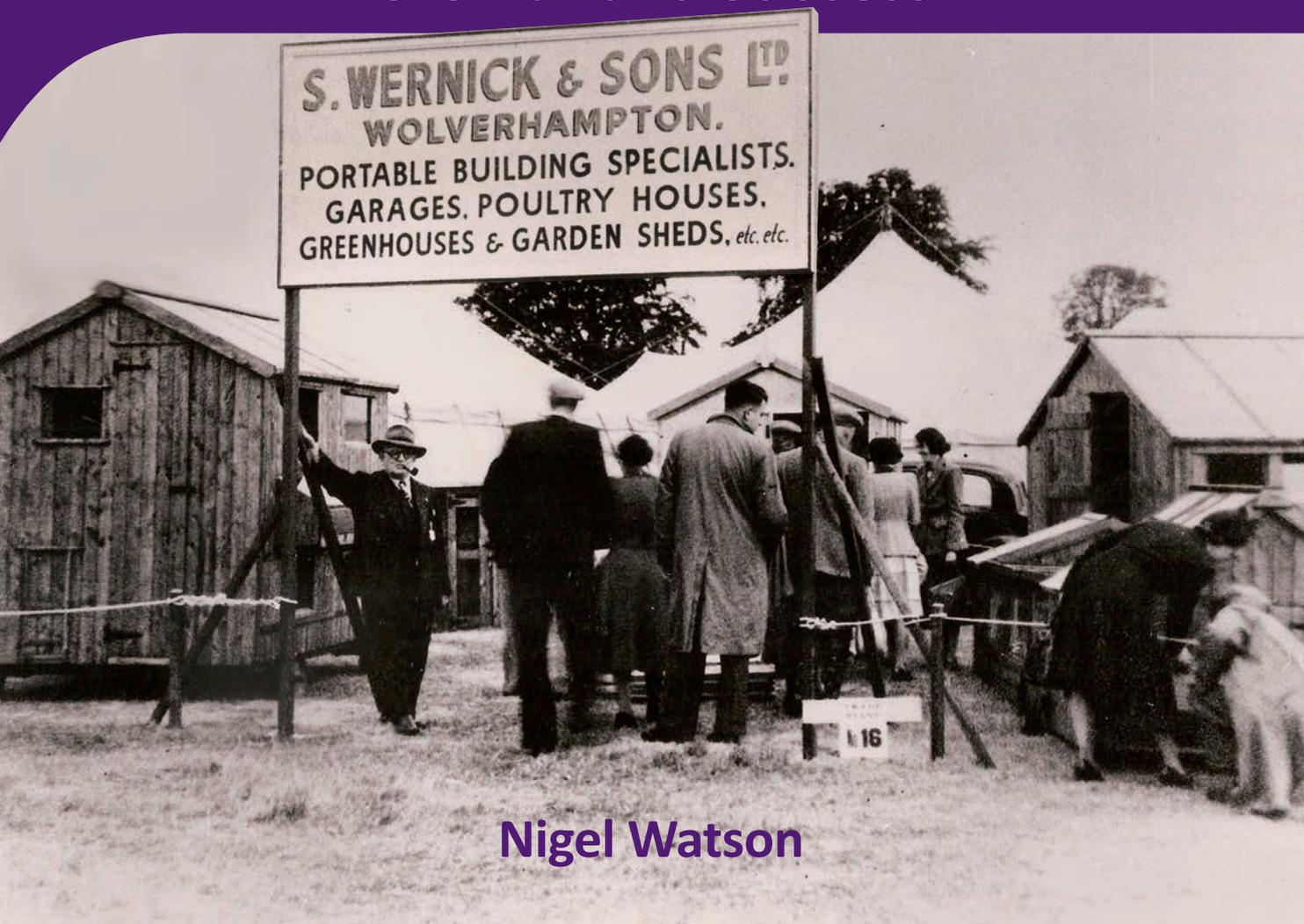




80 Years of the Wernick Group

A Continuing Story of
Growth and Success



Nigel Watson

First published 2014 in Great Britain by
St Matthew's Press
10 St Matthew's Terrace, Leyburn, North Yorkshire DL8 5EL
www.corporatehistories.org.uk

Copyright © Nigel Watson & Wernick Group Ltd 2014

Printed and published privately by St Matthew's Press for the Wernick Group

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronics, mechanical, photocopying or recording, or used in any information storage retrieval system,
without prior permission in writing from the copyright holders.

