

In conversation with...

Nigel R Bottom, Group Managing Director, the Witham Group,
Royal Warrant holder since 1991



2021 marks The Witham Group's Centenary. Where and how did it all begin?

Albert Smith, former factory foreman of the 'Star Oil & Grease' company in the early 1900s, set the scene for today's Witham Group; he founded his own company, blending the first Qualube Lubricants by the banks of the river Witham in the City of Lincoln and went on to employ his two sons, plus my grandfather, Les Bottom as his salesman. Decades later, my father, Geoff, and Albert's grandson son, Alan, became partners, setting up Witham Oil & Grease Co. As a teenager, I would earn pocket money filling oil cans, painting floors, scooping grease from barrels, washing the lorries, vans and cars. By 14 years old I could drive and at weekends and school holidays, my favourite job was parking the vehicles in the yard (once they had been cleaned!).

My studies followed; I went away to agricultural college and completed my diploma in Business and Finance at the earlier age of 18-years old (I was a pilot for the course), so I entered the world of work then. I was keen to gain experience elsewhere, so found myself at a freight forwarding company sending lorry loads of grains throughout the UK and abroad on ships. After a few years, an opportunity to work at Witham arose and that was it; I was given the chance and my career took off.

How has Witham diversified its offering through the decades?

Lincoln was always an industrial city, synonymous with agriculture and manufacturing; Witham supported many of these now global manufacturers.

As mechanisation developed (from farming with horses for power to steam engines and then tractors), Witham developed its lubricant ranges accordingly, working with global technology providers. We remain heavily involved in agriculture and in all other aspects of lubrication, from Passenger Car Motor Oils (PCMO), Heavy Duty Diesel Oils (HDDO) to Marine and Horticulture.

You are the 3rd generation custodian – how relevant are your forefather's original values?

Very! The previous generations laid the best foundation stones; we are simply building on them. We may add an extra wing or small extension and are certainly doing all we can with our sustainability initiatives but essentially, Quality, Value and Service remain at the heart of all we do. Witham is currently run by a fantastic Team of Directors including my wife, Ali who heads the company's marketing activity and my brother, Richard who runs the Group transport fleet routing our trucks and deliveries throughout the UK and abroad. We also have a 4th generation Smith family member - Dominic Smith, in our Technical department at Lincoln HQ; so both families continue to be successfully involved 100-years on. As MD, I have had to earn my place at the board table. It is right that I continue to prove I deserve to be here.

100 years on, how important is Innovation to Witham?

Innovation is very important; it's been our driver, how to improve not only our own environmental credentials but also to play our part in developing new ways to improve our industry. Around 10 years ago, we took a serious look at the way we did things, from packing to production and blending itself, as well as our product range and deliveries. We set our objective to put the environment at the heart of all we do and have not looked back.

You recently launched a new environmentally friendly lubricant made from sheep lanolin (not fossil fuels!) How did this develop?

The Lanolin project was born out of a necessity to solve an issue within the industry where conventional products only just did the job in preserving metal once the paint surface has gone. Lanolin has been in existence for millennia and we just had to work out how it could be used in our industry. We did this with a technical partner in New Zealand, producing

Witham ProLan and the rest as they say is history. It is a fabulous product with great results, it is food safe, environmentally friendly, extremely sustainable, competitively priced and just works!!!

You blend all your Qualube lubricants 'carbon neutrally' using ultrasound technology. How did this arise?

The sonic blending concept (Blendtek) was born from our desire to improve and evolve. Currently, lubricants are mostly batch blended using gas/water energy to heat base oil then add additives and wait 2 – 4 hours until it's mixed. The use of sonics (sound), adding base oils and then additives at the same time through a tube (reactor), using only a 13-amp plug for energy / power (sourced from our roofs solar panels) has revolutionised the process - no heat, no agitation, no dedicated blending vessels, and all completed in less than 20 minutes. Once embraced, this will change the way we all look to blend Lubricants. Currently Blendtek is being used by ourselves, a handful of other UK blenders plus a very large German independent blender. It is also being trialed in other parts of the world and a large international ADCO who are using it for manufacturing some of their additives in the UK and USA.

We love this innovation and the positive environmental impact it is having within our business and others. From a sustainability point of view, all the lubricants we blend at Witham are Carbon Neutral as the small amount of electricity needed to run the Blendtek unit, plus the pumps etc. comes from our small bank of solar panels on the roofs of our factory. How fantastic and rewarding would it be if all lubricants could be blended with such a very small carbon footprint?

Witham was awarded a Royal Warrant by HM Queen in 1991. What has this honour meant for you personally and in terms of the company?

Personally, I know it must have been the proudest moment of my father's career and in the history of our company, when he received the letter from HM The Queen in 1991 announcing that the Witham Group was to receive the Royal Warrant for the products and services we supply primarily then to the Sandringham Estate in Norfolk.

When my father retired in 2004, I took on the responsibility not only of the business but as the

Grantee of the Warrant for the company and I am pleased to say we have since expanded our reach within the Royal household further and now supply other individual Royal family members at other Royal Estates in the UK.

The Royal Warrant has had a greatly positive effect on our business, both internally and externally. From ensuring our operational standards and environmental credentials are second to none, to giving our teams huge pride when they know that we are only one of 750 companies in the whole world to receive such an accolade is immensely satisfying. We never rest on our laurels. This is great for us as a family company, and for British manufacturing, as well as our industry.

What is your vision for Witham for the next 100 years? Are you hoping your children will carry on the family legacy?

The vision for Witham Group is simple - to continue to keep offering Quality, Value and Service to our customers with the latest and best products, environmental excellence, whilst keeping people at the heart of what we do. If we continue with this philosophy, that has stood us well over the past 100 years, I am sure we will continue to succeed into the exciting future ahead.

The Lubricant Industry is something I am very passionate about and continue to support and help with raising the industry standards via the UKLA, UEIL and VLS. As Group Managing Director of Witham Group in its 100th Year, I am also very proud that our special company stands out with its unique heritage, ethics and reputation.

Whether another Bottom and /or Smith will be involved in the running of the business over its next 100-years is yet to be written. However, I have no doubt that this company, with its very strong foundations, will still be standing tall and proud for a very long time.

LINK
www.withamgroup.co.uk