

After riding out four recessions, Essex-based First Choice Kitchens and First Choice Bathrooms have increased turnover tenfold and are coming together under one roof. David Harris talks to co-owner John Lewis (pictured) to find out why

When two become one

When a bathroom retailer has been in business more than 40 years, it seems reasonable to be impressed by its longevity, particularly as that means it has survived the ravages of no fewer than four recessions.

First Choice Bathrooms started life in 1974 as the Hockley Tile and Bathroom Centre on the same site where it still trades today, in the appropriately named Spa Road in Hockley, Essex.

It wasn't until 1980 that the First Choice name was adopted, but virtually from the beginning the business was run by brothers Keith and John Lewis, together with business partner and friend Richard Turner.

The trio actually ran two shops as the business evolved into a separate bathroom and kitchen shop in the same street, each with the First Choice name. This year, that is set to change, with the two coming together in the bathroom shop as First Choice Kitchens and Bathrooms. Partly this is a matter of logistical convenience and partly to set it up as a more attractive prospect for selling on, as all three partners are nearing or at retirement age.

Anybody visiting at the moment will find the bathroom shop in mid-conversion, although still very much open for business. It's a situation that John Lewis is finding rather hard: "I like the store to be pristine and to see it like this is killing me," he says.

Right: Ethos Cologne display and Uform Florence and Wakefield kitchen

Below left: Part of the extensive Villeroy & Boch showroom with Utopia Qube vanity unit in foreground

Below right: Vitra's Nest furniture and Aqata walk-in enclosure



First Choice's 40-year journey to this point has seen evolution and revolution in the wider British bathroom business. The sturdy survival of First Choice through the mid-1970s, early 1980s, early 1990s and 2008/9 recessions is all the more striking, because the Essex market in which it operates is not short of competition. Hockley is in the shadow of Southend, which offers plenty of competition in the KBB market. Commercial survival is not everything, but to not only survive, but also continue making a profit in this sort of environment, is a worthy achievement.

Furthermore, when the three businessmen first set up, none of the three had any particular experience in the bathroom or kitchen market. The first shop, which became the kitchen specialist, had been a local DIY store and was set up by Keith, selling things like paint and wallpaper. Keith just did it because he liked DIY, not because he had any related professional background.

John was similarly new to the sector. When he came to join, his brother had an engineering background and was a design draughtsman.

From the start, he remembers that there was some scepticism about whether the bathroom shop would succeed.

He says: "I think that one or two of the reps in the early days didn't think we would survive. None of our backgrounds were in plumbing - it was more that we were into a bit of DIY. For

installation, when we started, we used a friend's brother-in-law, who was a plumber. When I did the estimates, I took a tiler with me to make sure that I got things right. I wanted to make sure I didn't make any mistakes, but soon enough I learned to be confident on my own. We just did our best and learned as we went along."

It helped that Hockley appeared to need a bathroom retailer, despite the economic turbulence of the mid-1970s. It was customers in the DIY shop asking for bathrooms that prompted the three to set up a tile and bathroom centre in the first place.

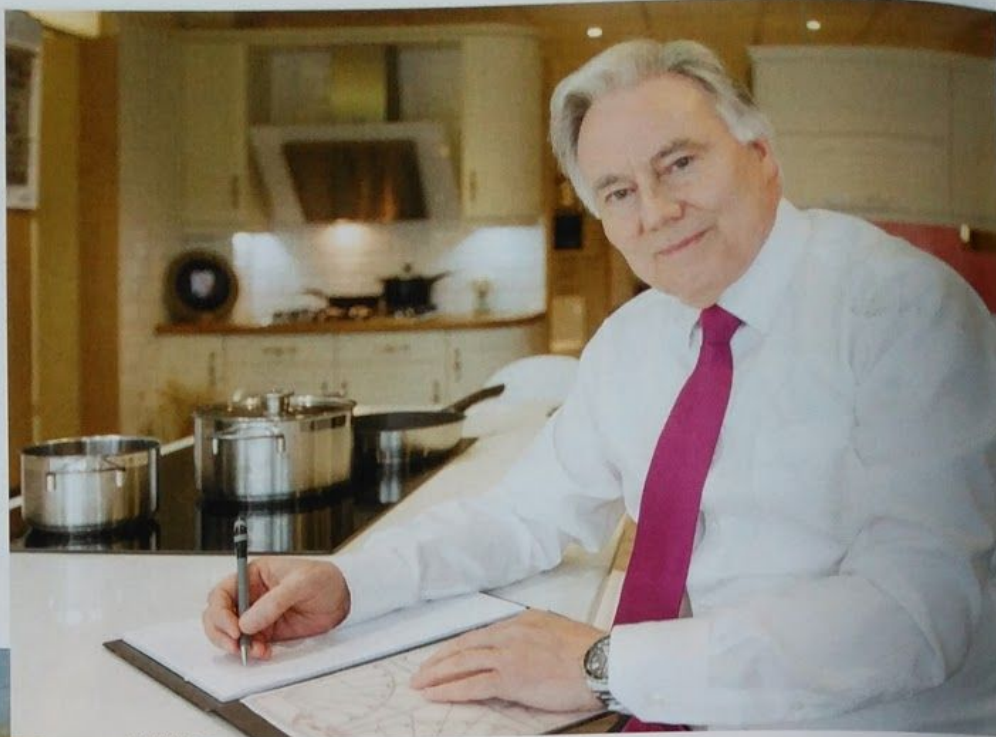
John cannot even remember the turnover in the first year of business, although it has certainly grown well over tenfold to the £1.25 million it stands at today.