Wernick Group, Molineux House, Russell Gardens, Wickford, Essex, SS11 8BL

Tel: +44 (0) 1268 735544
Website - www.wernick.co.uk

Design and artwork by Brian Glanfield CREATIVE DESIGN

Printed and bound by
Jeremy Mills Publishing Limited, 113 Lidget Street, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD3 3JR

Foreword By David Wernick	4
Acknowledgements	5
1 Beginnings 1889-1914	6
2 Into business 1914-47	8
3 A family concern 1947-71	13
4 Exports and hire 1971-95	27
5 A nationwide business 1995 onwards	47

Foreword By David Wernick

This is the story about the arrival of my Grandfather, Samuel Wernick, to Britain in 1902 at the tender age of 13, the creation of Wernicks in 1934 and its subsequent history up to 2013. It is the story of a family who from very humble beginnings have gone on to create the oldest and one of the largest providers of portable accommodation in the UK.

The story spans four generations of the family and relates the ups and downs that the company has experienced over its first 80 years.

It tells how Sam with his children started a small shed-building business in their back garden in the Midlands and, with the help of an incredibly loyal workforce, succeeded in creating a company that was and is the envy of many of its competitors.

The Wernick Group today is made up of five main trading companies, operates from 36 sites around the UK, had revenues in excess of £85 million and profits in excess of £10 million in 2013 and employs over 550 people.

The Group remains 100 per cent owned by the Wernick family and is deeply committed to remaining private in the future. I believe that by the company remaining private it can continue on its current path of growth through both acquisition and its commitment to quality of product and focus on customer satisfaction.

I am often heard reminding our employees that I don't pay their salaries – our customers do! If one saying can sum up the overriding philosophy of the Group, it is, The Customer is King.

The Wernick family is deeply indebted to all past and current employees and all of our loyal customers who have made this success possible.

David Wernick
Chairman
Summer 2014

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Wernick for his encouragement and support during the course of researching and writing this short history of the Group. I have also been helped by many other people who also deserve my thanks. In particular I would like to thank all those who agreed to share their recollections of the business with me: Doris Cavadasca, Simon Doran, Denis Gibson, Ian Griffiths, Sylvia Harper, Kath Hodges, Alan Hollyoak, Edna Hunt, Richard Jackson, Julian Johns, Liam Muldoon, Steve Potter, Steve Pridmore, Jeff Pritchard, Simon Reffell, Eddie Shaw, Pat Shayler, Garry Sylvester, Peter Tanner, David Wernick, Eileen Wernick, Jonathan Wernick and Lionel Wernick. I would also like to say thanks to Sharon Aspinall for helping me to organise my various visits and interviews and making sure I was never short of tea or coffee.

Nigel Watson
Summer 2014

1 | Beginnings 1889-1914

In 1902, when Samuel Wernick first landed in England with his elder brother Joseph, he came not as a refugee but as a visitor. Sam's uncle, Joseph, had sought asylum in England in the early 1880s. He had settled amongst an established Jewish community in the East End of London where he ran a flourishing baker's shop. He had invited his two young nephews (Sam was only thirteen years old) to come over and spend time working for him in the shop.

The family Joseph Wernick left behind lived in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, although the country had been part of the Russian empire since the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The country also formed part of what was known as the Pale of Settlement, a vast tract of land covering the empire's fifteen westernmost provinces. In the 1880s this was home to nearly five million Jews, whose lives were circumscribed by a plethora of discriminatory rules and regulations. Many had already left for a better life elsewhere, with 350,000 believed to have emigrated during the 1870s, most ending up in the United States.

In May 1881 the Russian tsar, Alexander II, was assassinated. Although there was only one Jew amongst the assassins, it was the Jews who suffered most from the subsequent backlash. The repressive reaction of the new tsar, Alexander III, caused the expulsion of thousands of Jews from their villages, and resultant overcrowding in the towns to which they were sent.

For many more Jews, the further decline in their quality of life prompted a massive increase in

emigration. This time many of those who crossed the North Sea decided to settle in Britain. Amongst them were Joseph Wernick and his wife Rebecca, who headed for the well-established Jewish community in London's East End. In the twenty years between 1881 and 1901 the immigrant Jewish population in the UK is estimated to have increased from 15,000 to 95,000.

