



# The Whitakers' Way

by Angus Kennedy

Angus Kennedy, Editor, was invited by the family to unearth the secrets behind one of the UK's most successful chocolate businesses as they surge ahead into 2014 - a year that marks a major achievement in their history - their well deserved 125th anniversary.

**A**s I drove home from an action packed 24 hours with William Whitaker, Managing Director of Whitakers Chocolates Ltd., I couldn't help thinking how much I would really like to live somewhere as perfect as Skipton where you will find Whitakers Chocolate Ltd. But do not be fooled by





this quiet English ideal. Settled amongst the rolling green hills and just a few miles from the town where my hotel was, you will discover a multi-million pound chocolate manufacturer. And one, I must add, that is growing at a commendable rate.

I followed William's car and pulled up into a driveway of what seemed to me to be a perfectly preserved Victorian row of finely built family houses in Skipton. It looked to me like a private house.

"It is a private house!" said William proudly, as he turned the lock to go inside. "It was all started by my great grandfather, John Whitaker and his wife Rebecca in 1889 in Crosshills as a small grocery and drapery shop. We then moved into baking and gradually into chocolate in 1903.

We moved here to this site in Skipton in 1926," he said, as we entered one of the Victorian rooms. We immediately started to look through boxes with old adverts, packaging designs and boxes of great cricket sporting moments (William's brother is the newly appointed chairman of the England cricket selectors). "There's 125 years of history in these," he said, as

I opened a box for myself. "This is the site where we started producing chocolates on a large scale. When we came here, chocolates were produced in this front room!" he said fondly. "On the other side you will see that part of the factory was built on what used to be our family rose garden in 1964." The nostalgia was getting to me; I was absorbing 125 years fast and could feel the sense of achievement of four generations of effort that filled the air with me.

Whitakers Chocolates has come a long way since then, even since William joined the company after coming up through the ranks and learning the business with his father, John Whitaker. There have been some dynamic changes in the last 10 years. Today Whitakers is still a family owned company and produce over 2 million chocolates a day, of which 1 million of them are mint crisps. They employ 150 part time and full time staff and have experienced consistent growth each year and currently turnover £11 million.

It's safe to say that they have become market leaders in private label chocolate wafer lines, neapolitans, mint crisps, fondant creams and related products. Four generations have rolled up their sleeves and worked hard to enable the company to operate from a modern, purpose built manufacturing site with impressive warehousing and distribution facilities today.

Whitakers seem to have embraced all the challenges that have been thrown at it over 125 years and blossomed into a leading global supplier of chocolates. They have evolved into a highly trustworthy partner in the production of specialist and custom made chocolate products over their four main







lines. They supply to both foodservice and retail markets in the United Kingdom and around the world.

William was keen for me to see the plant right away. Like many of the factories I have seen, every inch of the factory was cleverly taken up for production with the floor planned to maximum effect. The plant is typical of many fast growing producers with additions that were made over the years to accommodate the new plant. This tour was particularly enjoyable, as I knew I was here to record a huge achievement in their history. The plant worked like clockwork to the maximum effect and the staff were a pleasure to be with. I can always tell a good factory by smiles on staff faces and his plant is no exception.

The company produces a wide range of its own branded products and for its own label. Their strategy now, a move that has paid off handsomely, William told me, was to focus on what they do best and keep their manufacturing to the four main lines of: neapolitans, chocolate wafer products, cream fondants and mint crisp lines together with selection boxes comprising of these components.

They are also well known, as many readers know, for their infamous Whitakers 'After Dinner Mints' with the candelabra logo on the packets. The logo, incidentally, was inspired by William's father, John Whitaker, a keen pianist and astute businessman. John told me that the idea that came to him while he was playing the piano. "It made sense to me Angus," he said. "Playing the piano, fine dining with the candelabra on the dining table and of course enjoying your favourite after dinner chocolates!"

