

# A LIFETIME IN LIGHTING – CHELSOM CELEBRATES 75TH ANNIVERSARY

Taking a look back at the last 75 years, Sophie Harper finds out about Chelsom's success as a family business from father-son leadership duo Robert and Will Chelsom.

Robert's parents, Reg and Kay Chelsom, became unexpected business owners in 1947 after an American friend, who owned an antiques shop in Blackpool called The Golden Age, wanted to return to New York, and offered them the opportunity to buy the business. Borrowing money from the bank and family, they bought the shop with no knowledge of antiques or antique lighting, but they learned their new trade pretty quickly.

They worked tirelessly to make the business a success, spending Monday to

Friday in the shop and weekends in France, sourcing antique lights from Paris.

The couple's hard work paid off and the shop was a huge success, with people coming from all over the north of England to purchase antiques from Reg and Kay.

"Blackpool was the centre of the universe in those days," says Robert. "It was the heart of all entertainment in the UK and there were shows all throughout the day – there was a lot of money being spent here and people came from all over."



The business steadily grew in the 1950s, and one shop became two. But with antiques becoming harder to source, the Chelsoms started looking into making reproduction items. They decided to pioneer the manufacture of reproduction period lighting, which they began in England, and then started to look to bigger manufacturing units in Spain and Italy.

With the factories in Europe needing to produce more lights than the Chelsoms needed for their shop, they decided to take what they needed to sell at The Golden Age, and offer the surplus to other shops in the UK, therefore becoming distributors at the same time. Their first three customers were Harrods, Fortnum & Mason, and John Lewis.

Reg died in the early 1970s, and with Robert still at school, Kay ran the business until Robert left education. "I pretty much left school one day and went into the business the next," he says. When Kay died in 1976, the business became Robert's, but with more interest in the manufacture and distribution side of the business, he decided to sell the shop and focus on what had then become the main business.

In the '80s and '90s, there was a lot of competition between major high street department stores," explains Robert, as he talks about the challenges he faced as a young business owner. "A lot of businesses were more about the discounts on offer than the quality of product or customer service, so we moved away from retail and started looking at the contract market."

In a tough market where the spotlight had shifted onto London brands, the business had a battle to compete, but slowly and surely started winning contracts for projects in America and the Middle East.

In 2006 Will joined the family business, starting his career at Chelsom as a sales junior, learning the job from the ground up. "It was a great way of gaining exposure to the whole interior design world and FF&E procurement, and I got to do that with great mentors," he says. "It was exciting getting to know the hospitality industry. Getting to meet people and visit sites really piqued my interest."

At the same time, Robert had begun designing more of the business' products himself, and Will says he was able to shadow his dad and take inspiration from the design process. "My early years in the business were all about building relationships and growing the business, so I put a lot of focus on more complex overseas exports. The brand just grew and grew, and we were becoming better known globally."

Will noticed what a well-oiled machine Chelsom was becoming, and thought there was room to build on the team's existing portfolio by utilising its combined skills in new markets. "At the time, our manufacturing, technical, and project management capability had suddenly become enormous. We'd gone from being a company with a great catalogue that can supply great products, to a company that can deliver enormous projects on enormous scales. It was at that point I thought this could be transferred to the marine sector." This new avenue for the business paid off, and has become a huge sector for the brand. "I would say Chelsom is now one of the leading suppliers to the cruise sector," says Will.

"This year alone we have three or four major projects where we're supplying lights to every single cabin on ships that have 5000–6000 passengers. On one of the largest ships, I'd say we've supplied around €1m worth of lighting. There aren't



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many companies that can compete with us in that respect – and that's not just for the design aspect, I think it's because of the infrastructure we've created here. We've got phenomenal leadership in the business now, both from a commercial and an operational point of view."

Robert and Will design every single Chelsom product together, putting the company catalogue out every two years with more than 200 new products created for the latest collection. "When Will came on board, it was the working together and collaborative approach of us bouncing ideas off each other that really brought things together," says Robert. "We're quite honest with each other, which helps when we're trying to create new products."

"We're very lucky that we're aligned with all our thinking and we're upfront if there's anything we don't agree on," adds Will. "I would say with 99.9% of our ideas we'll look at each other and say, 'That's awesome, let's do it!'. That 0.1% of the time, we might say to the other the market's not ready

for that, or that's been done before, and sometimes you need that commercial tension or friction to be progressive and move things forward. It's a great partnership – it's a good combination of all of Dad's years of experience and my connection to the market and fresh perspective."

Known worldwide for supplying a diverse market – from Mandarin Oriental to Travelodge, creating a catalogue of products for the hospitality and marine sectors and working with interior designers to create one-of-a-kind bespoke items – Chelsom has become a leading supplier for lighting design in the hospitality industry, and it's clear the business' success is down to the Chelsoms' attitude to work and collaboration which, although evolved, has been the main constant for the last 75 years.

Keep a look out for the new Chelsom catalogue, Edition 28, available in May 2023.

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