



Karen Wallace

meets

Lee Clarke



Quality takes a bow

One of Sunseeker's luxury yachts, of the type fitted out by Countrywide Flooring (Bournemouth)



Recent installations by Countrywide Flooring (Bournemouth)

Nothing compares with experience, says Lee Clarke of Countrywide Flooring (Bournemouth). Karen Wallace reports.

IT WAS at the tender age of 13 that Lee Clarke first ventured into the flooring industry. His uncle worked for F Richards & Sons and managed to arrange a part-time position for him.

On leaving school, Richards employed Lee on a five-year apprenticeship to train him in the installation of all floorcoverings. His apprenticeship took him onto the QE2 and into many of Bournemouth's luxury hotels.

After working for further five years as a 'one-man band', Lee decided to set up Countrywide Carpets & Flooring in 1997 due to increasing number of recommendations he was receiving for the quality of his work.

Last year he changed the name of his firm to Countrywide Flooring (Bournemouth) with Limited status. Lee is the md and his wife, Giuliana, the company secretary. Neil Howarth, became a director recently after many years of service.

There are five staff members and many sub-contractors, handpicked for quality by Lee and Neil. All staff receive in-house training and attend a variety of courses.

Lee is still fully involved in fitting. 'This is about quality

control. We get more respect as a company if the client knows that I'm not just sitting in the office. This is a common mistake some flooring firm directors make.

'One of our strengths as a company is that even in today's fast-track industry, we pride ourselves on installing all flooring to an exceptional standard in the time scale set by the client.

'It's just not our way to simply wack it down although unfortunately many have this attitude.'

As a consequence, Lee and Neil are constantly battling to find installers of a high enough standard.

'Luckily on a recent project in Reading we drew upon the experience of NVQ-qualified James Harris and another established installer Mark Gray. Both are important members of the Countrywide team.

'Maintaining our standards and focusing on presentation, price and professionalism is what keeps the contracts flowing. All our staff are in uniform and all the vans are kept clean and tidy.

'We believe that by maintaining the basics, we give our clients the confidence that they have chosen

the right company and this, in my opinion, is the best form of advertising.

'Testament to our standards is the amount of repeat business we receive year after year from corporate giants such as Air Products and Sunseeker International.

'We are Sunseeker's approved supplier. The first job came as a recommendation, but since then, we have been involved in fitting Altro, Kährs, Dalsouple and Freudenberg products as well as Karndean and Amtico vinyls to the new £11m 37m Tri-Bridge Super Yacht.

'We have since put flooring into the new 34m super yacht showcased for the first time at this year's London Boat Show.'

Other clients include building companies such as Barretts and Taylor Woodrow and chains such as Help the Aged, Borders Book stores and J P Morgan to name a few.'

Countrywide Flooring is already a member of the Guild of Master

Craftsmen and is awaiting

the final certificate confirming creditation to the SAFE Contractor Scheme. 'This tells everyone we are a reputable company and meet all Health & Safety requirements.'

One thing that annoys Lee is the length of time it takes for companies to pay. 'Some can take 90 days just to pay for labour-only instructions. And I would like to see retentions abolished.

'I also believe that warranties should only be issued if an approved installer fits the flooring. A floorcovering will only wear as well as it is installed.

'When things go wrong after clients opt for the cheapest quote, it gives the flooring manufacturers a bad name. It's as simple as that.'

'People need to be prepared to pay for what they're getting. Laying flooring is a craft that we are all proud of and we need to cut out the cowboys who fail to prepare and install properly. **CFJ**

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