In the East End, the tightly packed Jewish quarter was concentrated in the streets leading off Petticoat Lane, although Joseph and Rebecca headed for the community centred on Tenter Ground, south of Whitechapel Road. With Jewish neighbours on every side, all speaking the same language and sharing the same religion and traditions, the Wernicks made their home in 9 Coke Street, and it was here in 1884 that their eldest son Ruben was born. By then the community was expanding to accommodate the steady influx of immigrants, and by the turn of the century it was reckoned that nearly one in three residents in Whitechapel was Jewish. Although the area became overcrowded, housing conditions were often squalid and the immigrants often received less than a warm welcome from the citizens of their host nation, they had at last found a refuge from repression.

Born in 1889, Sam was one of five sons and three daughters born to Issa and Miriam Wernick in Warsaw. Sam and his brother Joseph, who was three years older, were following in the footsteps of many thousands of their fellow Jews when they sailed across the North Sea. They would have been greeted enthusiastically by their uncle and aunt, squeezing into their small



A young Sam Wernick.

house, already home to the seven-strong family and their servant Leah. The two boys worked for a shilling a week plus their boots.

The experience made a marked impression on both boys. Although they returned to Poland, they were determined that one day they too would follow the example of their uncle Joseph and seek their fortune in Britain.

The boys stayed in Poland almost until the eve of the First World War. When they returned to Britain, they came with their brides, having married sisters: Bertha, who was Sam's wife, and Shanka, who was married to Joseph. Bertha was bright and intelligent but quieter than her

outgoing and extrovert husband. Although Sam would learn to speak perfect English, Bertha never lost her accent. The couple brought with them their first son, Solomon, always known as Solly, who had been born in Poland on 30 June 1913. (Six more children would follow: three daughters, Yetta, born in 1915, Sadie, born in 1916, and Joan, born in 1923; and three sons, Nathan, born in 1918, Joseph, born in 1921, and Lionel, born in 1928.)

By now there were some 300,000 Jews in Britain. They may have seen the country as a safe haven but many Jews still suffered anti-Semitic taunts and discrimination from their non-Jewish neighbours. They continued to find safety in numbers in Jewish enclaves in major cities, including Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Glasgow. Sam, Bertha and Solly rented a house in Plumbers Row, Whitechapel, lying between Commercial Road and Whitechapel Road, just a few minutes' walk from uncle Joseph's baker's shop. A little later they moved to Duke Street, close to Aldgate, and it was here they were living when war broke out.

Joseph Wernick's baker's shop in Coke Street in the East End of London.



2 | Into business 1914-1947



During the late 1920s Sam Wernick made his living from dealing in poultry. Judging from this photograph, taking hens back to London from the middle of Wales must have been a slow, uncomfortable and precarious business.

On 4 August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. Men from Jewish families established in the UK for several generations believed they should fight for their country and many of them were quick to enlist. By the end of the war more than 55,000 Jews were serving in the British armed forces. Sam Wernick was not amongst them. As an alien immigrant without citizenship, he was forbidden from serving on the front line. Instead, Sam was making a living dealing in poultry, capitalising on the particular fondness of the Jewish community for chicken soup.

This situation changed following the revolution in Russia in 1917, after which Britain viewed the

Bolshevik state as an enemy. In April 1918 the 8th and 9th Russian Labour Battalions were formed from aliens of Russian origin living in the UK. The two battalions were separated, one based in Kent, the other in south Wales, apparently in case they came together and began spreading revolution. Sam Wernick was called up for service into the 9th Battalion on 27 September 1918, just six weeks before the end of the war, when he was a little more than 29 years old. He was discharged on 22 November 1918.

It is said that Sam learned butchery during his service but it was so short that it seems more likely that he had already picked up the trade

during his time as a poultry dealer. Armed with this experience, he set up in business after his discharge as a kosher butcher at 202 Kensington Park Road, in London's Notting Hill. But the 1920s was not the easiest time for starting up a new business, particularly in an area that was poor and run-down, quite unlike today's fashionable, upmarket and expensive part of town.

Instead, Sam and Joseph returned to poultry dealing, travelling to mid-Wales to pick up old hens long past laying for a shilling apiece, and taking them back to the East End, where they sold them to the local kosher butchers. It would have been hard work. Motor traffic was still scarce, with just 150,000 motor goods vehicles on the road in the early 1920s, and the vehicles themselves were primitive and unreliable. Long-distance haulage could be a hair-raising experience, driving vehicles with under-powered engines, brakes fitted only to the rear wheels, and no windscreen wipers. Journeys at an average speed of just 12 mph on often unmetalled roads seemed to take forever, with drivers often working all day and all night.

