

G&M Radiator Manufacturing, Scotland – 50 Years in the Making

Geoff Shrigley was the founder and Chairman of G&M Radiator. You would know if you had ever met him because he was one of those characters that left an indelible impression on all who spent any time in his company. A huge fan of all things American, Geoff made many friends Stateside and his passion for American cars meant that the backstreets of the East End of Glasgow would often reverberate with the melodic burble of big V8 engines. More importantly Geoff decided that the official launch date for his new company 50 years ago would be the 4th of July.

However the G&M story begins much earlier than this and harks back to the days of sheet metal working and its natural association with soldering, sheet metal shaping and working with brass and copper radiators.

Geoff's father Tom hailed from Macclesfield in the North West of England and he moved to Scotland around 1938 to work for Glasgow Radiator, an established repair company. The Glasgow repair shop was a huge success and, based in the industrial East End of Glasgow, it thrived on work from nearby steelworks, municipal transport garages, ship yards and mines. Glasgow post war was a bustling and developing city with a growing population and a willing labour force.

When Tom retired and Geoff took over the business he quickly became frustrated by the poor service and limited availability of cores from the established manufacturers. So, in 1964, after much advice and encouragement from friends in the USA, he decided to start manufacturing his own cores. It was very quickly apparent that there was a demand not just from his own repair businesses but from other radiator repair specialists across the UK and Europe. The third generation of the Shrigley family, Geoff's son Michael, joined the Company in the engineering department in the early 70's and together they developed new models and manufacturing techniques.

Production volumes grew to meet demand and it became apparent that expansion was required. A local disused carpet factory became available which Geoff and Michael completely renovated and in 1979 the repair business and the manufacturing side moved in and the G&M Radiator success story really began.

At the start of the eighties, the first plastic tanked radiators began to appear in workshops and at first it seemed this was the start of the "throw it away and get a new one from a dealer" approach which would inevitably mean the end of the traditional repair shop and conventional core manufacturers.

However, using the same reverse engineering approach which would stand them in good stead to this very day, Geoff and his engineers designed tooling to make tabbed, fully formed headers from brass. This meant the repairer could take off the old plastic tanks and re-crimp them to the new copper/brass core thereby giving the customer a cost effective alternative to a new unit. With the added advantage of being made from durable and easily repairable copper and brass, the product was an instant success. Who says recycling is a latter day obsession?!

Over time, G&M and the in-house engineers would develop cores that came with OE style sides and gaskets. Within a few years, the model coverage for this core range was in the hundreds. The unique, hardened press tools that were required to cut, shape, punch and form the headers were all made in-house. Soon, G&M were supplying blank headers to core manufacturers across the globe who would use them to manufacture their own cores.

Through the late 80's and 90's, the company flourished and the demand for PTR cores was huge. Investments were made in equipment and machinery, more employees, extra shifts, expansion of the premises. After Geoff retired Michael took over the helm and continued to drive the company forward into new markets.

In the early 2000's the price of copper started to rise dramatically. At the same time suppliers started to flood the market with low cost aluminium radiators and demand for cores started to fall away. The company had seen it coming and had made plans. Michael had been looking into making some strategic acquisitions to enhance the range of products that G&M could offer.

They expanded in to Ireland with a manufacturing plant and warehouse on the west coast. Gallay/Becool, a reputable heat exchange manufacturer with a global customer base was purchased. A year later a joint venture was developed with Dolphin Manufacturing in UAE. In 2007 Alutec, a highly respected aluminium heat exchange manufacturer was also added to the growing G&M Group.

Sadly, Geoff Shrigley passed away some years ago but his legacy and influence can be seen in so many areas.

The current MD is John Blake, a seasoned and experienced radiator man. He remembers the company founder well: *"Geoff was an innovator and an engineer who never lost his drive and enthusiasm. Long after he retired, he would still come in to the factory and astound our engineering people by pointing out the solution to a problem that would have had them all scratching their heads for days. His "can do" and think outside the box attitude will be one of his many lasting legacies.*

One of our enduring strengths is our experienced work force, many of whom have been with the company for over 25 years. They have seen so many changes and have willingly taken on the challenge of re-training and learning new techniques and processes and readily accept the fact that we need them to be flexible enough to work in different departments at very short notice.

It's only in the last 12 years that we have added bought-in products to our sales range. Prior to that everything we sold we made here in the factory. Nowadays, although a good percentage of our sales will inevitably be from bought-in products, we still have the ability to quickly produce development samples and then full blown finished production runs which gives us an edge over competitors.

It is an enormous advantage that the Group is still owned by the same family and Michael Shrigley is as committed and enthusiastic about the future as we are. These days Michael divides his time between the G&M Group and his business interests in the USA but we speak almost daily and he makes regular trips to the Group companies. Our focus now is to develop and expand the aluminium and heavy industrial side of the business and our alliance with our friends at Dolphin Manufacturing in UAE is a huge benefit. We can produce anything from an A/C coil for an office building, a shell and tube heat exchanger, a huge Gen Set cooling pack – the range is massively diverse. These products alongside our established re-engineered plant, agricultural, construction, mining and industrial heat exchangers is an exciting new direction for the company and will take us further away from the general mass market automotive sector. The design of most O.E. heat exchange systems is very much dictated by cost and the need to offer a global all world part – but this will clearly not be the best solution for every environment or application. Our products will offer benefits in performance and longevity or it could just be down to price and availability but the fact is, we offer customers a choice.”

New sales people spend at least a month working in all departments of the manufacturing plant to ensure they have an understanding of the various processes. It's one of the reasons customers like to talk to G&M.

“Our sales people are not just order takers” John points out. “We know from customer feedback that they still feel we are regarded as approachable and prepared to listen and willing to take on jobs that other suppliers may turn away. This maintains customer loyalty which is almost unheard of these days in our fast paced, internet search engine, change supplier for a penny business environment. Obviously, we recognise the importance of the Web and on-line ordering and our IT and marketing people spend a lot of time ensuring our web site is user friendly and packed with information. We recently introduced a live chat line to the web site which has been a huge success. But we are also very aware that, at the end of the day, people buy from people.

Over the last 50 years we have developed solid trading relationships with customers around the world, especially in Europe where we have partners in all major countries. We also see great opportunities in Eastern Europe and have seen a huge increase in sales and enquiries from this area in the last 3 years”

For G&M Radiator then, product and market diversification is the key to the future.

A final thought from John Blake:

“There is no doubt that our industry needs to be open to new ideas, techniques and strategies and we are more determined than ever to develop in to new markets and regions. We are always looking to work with trading partners in areas where we are not well represented such as North America.

A lot has changed in the last 50 years but we are well equipped to meet the challenges that lie ahead. With the strength and knowledge base of the G&M Group we are confident that the next 50 years will be just as successful as the last 50”

Jeff Thorpe July 2014