

David Wright, at 59, came into the family flour milling business, GR Wrights and Sons Limited, in 1981 representing the fifth generation milling on the company's River Lea site at Ponder's End. Nine years later, in 1990, he took over as Managing Director at 29-years of age. He is a graduate from the Swiss Milling School, which he had attended in 1983. He had also trained as a miller at UK mills - namely the Timms Mill and at Heygates Mill in North Hampton. Mr Wright is the great, great grandson of George Reynolds Wright and under his direction the family business expanded in an extremely competitive marketplace through his attentions to staff support and adopting the latest technology. The company gained BS5750 Certification in 1994 – one of the first milling companies in the UK to achieve this accreditation. He also saw his company gain recognition for its support for employees by again being one of the first in the milling sector to lift the 'Investors in People Award' in 1998. He also secured a 'London's Manufacturer of the Year Award' in 2004 followed by a 'Passport to Exports Award' in 2005. This latter award was for finding new markets for bread mixes abroad. After developing bread mixes in consumer packs he introduced cake mixes, which were more recently rebranded in 2015, but had already penetrated markets overseas, such as France and The Netherlands. Mr Wright focuses on his people, new technologies and has an uncanny eye for market opportunities in the flour milling sector. Here he talks to Milling and Grain about the latest company development – the building and commissioning of his new 18-tonne-per-hour flour mill at Harlow north of London

**Do you see continuity critical to the business itself given the company's historic past? Is that continuity projecting into the future and your decision to build a new mill at Harlow Essex in the UK?**

Yes, we are very proud of our heritage.

You walk around here, including this new office, and everything is about our history on the walls. It's our heritage which is great and something to be proud of, but it doesn't get us new business and we have got to look forward to the future with modern plant that's going to see us through for the next 25-30 years plus.

A lot of big corporate businesses never look far ahead. They are looking to five years of achievements and that they have to make their mark on behalf of shareholders in that time. It's always short-term.

**In terms of the investment can you give readers an idea of how much has been invested in this new mill?**

A lot! At the moment it stands at UK£47 million and I don't anticipate that going up any more now, but we've had to go through quite a difficult time with Covid-19 which impacted us during the build.

At one point we had 150 contractors on site building the mill. Then the next day it was down to about six. They had all left. Contractors by their nature live away from home so they all went home. But after a couple of weeks they gradually came back. Overall, we were delay on the project and this cost us a fair bit and that delay was around four or five months. We were planning to open in August last year 2020, but we didn't really get started until December and really from January this year its taken a few months to get everything bedded down. It's only just starting now to feel right.

**Did the contractors - Clegg Food Projects, who were the principle contractor and the installers Salford Engineering - achieve a good outcome for such an advanced and modern construction?**

We look back now and say 'wow'. They did an excellent job overall. Was the whole project flawless, no it wasn't. There were always going to be things that needed picking up and there are lessons to be learnt from that, but essentially, it's been really good. From breaking ground, the whole build took just two years.

If you want to include the purchase of the land, then it's probably a five-year project - three years to secure the land and two years to build and commission the factory.

**Is the original milling plant at Ponder's End in Enfield, North London, still in production. Or has it been replaced completely? If it's running, what is the future for it. Will it continue to be a production centre for the company?**

Yes, I hope so. It is the intention. We have two plants at Ponder's End. One is a small five-tonne-an-hour mill and the other is a bigger 10-tonne-an-hour mill. We have closed the bigger plant and the little plant runs making speciality flours. The new build here is an 18-tonne-per-hour plant, so it's quite nice having that smaller plant to play around the more specialist-type flours.

**How important is location in the decision-making for a business of this nature? Had the old Ponder's End site become restricted due to its location today?**

The first thought was to build the new mill on that site. But where were we going to locate and put all the plant and equipment needed? We have Listed Buildings up there - the warehouse and the barn are all protected and you can't knock them down. Old buildings, the process flow and the cost of the new equipment plus the limitations of the old mill site said to us that it was a compromised site to work with. Whereas we felt that we could start again on a completely brownfield site and have the mill how we wanted it and we won't have to compromise; and we'll have exactly what we want. It cost a bit more, but we felt if we were going to spend the money at Ponder's End then let's spend a bit more and get it absolutely right.

**Does Harlow give you a better location for distribution?**

Yes and no. We are only 10 miles away from the other site. It's not a big deal. We didn't want to be too far away so that everyone could come from Ponder's End to here or readily relocate. Anything more 10 miles than people might say they do not want to move. More or less everybody came across and we're happy that they have done so as we are a very close family business.

**What about your raw material flow, the incoming wheat for example? Is that better here?**

All raw material is coming into the factory by lorrie. Look out the window and you'll see we are now in Essex and not in London and so there's two benefits - we are nearer to the wheat fields, which is good but further from the Port of Tilbury which is not quite so good, but it's still not enough to incur any further costs and we do a lot of flour trade north of here as well. By and large I would say there is a slight benefit to moving here in terms of raw material flow and moving finished flour. Also Ponder's End was a low-emission zone so some of the older wheat lorries couldn't get in there.

**What is the balance between local wheat supply and imported wheat in annual throughput here at Harlow? Are imported hard wheats used for in your flour products?**

We process mostly all local wheat but we do buy Canadian wheats. Local wheat makes up between 70 and 80 percent of the wheat we process. We only really make bread flours here in this company. We do a bit of plain and raising flours but 90 percent is bread flour. We provide all major UK retailers, big bakeries and wholesalers, some with their own labelled bags.

**What's your USP or unique selling point as a company in a very competitive market? What separates you from the rest of the UK major millers?**

We have always provided quality rather than gone the cost reduction route. Premium production with a strong focus on service and being on time is a big thing. When you walk around you'll see that we are quite a complicated business.

For example, you'll see one scale producing for one customer and it's all going out in bulk which is very straightforward, but we also have hundreds of customers and hundreds of 'Skus' (small units) and there are lots of complications that comes with that.

When I first came into the business we looked at things that would give us an edge and allow us to compete in a very competitive market dominated by very big flour producers. We went for the specialist and difficult things to produce that nobody else typically wanted to do. That's how we grew.

