

The wooden touch hits cricketers for six

By PHILIP WILLIAMS
Business Staff

Chris Hext-Farrant's business style is a touch-wooden. He is fixed in his ideas, unwilling to change and he dislikes machines.

But as a cricket bat maker for 30 years, his stubbornness is music to the ears of the players for whom he crafts an old-fashioned, hand-made product.

The former County bat maker has set up his own business in Shropshire. And while he no longer makes for the likes of Geoffrey Boycott, Clive Lloyd, John Edrich and Warwickshire's Andy Motes, as he did in the past, he hopes to add more sponsorship deals to the one he has with

Middlesex all-rounder Mark Feltham to bring more interest in his bats. "I really need some promotion to push the business forward," he said at his business in Wem, near Shrewsbury, yesterday.

Trained at the now defunct Ben Warsop bat making business near Lords, he spent nearly 20 years at the Huntingdon company County, which makes a lot of bats for first-class players.

Finally disenchanted, 18 months ago he struck out on his own and decided to settle in his wife's Shropshire home town.

"Mechanisation spoiled it for me. I was disillusioned with the way the big bat makers made bats," he said.

He ploughed all his savings of more than £10,000 into the new business — the Premier Cricket Bat Company — and set up shop in part of the former Wem Ales brewery in the centre of the town. "I thought it would be a nice place to work in. It's in the middle of an area where there is another bat maker," he said.

"I make what I like to think is the Roll-Royce of cricket bats. I don't make a separate charge to get the best finish. I get my satisfaction knowing I have made the best bat available," he said.

He buys all his willow from growers in Essex and won't use, in his eyes, inferior foreign wood. Nor will he use a piece that isn't thoroughly air dried

or less than 30 years old. "Many of the big companies are using wood that is only 15 years old. The quality isn't there," he said.

The whole process is done by hand, except the cutting of the V for the splice. He abhors the bleaching of blades which is now a technique of bigger manufacturers "to disguise a multitude of sins".

He insists it shortens the life of the wood and is suspicious of the trend towards heavier bats.

"Some of things people use these days must pick up like a railway sleeper," he said.

He says he tries hard to avoid the grain of the willow to the individual.

His bats for Boycott weighed just 2.4oz and used narrow-

grained wood to match the player's stroke-making style. Powerful Merv Hughes "cricketers" need a weapon with broader grain, he says, but the willow should always be from the bottom of the tree where the grain is most dense.

Mr Hext-Farrant hopes to be able to push his output up from 10-12 bats a week to about five a day but says quality must not suffer. He doesn't supply shops and the bat should last four to five seasons with regular care, including a minimum of three weeks knocking in.

His prices are not outrageous, given the sums paid for the mass-produced item.

A Premier bat comes in at about £120 at the top of the range.



Hand-crafted: Mr Chris Hext-Farrant shows one of his bats to NatWest's Wem manager Mr John Styles.



BUSINESS DIGEST

Mapal wins precision tool award from General Motors

Rugby-based precision tool manufacturer Mapal has been awarded the 1993 CQP award from General Motors as best supplier of reaming tools.

Clear decision

Meriden-based Network Conservatories has been admitted to the trade group, the Conservatory Association.

Quality tank

LTI Homer, the Solihull-based fuel tank manufacturer, has been named a quality assured supplier by Perkins Engines.

Sticky Lynx

Nuneaton-based distribution specialist Lynx has won a three-year, £2 million contract to provide a distribution service for Sellaette GB.

Read at the head

Sutton Coldfield consultant Mr Ron Reed is the new president of the Institute of Metal Finishing.

2,000 up for Milacron

Birmingham company Cincinnati Milacron has manufactured its 2,000th SABRE machining centre since it started production of the tools in Erdington five years ago.

Practical motoring

Practical Car & Van Rental of Birmingham has celebrated its ten-year anniversary by signing a new car deal with Nissan. It will take up to 500 new Nissans this year to augment its nationwide fleet of more than 4,000 used cars and vans.

Toys R pipes

Telford-based Johnston Pipes is supplying concrete pipes, manhole rings and road gulleys for the Toys R Us supermarket in Meole Brace, Shrewsbury and manhole rings for a sewage pumping station serving new housing being built by S J Phillips in the same area.

Shop facelift

Rugby-based shopfitter Store Development has refurbished the Swarovski shop in Allders, Croydon.

Tarmac tops table in building stands for football clubs

Wolverhampton-based construction giant Tarmac is heading the league for equipping Britain's leading soccer clubs with new stands to meet the demands of the Taylor report.

New stands costing a total of more than £4 million are being built for Tranmere Rovers and Swindon Town Football Clubs by Tarmac Construction.

And other famous clubs, including Liverpool, Aston Villa, Blackburn Rovers, Leicester City and Southampton, are being supplied with massive concrete units and components for new stands, by Tarmac Precast Concrete under contracts worth more than £1 million.

Three new stands with more than 10,000 seats are being built at the home ground of Tranmere Rovers, under a contract worth £2.7 million.

The existing Borough Road stand is to be replaced with a stand of 2,434 seats by the start of the new season in August.

The new stands for the Bevington Kop site with 5,784 seats, and the Cow Shed with 2,507 seats, will be completed

by Christmas. New food kiosks and toilets are being provided, and a supporters' car park is to be extended as part of the contract.

A new 5,000-seat south stand is being built for Swindon Town Football Club at a cost of £1.5 million, ready for the start of the new season.

The steel-framed, precast concrete stand with cantilever roof runs the length of the south side of the pitch and includes space inside the stand at first floor level for future club facilities.

