

In conversation with...



Peter Vickers, Chairman and Managing Director (for the last 25 years) of Vickers Oils, manufacturer of environmentally acceptable lubricants (EALs) and specialty lubricants

The Vickers Oils story is a fascinating and very personal one with an almost 200-year lubricants history. How did it begin?

Two hundred years ago, our family heroine, Mary Randall Vickers (my great-great-grandmother) was running her late husband's patten-making business, with two of her sons. Pattens were wooden soles mounted on an iron ring, to lift the wearer out of the mud and so keep their ordinary shoes dry. But by her death in 1826 macadam roads were becoming common; and there were many competing patten makers in Leeds; so the business would not support her two sons. The elder brother, Benjamin Randall Vickers, realised the need to establish a separate business and in May 1828 felt led to sell oils and soaps. We've been at it ever since.

As the company's 5th generation 'custodian', has it been important for you to honour the original values of your forefathers? And in what way are those values part of today's company ethos?

Yes, indeed. We still have Benjamin Randall Vickers' Memorandum which sets out his thinking and his business principles, which include his desire for: "not riches", but merely to maintain his previous standard of living, with a little in reserve; "to contribute to the comfort of the poor and suffering"; and "to support the interests of Christ in the church and the world". It feels as though those fundamental values have applied throughout; but, rightly, they have been interpreted slightly differently by each generation, in the light of changing context, and re-expressed to make sense for the changing times:

- "People matter": at the heart of our business are long term relationships, in many cases spanning decades, with employees, customers, suppliers, service providers and family shareholders.

- These relationships would have been impossible to sustain without being trusted. So, dealing fairly, with honesty and integrity, has been and remains a bedrock.
- Part of that has been the family's view that the interests of employees and shareholders are of equal importance; over the generations, the family has not sought to maximise its financial return but rather to plough profits back into the business.

And then there's the wider purpose, beyond both providing world-leading products & highly regarded service, and being a competent, friendly and professional team. For my grandfather and father, who lived through years of suspicion and strife in British industry because of the legacy of exploitation of employees by capitalists, the wider purpose lay in seeing the business as a testing-ground for a new model of industrial cooperation and as an alternative to "class war".

These days the great challenge is of course sustainability: are we, who are at work and in power today, willing to change our ways of life fast and far enough to reduce the damage of climate change and other environmental impacts? That's been part of my own passion about the development of EALs.

Vickers Oils has been at the heart of marine lubricants innovation since the 19th century (one of your marine lubricant brands has a 1900 trademark!). Was it inevitable that you would be the first company to develop and commercialise EALs (environmentally acceptable lubricants)?

As a historian, I'm not sure anything is inevitable! But it certainly helped that we are a privately owned SME which takes a long-term view. In 1993 a Swedish

customer suggested to me that we should develop a biodegradable version of one of our existing stern-tube oils. It was an inner hunch, a gut feel, that that we should do this (despite lacking any other evidence of demand!); and it took nine years of lab work and sea trials before we had a marketable product – just as the first real demand emerged in the Baltic, the Great Lakes and the Florida based cruise industry.

The marine sector is still adjusting to the impact of IMO2020. What are the longer-term implications for the industry and the ongoing development of EALs?

Right now the impact of declining world trade because of COVID-19 seems to be outweighing all the regulatory pressures of IMO 2020. As a company we continue our R&D into new EALs with improved performance, taking advantage of new base fluids and additive technology which suppliers keep bringing forward.

After 38 years in the industry, how do you feel the world (and our sector) has changed?

The following macro-changes are obvious; nonetheless they have had a profound impact on our industry, our company and my own life:

- Europe changing from a divided continent, fearing war, into a free, peaceful, united, area of shared values, prosperity and trade; China's re-emergence to its historical world power status; and Asia becoming the most dynamic area in the world;
- rising worldwide prosperity, despite vast inequalities and injustices;
- utterly different means and speed of communication (neither the pc nor the mobile phone existed when I started work!);
- the prevalence of capitalism, albeit in many different forms, over nationalised monopolies;
- the internet;
- (quite properly) far stronger health & safety laws, and chemical registration programmes;
- the significant changes (in many parts – not yet in all) in social attitudes towards: care for children; gender; race; religion; sexuality; and others
- Perhaps most important of all, though, are the environmental twins; the rapid escalation in global warming, and the, somewhat slower but still definite, change in public recognition that we must change the way we live, in order to preserve Earth as a habitable home for our descendants.

Covid19 has fundamentally derailed society and commerce, at least for now; how do you see the industry (and our lifestyles as a whole) adapting to the 'new normal' – what do you think that will be?

Perhaps the word "normal" is itself unhelpful. It implies something fair, known, reliable, settled, sustainable. But actually we're far from that: how can we describe as "normal" such a structurally unfair world, at risk of self-extinction from climate change, nuclear proliferation, pandemics or even (according to some thinkers) artificial intelligence?

What has been so heartening through the last weeks has been the obvious re-emergence of neighbourliness; compassion and consideration for others; friendliness and conversation; what one might call "normal human behaviour"! The virus gives us an unparalleled opportunity to build on these generous, selfless instincts and behaviours and to establish a new model where we truly care for our neighbours (whether they're next door or ten thousand miles away) and treat their well-being and interests as being as important as our own.

You recently passed the MD baton to your technical director, Chris Wholley. Why did you decide to step down? And does this mean that Vickers Oils will not be run by a family member for the first time in its history?

Well, it's certainly not the first time that there's been a non-family chief executive; that happened in the 1950s and again for about 15 years in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, my own first 12 years were spent working under a non-family chief executive. Chris has in fact been doing part of the job already as Deputy MD and is ideally placed to take on the entire role now.

We're undertaking a transition from a family-managed business to a family-governed business. The transition is about, in a managed way, handing over diverse responsibilities which I've carried to several different people, both family and non-family, rather than looking for a single "successor". This will take several years; I am continuing as Chair of the Company and hope to be around to help celebrate the bicentenary of the business in 2028.

What future plans are on the horizon for Vickers Oils?

Since 2015, we've almost completely re-equipped our manufacturing facilities and built a large new lab. 30% of our staff work in the laboratories and in technical service. We have plans for measured, sustainable growth in both new sectors and new regions, based on product leadership, excellent service and being a reliable supplier: all of which depend on our friendly, professional team. The first steps in those plans were the introduction, last year, of a range of Food Grade lubricants which already we're selling on four continents; and the establishment this year of our first overseas subsidiary, in Australia.

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