the spheres used in the television programme *In the Night Garden* and Richard added: "Sometimes I watch a film or turn on the TV and suddenly think, 'I made that'.

"When my daughter was watching that TV show, I suddenly saw the sphere we had made. I had completely forgotten what we had created."



Far left: Talbot Designs overcame a flaw in Darth Vader's costume, left: Richard Woolff, and background; Copenhagen's Royal Theatre