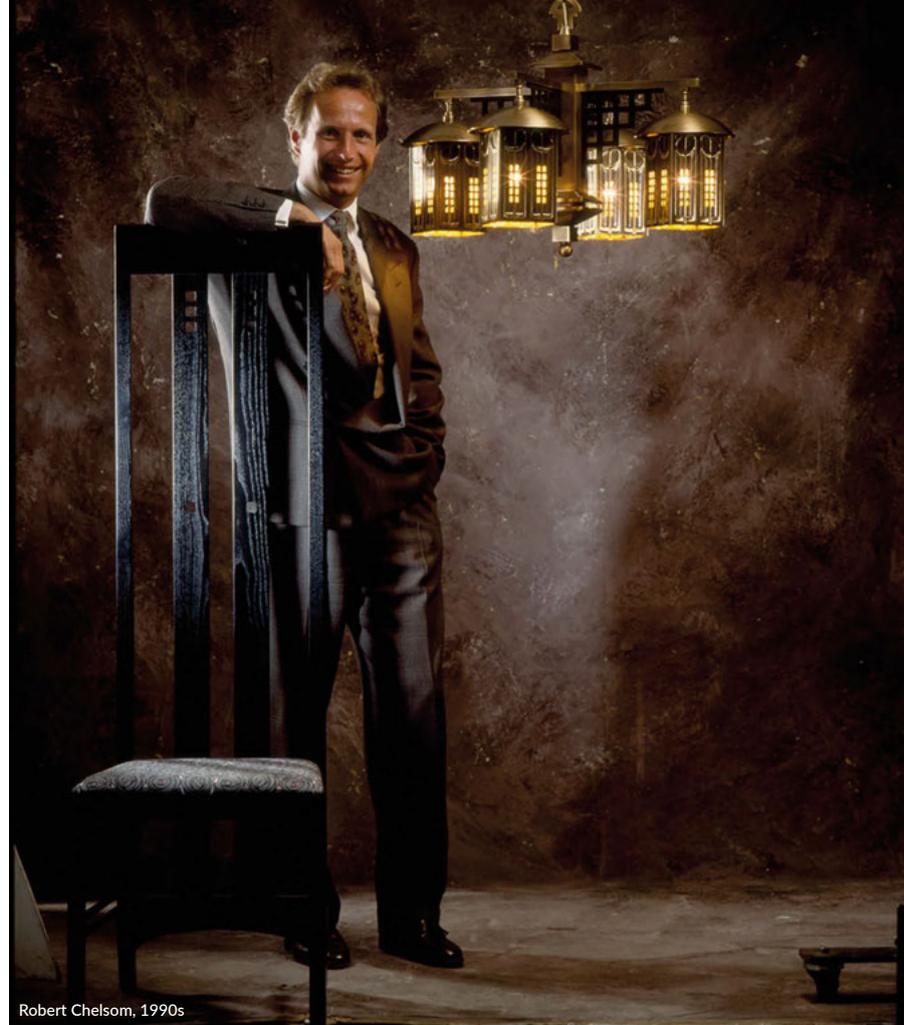


**“I REMEMBER FROM
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Original Chelsom shop front



Robert Chelsom, 1990s

British luxury lighting brand Chelsom celebrates a milestone anniversary this year, turning the grand age of 75. In celebration of this achievement, darc sits down with current Managing Director Will Chelsom to discover more about his background entering the family business, and what the team has in store for its future.

"I grew up in Lytham St Annes, just south of Blackpool in North West England. My grandparents moved to Blackpool to set up our business in 1947 and my Father has lived in the area his whole life," recalls Will. "Lytham has always been a slightly sleepier neighbour to the explosive tourist haven that is Blackpool, but it was a wonderful place to grow up and our business has been based here ever since. I went to the University of Leeds, where I studied Business Management with Asia Pacific Studies; a course that was hugely interesting and that I have been able to relate to throughout my career.