It's not just turnover levels that have changed. The nature of the bathroom business has also changed radically and John recalls the early days with mixed feelings. He makes the point that one of the many things anybody would notice about walking into a bathroom shop then and now would be the difference in the colours on display. Now, white dominates, then it was a riot of colour, both for bathroom furniture and the paints to complement them. John remembers the colours being classified into different groups, representing different price points.

John says: "I remember that group one colours

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Left: Coco Bolo kitchen featuring Bosch and Neff appliances and Silestone worktop



included pink, primrose and sky blue; group two included things like avocado, autumn and sun king; and then we had the expensive 'penthouse' colours, as they used to call them. They included dark blue, red and emerald green and they usually came with gold-coloured taps. It was all very different and it was like that for many years. I remember the first time I heard from a London shop that they were stocking mostly white and it sounded really strange at first. Of course, now we are all like that."

Other changes include the different materials used in bathrooms.

John says: "People used to frown on acrylic baths, partly because in the early days you could practically see through them. Everybody wanted cast-iron and I can remember on many occasions struggling to help a plumber get a heavy cast-iron bath up stairs. Nowadays, there is no cast-iron, not even much steel. I'm not even sure if anybody makes them anymore."

Have all the changes been good? Not necessarily, says John.

He says: "Take the change from cistern handles to push-button toilets. Technology in a toilet cistern is a fact of engineering, but there is more to go wrong and it is more difficult to put right when it does. It's the same with taps. Now they have ceramic cartridges not washers, which

might be better in some ways, but are harder and more expensive to change."

Product development

Tiles are another area where John is not convinced that changes have been unequivocally for the better.

He says: "When we started, all tiles were four-and-a-quarter inches by four-and-a-quarter inches. Now they have got so big that some are like paving slabs. They are also often porcelain, rather than ceramic, which makes them the devil's own job to drill. I prefer tiles to be more manageable and I suspect a lot of tilers would agree with me." As an afterthought, John adds that larger tiles are more expensive to replace if they are broken. Again, like the ceramic cartridges in taps, his suggestion is that a technical advance might not have brought unequivocal benefits.

But John is too pragmatic to try to hold back technology's onward march, which might be another reason why First Choice has prospered as the marketplace has changed.

Being in Hockley has probably helped, too. John describes the area as "quite affluent" with a customer base largely made up of middle-aged to old buyers – a customer age profile that retailers in many other parts of the country will recognise.

The type of bathrooms those customers buy

might have changed, but the service they require has not, according to John.

He says: "If you look after customers, they will come back time and again, as do their offspring. I'm now putting in bathrooms for the sons and daughters of people I worked for years ago."

He also gets business from other sources as a result of local contacts. Recently, for instance, First Choice found itself installing a black urinal for the Covent Garden cabaret restaurant Circus. The work came about because of a property agent in Hockley who had a connection with the restaurant and recommended First Choice for the work. Few things are more old-fashioned in business than getting work through the recommendation of existing customers.

Other ingredients for success include a thorough design service, although John does not send out plans, because he has found it is much better to get customers back into the shop to explain and discuss what he has drawn up.

"Apart from anything else, it gets us good feedback because you can get a better idea of what people think about what you are offering by chatting to them," he says.

John can be commercially hard-nosed when he needs to be, too. First Choice does not employ its own fitters but uses subcontractors.

John says: "We are strong on installation with subcontractors that we use all the time. I think it is better with subbies, because if they are not doing what they are supposed to, you can deal with it more easily."

His business acumen is evident in the premises that First Choice occupies, too. The shop was bought in 1980 from previous owner Trinity College, Cambridge. Being masters of their own site made the subsequent recessions easier to ride out. It will also make the combined First Choice Kitchen and Bathrooms a more attractive purchase target when John and his fellow directors do finally decide to cash in their chips and retire.

A refit, a couple of years' good trading and John will be past 65, so a sale looks a real possibility after that. Anybody who steps in will be taking on not just a solid trading concern, but also nearly half-a-century of goodwill. 