



Mary Murrell

meets

Keith Acomb



*Despite the current market turmoil, Keith Acomb of Geoff Acomb and Sons is quietly confident that his company will weather the storm:*

SAYS Keith: 'Business is steady. I know next year will be tough, but because we have such a good reputation, and many long standing customers, we are in a better position than some to cope with difficult trading conditions.'

It was Keith's late father Geoff who started the company in 1982. 'He had worked for the same flooring contractor for 36 years both as a floorlayer and in the office following a stoke, but was then made redundant,' says Keith.

'Subsequently, although paralysed in one arm, he set up his own business. He was soon joined by a previous colleague Jim Boyne, and I came on board shortly afterwards.'

'Initial business was a mixture of domestic and contract work, but over the years it moved towards contract. Now only around 5% of our trade is in the domestic market.'

There is more than 100 years corporate knowledge of the flooring industry within the company as, apart from Keith, most of the floorlayers have been there for well over 20 years. These are Jim Boyne, Dave Barrett, and Richard Bellwood.

'This means that should problems arise we know how to resolve them quickly,' says Keith. Another experienced floorlayer, Matthew Rollinson, joined Acomb this summer and subcontractors are used when the company is especially busy. Mandy Acomb, Keith's wife, is in charge of all administration.

'Our combined knowledge means that we can give customers very good advice, especially at the beginning of projects. That is why they come back to us time and time again,' says Keith. 'Around 90% of our trade is repeat business or by recommendation, so we don't need to advertise or chase orders.'

Much of the company's business



is for vinyl, carpet and laminate flooring installed in dentists' and doctors' surgeries, care homes, schools and amenity blocks in caravan and camping sites anywhere in the country but mostly in the north.

Prestigious regular customers are York Minster and the National Trust.

Other recent interesting installations have been 80/20 wool/nylon carpet for a series of show houses for local builders and Altro vinyl in a mock up of a ship's cabin in the Liverpool museum.

The company also offers a UK wide sanding and polishing service. Some business comes through a main contractor specialising in building new healthcare villages where three or four GPs have surgeries on the same site which also encompasses ancillary services.

'For these we buy good quality materials like Tarkett Marley sheet pvc Eclipse, SafeTred Dimension, JHS Hospi-Supreme heavy duty contract carpet, etc.'

'One of the contributing factors to our success is that we are treated so well by our suppliers,' says Keith.

These are mainly Altro, Amtico, Armstrong, Danfloor, JHS, Polyflor, Tarkett and Westex Carpets.

During the holiday period the company had a busy time with work for schools. 'Sales were down a bit on last year, but good quality vinyls, carpets and tiles are still being bought. We haven't seen any downturn in the type of flooring requested,' says Keith.

'In the private sector care homes



product quality is either being maintained or increased, as the new ethos is that the look has to be less institutional and more like someone's home.'

Occasionally a contract means that the floorlayers have to lodge somewhere overnight, and one in Dunbar meant the whole team was away for a week, including Keith. 'We all work well together, so for me, away trips are always a welcome break from office routine,' he says.

A longstanding CFA member, Keith has found the association very useful. 'We haven't had to use it for some years, but when we have it has always given us excellent back up, and the late Richard Wollerton was very helpful,' he says.

Keith does not have much criticism of the industry, but agrees

with other contractors who say that manufacturers should not quote direct. 'I think all business should go through the trade, but I can understand why they do it,' he says.

'The one thing that really irritates me is when someone is made bankrupt but then starts up again a few weeks later under a different name, and often on the same trading terms!'

When not working Keith spends his time restoring his Victorian farmhouse and sometimes indulges in his interest in horse riding.

'Next year will be tricky, so I may not be able to indulge myself as much,' says Keith, 'but I am quite confident that our company will ride out any period of recession, as we have in the past.' **CFJ**

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