"I then worked in London for about 10 years as a head-hunter in the financial sector but it was really not for me at all. I hated it in fact, and it was the perfect catalyst to bringing me back to what I knew I always wanted to do, which was work within the family business. Sometimes you have to learn what you don't want to do before you learn what you do.

"Now I live just outside Manchester with my wife and our two children. My wife is an interior designer and we both share a passion for design, although I cannot say that she is 100% loyal to the Chelsom brand

when it comes to lighting on her projects! I feel very lucky to work in the space that we do, especially given Chelsom's focus on hospitality, cruise and high-end residential because we are constantly working with some of the finest talents on the most prestigious projects around the world. If I wasn't doing what I do today, I love music and would always have liked a career in that industry somehow... doing what I am not exactly sure!"

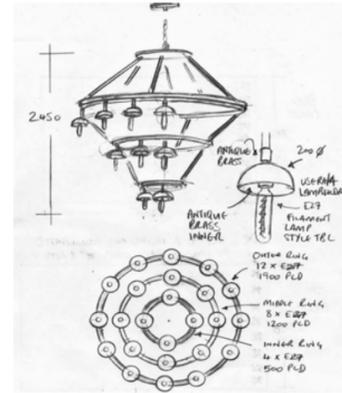
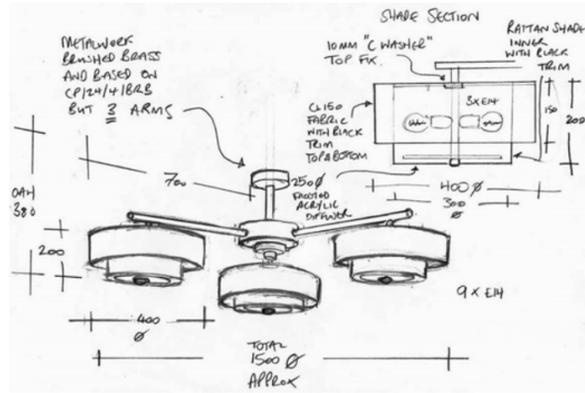
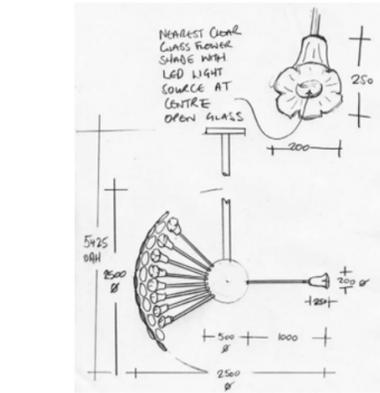
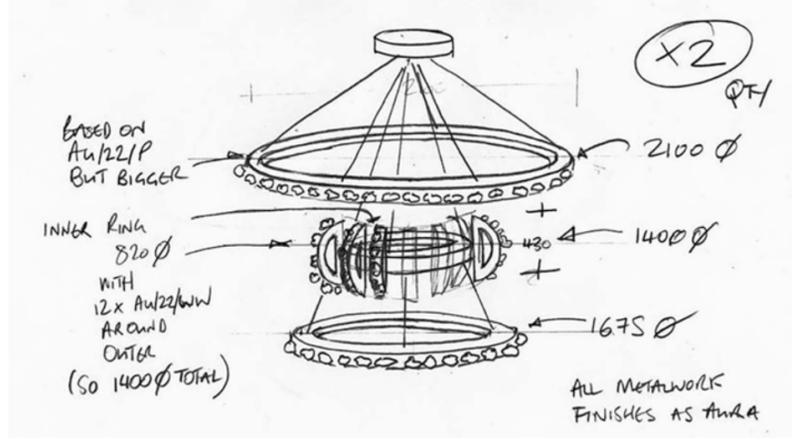
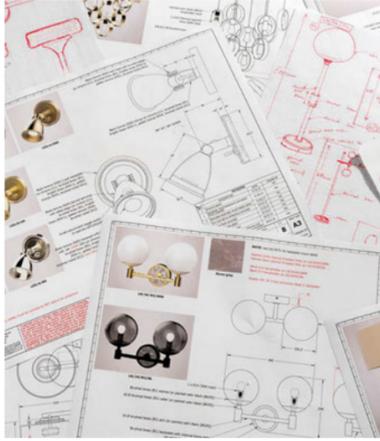
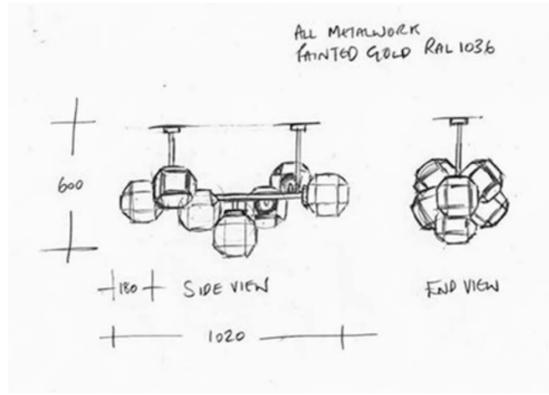
Chelsom is a traditional company in that it is a family-run business that has passed through the generations since its opening in 1947 by Reg and Kay Chelsom. It began as a small antique lighting shop in Blackpool under the name The Golden Age. This rapidly grew into three shops and then onto manufacturing period lighting pieces. In the 1970s, Will's father Robert took over from his parents and brought the brand to the forefront of hospitality lighting, which it is well-known for now. Will joined later in 2006.

