

Born March 1955, Nigel Bennett is South London 'born and bred' but has lived in Carshalton, Surrey, since 1983; he is married with two daughters, three granddaughters - and two cats. Educated at Dulwich College and Oriel College, Oxford, gaining BA (Hons) in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, Mr Bennett joined Confederation of British Industry

(CBI) in 1977 to help set up and run pay databank to monitor success or otherwise of incomes policy (legal restriction on levels of pay increase).

He was then Head of CBI's Employment Information Service until 1984, when he left to join Hay-MSL in new position designed to link pay surveys with management consultancy. Then, just three weeks later the manager resigned, and the new position disappeared with it!

Mr Bennett joined nabim in June 1985 as Industrial Relations Manager, with responsibility for IR, training, and health and safety; association Secretary from 2000-2021. Since July 2021, he has retained responsibility for the association's training programmes on part-time basis but will retire mid-2022.

An ardent Crystal Palace Football Club fan since mid-1960s, though largely of armchair variety since early 1980s, Mr Bennett's other interests include reading and music.

How did you first become involved in the flour milling industry in the UK? Was it a boyhood goal or did an opportunity arise that attracted you?

I'm South London born and bred, so not much opportunity for childhood experience of flour mills. My job application to the trade association was a way forward after what had turned out to be a bad career move (we're all allowed at least one).

I had a vague concept of identical grains of wheat being milled into white and brown flour but no knowledge of the industry or process. It took three interviews, but I eventually persuaded them to give me the job - or maybe there was just no-one else.

Anyway, I thought I'd do it for three-to-five years before moving on to the next career adventure, but I was soon told by a colleague that people worked for nabim for two years or more than 20; it seems he was right in my case.

What do you regard as being your key achievements in your time working in the milling industry?

Developing and managing the distance learning programme has been the foundation of my job satisfaction, just as the programme is seen by many milling companies as the foundation of milling training. Keeping so many committed individuals involved in its delivery, despite falling numbers employed in the industry, is something of which I am proud.

We have responded to our members' demands, not only in terms of distance learning-related innovation such as our Virtual Mill but also in the development of our Advanced Milling Diploma, working with our partners Campden BRI and the Buhler Training Centre to train future leaders in milling operations.

Finally, I have a soft spot for our development conferences, run until recently under the auspices of the Young Millers Section; many lifelong friendships have been formed there, as has a commitment to the association as a key player in industry life.

Can you highlight the two or three significant issues that the industry has had to face in your time at the UK Flour Millers Association?

Peaks and troughs tend to be smoothed out by the passage of time, so the most recent challenges often seem the biggest, even if they are not. That said, the double challenge of Brexit and Covid has probably been the most testing time

during my 37 years at Arlington Street, both for the industry and for the association.

I do believe that the full consequences of Brexit were little understood before the referendum, either by government or those in the vanguard of the forces for 'Leave!' Since the referendum, there has been a tremendous learning process for many, and UK Flour Millers has done a great job of education and lobbying.

Out of necessity, the pandemic has changed our perceptions of the best ways to carry out our work; the association and industry have responded well to the challenge.

What are the challenges you see facing flour millers in the immediate future?

Apart from having to get by without me? [*Much laughter*] Challenge is generally presented by change; change management is a vital skill for businesses and it is particularly difficult when the change to be managed is imposed by outside forces (usually government), rather than a chosen evolution of practice.

However, unlike most other industries, millers are faced with potentially dramatic change in their raw material every year with the new harvest. This means that they are well schooled in managing change and, whatever challenges come their way, I am confident that the industry will continue to play its key role in the UK food chain.

Given the historical role the UK milling industry has played in the development of roller milling in particular, do you feel the UK still has much to offer the global milling industry and in particular with reference to training?

I am neither a practical miller nor especially technically minded but I don't think there is any question that the UK flour milling industry is still at the forefront of technical innovation. It has to be, given the variability of its raw material, the wide range of product specifications and the negotiating strength of its customer base.

As for training, I believe we continue to offer the most flexible, comprehensive and rigorous programme available to millers worldwide. Through the involvement of skilled millers, we combine the strengths of the traditional distance learning courses with new technology, highlighted by our Virtual Mill, which uses gaming technology to offer an effective training environment.

Finally, can you express how important millers are to the stability and health of a community, given your dedication to training millers worldwide?

UK flour milling, global flour milling indeed, is a community in itself, taking pride in providing a vital source of nutrition to the vast majority of the population. Whilst bread is known as the staff of life, flour is an ingredient in around one-third of food products to be found in supermarkets.

It has been a privilege to work in such an important industry and it has been a pleasure to work with so many individuals who are committed to the industry and to the development of those that follow them into milling.

'Developed and delivered by and for millers' is a key strap line for our distance learning programme, and trained millers are essential to the nourishment of the world community.

