

Winning formula for a Victory re-born

■ A look behind the scenes at **Victory Leisure Homes**, a successful company, born out of the gloom of the recession in the north east

As the great recession of the late 2000s began to bite, Hull and East Yorkshire's historic caravan industry became one of the first high profile victims of the crash. Thousands of jobs haemorrhaged from the region's economy as long-established static caravan makers fell foul of tighter controls imposed by lenders, and supply chain businesses shut their doors for good.

It is a time remembered by those who came through it as the blackest the industry has ever faced and one from which the region has yet to fully recover.

Positive news

Yet despite the gloom, a closer look at the industry at the time reveals that some positive news did emerge from behind the stream of negative headlines. One such example is the success of Victory Leisure Homes which has shown forecast-busting growth over its first two-and-a-half years of trading.

The business is led by former Cosalt managing director Peter Nevitt, who has nearly 25 years experience in the static caravan industry, and is part of the J.R. Rix & Sons Ltd group of companies - a 125-year-old Hull family business which turns over more than £350m per year.

Victory occupies the site of the former Cosalt factory on Stoneferry and according to Peter, came into being after J.R. Rix & Sons made a speculative property purchase to consolidate its estate in this industrial quarter of Hull.

Peter said: "J.R. Rix owns the land around the site so when Cosalt closed it down, it made sense for the company to buy the remainder.

"At that point Rix didn't have any plans to make caravans, but as part of the deal the company also purchased the factory and the plant. It wasn't long before Tim Rix (Managing Director of J.R. Rix & Sons Ltd) rang me up and asked if I thought the site could be profitable again. I said yes so he told me 'let's get on with it'."



◆ (L-R) Peter Nevitt, Carl Minns (formerly the leader of Hull City Council) and Rory Clarke (a director of J.R. Rix & Sons Ltd).



◆ Peter and the Victory team in front of one of their lodges.

Peter responded by handpicking a management team from former colleagues who had become victims of the downturn.

"I knew if we were to make this succeed in a recession I had to have people around me I could trust," he said.

"It was also extremely satisfying to be able to offer jobs to people who are the cream of the industry and were suffering through no fault of their own."

Exciting time

With the dream team in place, Victory Leisure Homes saw its official opening in April 2009 amid a storm of press interest.

For Peter it was an exciting time to see leisure homes roll off the production line again, at the factory that had been such an integral part of his career.

He said: "From the start of the project to launching the business we had just seven weeks so we had to go for tried and tested designs, initially producing four models - the Ventura, Vermont, Vermillion and the Viking. These were an excellent starting point, and we were making around five units per week but over the last two years we've really stamped the Victory brand on our leisure homes with much more modern and tailored designs. Production now stands at between 15 and 20 units per week."

Making the leisure homes is one thing but selling them was a different story altogether. It was at this point the company started to experience some difficulties.

"The reps would go out and say 'We're from Victory,'" Peter said.

"But the park operators didn't know who we were. The reps explained that I was running the business which made the operators think we were the re-incarnation of Cosalt. Some of them, who had bought from Cosalt before, then wanted help to sort out after-sales problems they were having.

"Looking back it is quite funny and it helped us out - because we knew the old Cosalt designs well, we were able to help and that gave us the opportunity to build a rapport with them. Although there was a bit of confusion at first, we managed to turn it to our advantage."



J R Rix & Sons Ltd

Victory Leisure Homes is part of the J.R. Rix & Sons Ltd group of companies. J.R. Rix & Sons is a 125 year old family business based in Hull, which spans petroleum, haulage, shipping and ship building, maritime bunkering, port services and others. The business employs more than 700 across the UK and last year turned over more than £350m.

J.R. Rix & Sons Ltd set up Victory Leisure Homes in 2009 after buying up the former Cosalt Holiday Homes factory in Hull.

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◆ The lounge area on one of Victory's Ventura models.

Lodges within three years

As caravan sales grew, Victory's management team made plans to bring lodges on stream at the three-year mark. But a customer enquiry led to the company launching a range far earlier than they had anticipated.

"We built a one-off lodge," Peter explained, "which we decided to exhibit in Scotland. It was 40ft by 16ft and two berth but suddenly we were getting orders for 40ft by 20ft three berth lodges and other inquiries so without intending to, we had launched 18 months ahead of our target.

"By the September 2010 show we had four lodges to exhibit and it is now an important part of the business."

Optimistic future

Having beaten the gloom that has marked Hull and East Yorkshire's caravan industry over the past few years, Peter is very optimistic for the future of Victory Leisure Homes.

The company has recently launched its 2012 models - five twin lodges, 17 statics for the home market and a further nine for export - and is currently exhibiting them at trade shows across the country.

Peter said he believed the firm's smaller size makes it flexible

enough to deliver any order, from single up to multiple units, and its short lead time ensures customers get their caravans quickly.

This, coupled with the support from owner J.R. Rix & Sons, means it is set to strengthen its position as one of the UK's newest and most innovative leisure home and lodge manufacturers.

"The new models show Victory is really coming of age," Peter said.

"Our range of finishes and modern interior options give our homes a more bespoke feel and because we're part of J.R. Rix & Sons Ltd, we can offer in-house credit terms which are particularly beneficial for smaller parks."

He added it had been hard work to get to this point but he is proud of what the company has achieved.

"To start making leisure homes in the midst of recession might have seemed crazy to some people, but Victory is living proof that having the right people and the ideas generates success," he said.

"With the talent the company has, plus our flexibility, Victory is well placed to meet head on all the challenges it has ahead of it."

RESOURCES

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