"Like many family businesses, as a child you tend to grow up being surrounded by the day-to-day of what is going on in the company. I remember from a very early age taking a strong interest in what my father did and I spent a lot of time in the factory observing what was going on," reflects Will. "In my teens, I would get school holiday jobs in any area of the business that I could and simply grew up alongside the company. The design aspect was always very cool and the end product we worked with and the projects we worked on always interested me.

"We produce a new collection of products every two years and an



Chelsom HQ assembly room



enormous amount of work goes into that process. I always remember the joy of seeing Dad's early design concepts come to life. I always saw the huge potential in Chelsom and I knew there would always be a challenge in maintaining and developing the brand. Design never sits still so it was always appealing to me to work in a business like that, so when I joined in 2006 the move felt very right. "My early years in the business were in Business Development and client relations, something that really helped me better understand the industry and the important players that exist within the design community." Going against the stereotype, Will has thoroughly enjoyed being a part of the family business. He explains that his experience has been "pretty much perfect".

"You hear a lot of horror stories when it comes to family businesses and my Dad and I seem to have avoided all of that. As Chairman, Dad plays a more hands-off role now as he has moved towards retirement (an acceptable move after 50 years in the business!), but he has allowed for an incredibly smooth transition as I came up through the business and was appointed Managing Director in 2016. We seem to agree on most things, especially when it comes to design taste and trends, so that makes for a super partnership. He has been an excellent mentor to me from the start and I am able to balance his vast experience with new ideas in taking the business forward. We are very hands-on, both with our colleagues and our customers and I think that is important in a family business. It is a rare thing, but we work very well together."