John Whitaker, still works in the company with his son and the company is still a privately owned business. He told me about his shrewd business move he made in 1964 to obtain a bank loan for £25,000 that would enable them to invest in new equipment and build a brand new chocolate factory

***"when you ask William what his favourite chocolate is, he will give you a very candid answer"***

on the Skipton site where we stood. When in those days, he added proudly, "You could actually talk to your bank manager over lunch! It was our late Aunt Ida," he said fondly, "that had the spirit to produce chocolates in the first place... we have to thank her for that" he added. "Each generation makes their mark for the future and I realised we had to make this into a profitable long term business. I remember when we hand dipped and tempered in a bowl in the front living room of the house you saw this morning Angus! ... and those days when we would cool the chocolate on the floor!" he laughed.

William had been busy too and had clearly worked hard on the strategic focus of the company. "Our philosophy has continuously evolved over the last 20 years," he added. "In the past we used to have 100 different hand made items in five boxes. Now we have 5 mass produced products in 100 different boxes. We had many different lines in the past and now we specialize in the area of mint creams, personalised products, private label and more recently, we have invested heavily in buying our distributors and offering our clients the complete food service. We offer new product development and customisation on our four main chocolate lines. This enables our clients to design their own products as they wish with their own ingredients and unique specifications with us and create their own neapolitans, fondants or mint crisps. That's a key change; we are also very successful in offering own label assortments and chocolate wafer lines to unique customer specifications, for instance people can supply their own chocolate if they wish. We are very flexible. In 2010 we developed a manufacturing partnership with the U.K's biggest brand of mint crisps.

So our clients can come to us not only for our own branded chocolates, but we now have a food service division offering a range of other complimentary confectionery products all in one. It was a big investment to start the Food Service Division in 2000. But it's paid off, as we offer a much broader product





range and an all-round better service to our customers. That was a key move, we bought the distributors that we grew up and worked with and now we have a much stronger access to the market.

Our foodservice division offers wholesalers, hotels, restaurants and independent retail shops a wider range of catering and retail products. As well as our range of products we can offer truffles, sugar confectionery and conference sweets. We also offer Callebaut chocolate, biscuits, brandy snaps, Pidy pastries, chocolate decorations and meringues."

As usual with my tours of factories I always feel I could talk for hours with the people I meet. William is the perfect host for his customers (you must visit the town of Ilkley with him - top tip!) He and his family are warm honest people and when you ask William what his favourite chocolate is, he will give you a very candid answer! A brave answer in my opinion and an answer you can find out if you visit William at his Whitakers' stand in the U.K. pavilion at ISM.

The 125th year celebrations, in my opinion, are wholeheartedly deserved by this industrious family and staff that I had the pleasure of meeting. Everyone who works here puts everything they have into the business.

A brand new brewery called Copper Dragon incidentally and rather opportunistically popped up just next door to the Whitaker factory warehouse. William took me for lunch there and just when I thought I had seen it all, we were whisked off into the brewery for a tour. William, along with their chief brewer, had developed a brand new chocolate beer. 'Now he's talking' I thought! It was a terrible shame, I was driving...

The beer, and of course the spirit of this fine company, are yet another silver lining of the company's celebrations. You do not survive for this long without hard work, innovative thinking and in Whitakers' case, strong family business values. I only have to pick up an old issue of the magazine and see how many companies have not made it over the years to see what a big accomplishment this really is. There is so much more to Whitakers, not least the family spirit that sends good vibes through everyone that works there and everyone who visits them. Now that is a party worth celebrating! ■



# The History of Whitakers Chocolates

**1889**

Whitakers opens as a grocery and drapers shop on the high street in Crosshills.

**1903**

First bakery and chocolate products produced.

**1926**

The company moves to Skipton to open its shop on the High street.

**1961**

Whitakers Chocolatiers (Skipton) Limited formed.

**1964**

Finance is secured with the local bank and the first Whitakers' chocolate factory opens in Skipton.

**1974**

Introduction of the first wafer line and mint chocolates are introduced.

**1981**

Sales reach £1million

**1982**

Whitakers introduce their starch-less cream depositor.

**1988**

Bakery closes to concentrate on chocolate production.

**1989**

Whitakers introduce their 1st round products and are then foil wrapped.

**2000**

Whitakers purchase their distributors, set up a multi-million warehouse that offers a brand new distribution facility. Introduction of the personalized chocolate neapolitans.

**2013**

Sales reach £11million

**2014**

125 years justifiably will be celebrated.