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LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON: RESCUING BRITISH CRAFTS

Knights on a mission

Peter and Charlie Bowles are building a stable of timeless British brands that represent the very best of the country's design and manufacturing skills, discovers **Barbara Chandler**

ENTREPRENEUR Peter Bowles and his son Charlie, with their lighting and furniture showroom in Chelsea Harbour, are design knights in shining armour. Their mission? To rescue ailing British hand-crafted brands and get them back on the road – five to date.

Peter worked out the formula: buy a failing workshop, then upgrade production and its designs, and finally open up new markets.

He started manufacturing in the early Nineties with a now well-known company, Original BTC Lighting. Even then the mantra was "made in Britain". The aesthetic is eclectic, with restyled traditional designs and new creations in aluminium, copper and chrome, hand-assembled in Oxford. Parts are hand-spun in Birmingham, often with bone china shades made in Stoke. From the beginning, details such as cotton-braided flexes and china ceiling roses were particularly popular.

Design and manufacture runs in the family. Peter's carpenter grandfather was chairman of a national furniture brand, and his father ran a lighting

company. All went smoothly at Original BTC until six years ago, when the Stoke factory which supplied its china said it was closing down. The lamp shades had been specially created to exploit the translucency and versatility of hand-cast, twice-fired, glazed white china clay. Production processes used skills stretching back three centuries. "There is no way either I or the country could lose this," says Peter. So in 2008 he bought the factory, retaining all the staff, and their irreplaceable expertise.

The bold move paid off at once. A slight adjustment in working hours raised castings from nine to 10 a week, increasing production by 11 per cent without any extra labour costs. Similarly, new flexible hours raised the number of initial "biscuit" firings from three to seven a week. Products could be made more quickly, and designs more easily adapted for special orders. In 2009, Charlie, 27, left his Notting Hill Café business to cope with expanding demand, becoming a director in 2012.

In 2010 came another opportunity. Davey Lighting, maker of marine



DAVID BUTLER

Family matters: Charlie and Peter Bowles at their Original BTC showroom, Design Centre Chelsea Harbour

fittings for 125 years, was failing. The prospective purchaser was a Belgian, with production in the Far East, but father and son snapped up the firm as a perfect sister lighting company for Original BTC. Davey lights use metal components, and when a few months later the Birmingham maker of those parts threatened closure, the Bowleses bought it, too. Abbots Manufacturing is now part of the family – as is English Antique Glass, the country's only remaining maker of flat glass for stained-glass

windows, with cathedrals and Buckingham Palace as clients. It was failing but now makes the parts for Davey Lighting, and a new and exquisite collection of mouth-blown glassware and gifts, from small tumblers to large vases, has revitalised production.

Renaming themselves The Original BTC Group, Peter and Charlie were on a roll. A particular skill of their metalworkers was making wire grids. This was exploited for a new brand of metal grid-based furniture

Smiles of style: Original BTC Cosmo Dimple pendant lamps. The firm started out in lighting

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christened Bowles & Bowles. Inspired by metal-mesh vintage lockers, the 12-piece collection includes seating, tables and a desk, as well as versatile storage. Each piece is pressed, welded and folded

by hand, using the factory's antique machinery and tools. Last year saw two further acquisitions. Beadlight is an LED pioneer with a patented technology developed for first-class seat lighting



Lock it away: hand-pressed mesh kitchen storage locker from Bowles & Bowles

in aeroplanes, providing glare-free energy-saving illumination from flexible leather arms. New domestic Beadlights have a machined aluminium head attached to a leather arm with 360-degree rotation. Luxury finishes include gold and titanium plating. Then came Branksome China, established in 1945, used by Queen Mary, and exported all over the Commonwealth. It was about to close, before purchase by Original BTC. Production has moved from

Dorset to Stoke, making the original shapes and two-tone colourways, using the old moulds.

Peter believes in a hands-on approach for all his companies, with personal involvement at every stage to get the detail right. And British production means "everything" to him, he says. "We are creating a stable of timeless British brands that represent the very best in UK design and manufacturing. The Made in Britain label holds real value both on



Best of British: carafe and goblets by Original BTC's English Antique Glass



Vintage touches: Bowles & Bowles copper-finish mesh coffee table

home soil and abroad. It immediately implies quality and longevity." He insists highly skilled, labour-intensive handcrafts create "an emotional bond" with consumers that doesn't happen with a production line equivalent in the Far East.

"We have a responsibility to convince the world that Britain can still manufacture." But we need to act quickly, he says, as so many factories are near to closure.

The rewards can be huge. "We can offer quality, delivery and service exactly the way our customers want. We can make specials to order, often within a couple of weeks." There is a vast international market for British-made goods, he adds. "The US is particularly keen, and they love us in Europe." Over half of Original BTC Group's production is now exported. "And it's next stop Paris, for our very own showroom."



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