At the time of starting officially in the business, the majority of the fixtures in production at Chelsom were very classical pieces, which were popular at the time. Looking at the collections they produce now, the brand has removed that aspect of design almost entirely and has transitioned in style to more retro and vintage looks with contemporary and minimal features. "I was always interested in cutting-edge designers and how they have evolved the design world through the ages, whether someone like Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture or Terence Conran in multiple areas of design. Today, inspiration seems to come from a whole host of places," explains Will. "We are fortunate enough to work with hundreds of interior designers around the world and we get to experience their work on a daily basis. All of this serves as inspiration, whether thinking about colour palettes, shapes and forms or even technology. Most of the inspiration for my lighting design concepts today doesn't actually start out as a light fitting. Instead, it might be a piece of sculpture I have seen or a simple shape or form I notice in a completely unrelated product. I still find it hugely useful to search back through iconic lighting designs from the last century as it is amazing how many times trends come back around." Looking at the role Will plays now as Managing Director, he believes it is his responsibility to uphold the legacy that stands before him, while spreading the brand's wings further internationally. "Fortunately, Chelsom had a very strong presence in the market when I joined the company and we had worked on great projects around the world and had a great reputation. Alongside my father and the brilliant team we have at Chelsom now, we have really worked to constantly build upon that reputation. The power of the brand is hugely important to me and I am very careful in all aspects of our operation to make sure that we uphold our brand values and that we are consistent across everything we do. For example, I think we have a very specific design 'hand-writing' and I believe we offer a very consistent and amenable level of customer service, all of which is in line with our family business ethos. I have certainly championed the family business attributes that we have, but I have also looked to grow and move into wider geographical markets since joining the business."

When asked what key elements good design should include, Will believes good design comes from "originality, high quality, functionality, and value for money". "I see too often people under-bidding on project tenders and making things 'cheaper', but cheaper isn't always better. Products have to be built to last at all levels." These good design principles are part of the fabric of Chelsom's offerings, as Will explains further: "We have consolidated our overall portfolio of designs over the years and have tried to harness a level of consistency across every product type. Often we will use the same finishes or components to tie one product into another but I think the 'Chelsom Look' is certainly quite recognisable now. I think it is important that we reflect what our brand is about within our designs and we very much take that into consideration when we are sitting down to come up with new concepts. Each client will always want something slightly different and that is why we have a fully bespoke manufacturing capability as we know we must cater to all needs, but we certainly pick up trends and design directions from the projects we work on, which in some ways will influence our portfolio of designs. "[Good lighting] depends on the type of space you are working within and what the budget is, but I do feel that lighting products should bring originality to a design scheme. So often today, it is the lighting that is the leading feature in an interior and that can be memorable for people. It goes without saying that a lighting product has to bring the right light levels to a space but there must also be the option to heavily control

that light level. Sophisticated dimming methods and clever control systems mean that you can totally alter the look and vibe of an interior and I think that is important. "We are lucky with lighting because it constantly evolves. If you think about the progression of the light bulb, for example, today we are able to achieve so much more with lighting than we were when I first started in the industry. By using LED tape or strip, you can create incredibly flat and flush shapes nowadays, whereas everything used to have to incorporate a standard light bulb. Technology allows for a huge amount of flexibility in lighting design and there are less restrictions than ever before. Light shouldn't just be about illumination however, it needs to be about effect, colour, projection, ambience and control. Lighting is what defines or kills an interior space and you really notice when lighting is done badly. For me it is the most important aspect of an interior and I feel that the design world now values lighting far more than it did 10 years ago. "The main difference in designing lights to other products and furniture is the need to massively incorporate functionality and technology. We have quite a spectrum of standard products in our collection and they all need slightly different design considerations. For example, our headboard reading lights need to be easy to use and give exactly the right light for guests to read, whereas some of the more flamboyant designs meant for public areas, are more about the initial wow-factor and impact." On the other hand, one of Will's less-favoured developments is on the controls side. "I don't want to appear totally old fashioned, but I am not quite on board with the need to control everything from a tablet in the room. It was never that hard to just open the blinds, why do we need an app for that now?" He added that one of the most frustrating aspects about working in the design world is that of "juggling the aspirations of the interior or lighting designer with the budget of the client". "We are often involved in the middle of the process and it is important that we value engineer accordingly. We will never compromise on quality, so it is always challenging to strike that balance. "[On the flip side], there is no doubt that the most rewarding thing is seeing the end product. That might be when we design a new collection and you see it move from a simple sketch, through the CAD modelling and design phase and then into a final prototype. When a product jumps from paper to reality, it is awesome. Equally when we have delivered products to a prestigious interior project and you walk into the space for the first time, seeing Chelsom products within a beautiful surrounding is hugely satisfying." Reminiscing on some of the most significant moments in his career so far, Will references the moment Chelsom won its first Queen's Award for Enterprise in the International Trade category in 2017. "This award acknowledged progressive growth in international trade and we were honoured with a trip to Buckingham Palace as a result that was fantastic. We subsequently won the same award in 2020 and I am immensely proud of what our company and all my colleagues have achieved, especially as this recognised Chelsom working on a global scale. More recently, we won a Red Dot Award for product design, which recognised our LED reading light range, LED Eye, for outstanding design." Continuing on some of Chelsom's most notable projects, Will says: "We have recently delivered the majority of the bespoke lighting to the guestrooms at the brand-new Peninsula London. The quality requirement at Peninsula is off the scale and we have had to ensure that every single design detail and nuance has been captured in all of the products. The guestrooms have very sophisticated technology