Sam was never afraid of hard work. As well as the long hours he put into driving back and forth to the East End, he also turned his hand to making the wooden crates for carrying the hens. He was so practical that his wife Bertha would say to him, 'Samuel, you have golden hands!' When one farmer asked him how much he paid for his crates, Sam told him, 'Don't be a bloody fool! I make them myself!' But the question prompted Sam and his brother to begin selling the crates, priced at a shilling each, from the roadside.

Sam obviously decided that selling poultry crates to Midlands poultry farmers had more of a future than selling old hens to the kosher butchers of the East End. His youngest son Lionel recalled that the family moved to Oswestry, a small town on the Welsh border west of Shrewsbury, when Lionel was two years old in



1930. Sam and his family shared the same semi-detached house with his brother Joseph, his wife and four children. Eighteen months later the family moved again, putting a pin in a map and settling on Wolverhampton, a larger town better located for sending poultry to London. For ten shillings a week Sam rented a house in Prestwood Road from the local brewery, which owned the pub, The Prestwood Arms, next door. When the brewery wanted the property back to expand the pub, the family left with £50 compensation, and moved to a larger house at 127 Waterloo Road, with a spacious back garden. While Joseph carried on working with Sam, he also ran the poultry business, employing his own son, known as 'Big Solly' to distinguish him from 'Little Solly', Sam's son, to drive the hens to London. Lionel Wernick remembered accompanying his uncle back from Wellington in Shropshire to Wolverhampton, the two dozen hens Joseph had just bought flapping around excitedly in the back of the car.

The early 1930s were even more difficult. In 1931-32 the level of unemployment averaged fifteen per cent, compared with a maximum rate of a little over eight per cent during the most recent recession. In reality the figures were even worse, since the official statistics covered only

Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton, where Sam Wernick founded the business that became the Wernick Group.

insured workers. Many families experienced long periods of extreme poverty in an era without the safety nets brought by the post-war Beveridge settlement.

Sam Wernick just about kept the business afloat. As Lionel remembered, the family was 'totally impoverished'. Every year his birthday present was a new shirt. His sister regularly pawned the Sabbath candlesticks during the week to raise money for food, reclaiming them in time for the next Sabbath. Although food was often scarce, Bertha was a resourceful woman as well as a good cook, and her children rarely went without

Bertha Wernick,
wife of Sam.



anything to eat. And the Wernick household was also a lively one. For Eileen Wernick, who later married Sam's son Joe, the bright, vibrant, open and friendly Wernick family was a complete contrast with her own rather more strait-laced home life. The Waterloo Road house was only a few hundred yards from Wolverhampton Wanderers' ground and the boys fell in love with football. In later years the firm's vans and lorries boasted a livery of the Wolves colours of gold and black. On the other hand, Lionel could also remember listening at the age of six or seven to his brothers

and sisters debating whether Ravel's *Bolero* was anything more than mere rhythm. This eclectic range of interests was perhaps in line with what Sam told his children, that 'in any activity you rely on your fellow man, and you will only succeed by understanding the values of your fellow man'.

Sam was also resourceful. When the family moved from Prestwood Road, Sam brought to Waterloo Road a couple of doors from the old house. In the back garden of Waterloo Road he turned them into his first poultry shed. He also

bought the eight feet by three feet boxes used to import cheap Polish eggs, taking out the nails and using the timber to make more sheds. The boxes, stuffed with straw, often smelled strongly of rotten eggs, but sometimes a precious good egg was found. By 1933, Sam was confident enough to put up a hoarding at the front of the house that declared, 'Sheds For Sale – Enquire Within'. This has always been seen as the beginning of the business that became today's Wernick Group. But the business had a difficult start, and there were often weeks when not a single shed was sold, leaving the family to live on little more than fresh air.

By 1936 Sam Wernick's was one of nine businesses listed in the Staffordshire County Directory as makers of portable buildings. Lionel Wernick remembered his father sending off for catalogues from all the major shed manufacturers, cutting out the pictures and, puffing away on his pipe at the kitchen table, mixing flour and water together to paste them into his own home-made catalogue, carefully writing down his own descriptions and prices.