Precast terracing, wall and stairs units are being provided for the Kop at Liverpool's Anfield ground, a 9,000-seat stand at Leicester City's Filbert Street, one of the new stands at Blackburn Rovers's Ewood Park and a new stand at the Dell, home of Southampton.

In addition to concrete units for the new stand at the Holt end of Aston Villa's Villa Park ground, pre-stressed hollow-core flooring is being provided by Richard Lee's joint venture business between Tarmac and Trafalgar House.

Gummers turns up taps on production

A Midland manufacturer being showered with new demand has turned on all the production taps.

At the start of 1994, Birmingham-based A&J Gummers launched a new range of thermostat and manual shaver controls on to the market following a two-year development programme.

In just 12 months, the company says its turnover has doubled from £3 million to £6 million.

"When we launched the new showers at Interbid, there was tremendous interest and we had high hopes," said managing director Mr Ken Shaw.

"Little did we suspect that demand would be so great, so soon."

"We've not just taken off you,

could say we've gone into orbit."

Now the company has put on a 24-hour continuous shift system taken on 35 additional employees and brought forward plans for a factory extension.

"Our planned progression is just the right time with more new products to be launched at the Hospital Care Exhibition at the Birmingham, in September," said Mr Shaw.

Once the new factory extension is completed, the company will be investing further in new computer-controlled machining centres.

Despite the concentration on production, the company is well ahead with development plans for new products it plans to launch in time for next spring.



Finishing touch: Mr Mike Painter with his statue in St Werburgh's Church.

Bridgeman has designs on religion

Lichfield-based restoration specialists Bridgeman have turned a peony in this world and no doubt stored up a little credit in the next after designing a carriage for Christ Risen and new furnishings for a Catholic church in Stoke-on-Trent.

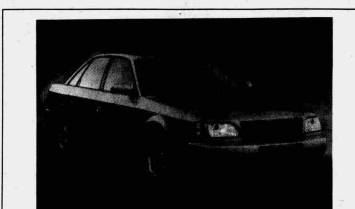
R Bridgeman & Sons designed and made the statue and the furniture for the sanctuary of St Werburgh in Clayton in a "four-figure" contract.

Bridgeman master carver Mr Mike Painter put more than 280 hours of carving time into the creation of the sculpture in English ash, mounted on a cross of mahogany and fixed six feet above the

floor in the archway to the sanctuary. The crown of thorns was represented by twisted copper wire.

The design of a new sedilia — the priest's chair flanked by two deacon's chairs — featured arched backs to match the windows and arches in the sanctuary and ash was used to match the existing seating in the church.

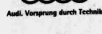
In addition, the company created a new oak frame for an embroidery depicting The Annunciation. Its three arches frame the figures of a dove, Our Lady and an angel and match the altar in a new mounting in the side chapel.



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Audi, Volkswagen Group, Porsche.

US faith in West Midlands

The West Midlands' share of UK inward investment is soaring as American companies put their faith and their cash into the country's manufacturing heartland.

The Invest in Britain Bureau said yesterday a record 3,300 jobs were created in the region by inward investors during the year which ended in April. That was more than double the 1,508 total for the previous year.

And the number of investment projects in the West Midlands soared to 83, the highest ever from 38 in 1992-93. The region's percentage of the national total rose from 12.5 to 20.5 per cent.

The national picture was equally bright — the total of 404 projects and 28,727 jobs created were both records.

The West Midlands Development Agency, which is responsible for attracting inward investment to the region, said the past year's projects represented total investment of £650 million.

The agency has recorded £2.5 billion worth of inward investment into the re-

gion since 1988, creating 22,000 jobs. Last year's performance, one of the UK's most successful ever, puts the region near the top of the list of leading investment locations in Europe.

Over the past three years, North America has been by far the largest source of overseas investment in the West Midlands, accounting for 39 per cent of all projects.

Germany accounted for 22 per cent, France eight per cent and the rest of Europe 22 per cent. The Far East accounted for only seven per cent despite some high profile initiatives.

The IBB reported that the UK attracts more investment last year from overseas companies than any other country in Europe.

Most of the new jobs were in manufacturing, followed by services, assembly, then research and development.

The IBB bureau paid out £343 million in grants — half to overseas firms investing in the UK for the first time and half to foreign companies already based here.

Istel to manage computer installation for BAe

Redditch-based AT&T Istel has won a £1.7 million contract to help install a computer manufacturing management system for former Rover parent British Aerospace.

It will project manage the installation of the system at the Woodford, Manchester, factory of Avro International Aerospace, a division of BAe.

The system is planned to save the company around £2 million a year and slash production times by three months.

At a total cost of £3 million, the new system is the biggest computer investment programme at Avro and is expected to pay for itself in just 28 months through reduced costs and improved efficiency.

"In technology terms, we are leaping 20 years," said Avro's project manager, Mr Steve Oliver. "It will give us accurate information on the ability to respond quickly to market forces."

AT&T Istel staff have been seconded to the factory to oversee the installation and buy in the computer hardware, software and services.

The new system includes a Hewlett Packard computer linked via a network to 150 Digital personal computers and is due to be fully operational by the end of next year.

AT&T, the US parent company of AT&T Istel, last night reported an increased second-quarter group profits of £719.74 million on sales up from £10.39 billion to £11.29 billion.

Simple is beautiful

TNT Express Worldwide UK has signed a partnership contract with Norgren Martonair for distribution of its European freight.

Norgren Martonair, a UK market leader for pneumatic control and automation components, is to centralise its European distribution and, having previously used up to 13 carriers, will now exclusively use the international express delivery services of TNT Express Worldwide.

Norgren Martonair hopes to benefit from TNT Express Worldwide's new range of services, which have shaken up the carrier's business by simplifying international shipping procedures, offering standardised products, reducing the paperwork and cutting delivery times.

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