and our products have had to incorporate the latest in control and dimming equipment.

"On a recent cruise ship project, we delivered an enormous lighting structure within an atrium of the ship where the brief was to create a 'confetti' effect across the ceiling and down the walls. Using specialist DMX technology the confetti panels change colour and illuminate in a sequence, which totally brings the space to life. It is undoubtedly the centrepiece of this massive space."

Looking at the current design community and trends that Will is witnessing within lighting, it is the continued conversation around sustainability and lighting he is eager to see progressing. "It is interesting to see the role sustainability is playing design. I love the idea of biophilic design and I think it is important that nature plays a role in the design of interiors. I think sustainability and the environment will be one of the biggest factors moving forward in design and we embrace that massively at Chelsom as we strive to be more sustainable in everything we do. I think technology will continue to push the boundaries of interior design also, especially where lighting is concerned, and that is very exciting."

More specifically, what can we expect to see from Chelsom in the

coming years? "I can safely say that we are not a company that stands still," claims Will. "We are constantly looking at all aspects of our operation to ensure that we continuously improve in all areas and we work hard at perfecting our overall product and service offering."

"I think I speak to all members of the family that have worked in the company before me in saying that we are all ambitious people and we constantly strive to improve at everything we do. 20 years ago the company was bigger in terms of employee numbers and there were other divisions within the company, including an architectural lighting business and a retail lighting business. The best thing the company has ever done is focus on what it does best. We are not against diversification but know the need to be a specialist in your field and when it comes to illuminating project interiors, that is what we do. I don't think my Grandfather would ever have dreamed that the company would have got to where it is today and I am immensely proud of what we have achieved."

"Our new collection, Edition 28, is to be launched in May 2023 so we are coming to the final stages of designing product for that collection before we look to overhaul the catalogue and website. The products are distinctive, exciting and are yet a further step forward for Chelsom;



Will and Robert Chelsom with the late Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh at Queen's Award

we cannot wait for people to see them.

"We are also launching HOME by Chelsom in September, which is a brand purely focussed on servicing the high-end residential market. Alongside that launch, we are adding some further new sub-brands to the Chelsom name that we are very excited about. You will have to watch this space for that."

"Internally, we are implementing a brand new ERP and CRM system later this year that will further enhance our customer service offering, and we are currently recruiting for new team members across a host of different areas, all while continuing with our drive to be more sustainable as a business."

"It is all go and there is much change ahead, but ultimately we are looking to continue working with our fantastic customers across the project interiors space in the same way that we do now. By being true specialists in the supply of lighting to the project sector, we have created somewhat of a niche business and we constantly look to build upon the reputation that we have earned over the years."

www.chelsom.co.uk

Celebrating 75 years of product design, Chelsom's family-run business has evolved through the generations to become a leading brand in luxury lighting. Speaking with Will Chelsom, Managing Director, darc finds out more about life entering a family business and following on his family's legacy in lighting design. Furthermore, Will gives insight into Chelsom's plans for the future and what the industry is to expect from them in the coming years.