Sam and Bertha were strong believers in education, wanting their boys to have what they had been denied. They encouraged them to stay on at school and aspire to further education, but in the end only one of them, Lionel, would leave school for university. All four boys won places to Wolverhampton Grammar School. Solly, a schoolboy boxing and snooker champion, had an unconventional streak, and developed a love of gambling, at which he would later be very successful. Very bright, he was often suggesting better ways of doing things to his father, who would usually respond, 'Listen, Solly, don't you come here with your gambling ways!' Times were too hard for Solly to have any other choice than help out his father in the business. When the Second World War broke out, Solly was ineligible to serve in the armed forces since he had never become a British citizen. Born in Poland when it was part of Russia, Solly was in theory an enemy alien, in constant threat of

internment until Germany invaded Russia and Russia joined the Allies. Instead, he was sent to a factory making Wellington bombers in Pontypridd in Wales until he was released to come back and help out at Waterloo Road after Sam had seriously injured his hand in an accident in the workshop.

Nat too was a keen sportsman. As a ballboy at the local tennis tournament in the summer of 1934, he was able to get the autograph of that year's winner of the Wimbledon men's singles title, Fred Perry, the last Briton to win the title until Andy Murray in 2013. Nat won a place to study economics at University College, Hull, then an external college of the University of London. He also won the valuable scholarship that would have enabled him to take up his place. But events conspired against him. As a member of the Territorial Army, he was called up on the declaration of war in September 1939. Sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force, and employed as an interpreter – he was adept at languages – he was amongst the men evacuated from Dunkirk, wading out to the small boats waist deep in water, striving to keep his precious cigarettes dry. Committing the sin of returning to camp a day late from leave, which lost him his commission, he was sent to the Middle East, where he was wounded. He saw action in Greece where, following the arrival of the Germans, he left on a raft with two colleagues, both of whom perished before he was picked up. An artillery gunner, he went back to France on D-Day but ended his active service in the City of London, where he used his skills to bring down the V1 flying bombs and V2 rockets which brought fear and distress to the capital during the final months of the war. Nat married his wife Hetty while on leave during the war, and never did take up his place at university.

At the liberation of Brussels in 1944, Nat had met up with his brother Joe, an officer in the Royal Engineers. Like Solly, Joe had left school at 16 since he was expected to find a job to bring much-needed money into the Wernick



household. He found employment in the research laboratory of Tubes Ltd (later part of the TI Group). He showed promise, becoming interested in metallurgy, and was given the opportunity to study part-time for a degree at the Wolverhampton and Staffordshire Technical College (now the University of Wolverhampton). He won the silver medal for the best student in his age group in the country. When war broke out, he was in a reserved occupation, but he was determined to join up. He served in Europe after D-Day, ending up in the German city of Hanover, where he too acted as an interpreter. In the meantime, he had married his sweetheart Eileen in 1942. Tubes Ltd kept his job open for him but

Top - Nat Wernick (centre back) with his fellow soldiers in the Egyptian desert with the 8th Army in 1942.

Nat Wernick on the far right with friends in Israel in the late 1940s.

on demobilisation Joe told his employers he wanted to join his father. Utterly meticulous, courteous and honourable, he was held in such high regard within the company that Tubes told him his post would remain available for him for another year in case he changed his mind.

Sam gained a son-in-law during the war. His daughter Pat, who was living in the East End, sang in a local Gilbert and Sullivan society, where she met Max Niemen, who had been working as a hairdresser. During the dark days of the Blitz, Max and Pat moved to Wolverhampton, where Max took a job as a foreman at the local battery factory. He was later called up, and served with the army in India and Burma. Pat acted as her father's secretary, a role she continued after the war.

While his three eldest sons were away (Lionel was still at school), Sam found that his business began to prosper after the trying times of the

1930s. Like so many other manufacturers, he began carrying out work for the government. As food became scarce and rationing was introduced, posters everywhere were urging people to 'Dig For Victory!' and Sam tapped into a growing demand for garden sheds and poultry houses. Many materials were in short supply and the need to make the most of whatever was available led Sam to develop another profitable sideline. Ever inventive, he began building small trailers for his farming customers. These were based on the front axles of old cars recovered from a local scrapyards, whose moving wheels he fixed with shackles forged by his friendly neighbourhood blacksmith at a smithy in nearby Red Cross Street, a part of Wolverhampton long since lost through redevelopment. Made out of timber, the trailer bodies were varnished and sold for eight pounds each. As Eileen Wernick recalled, by 1945 the business was 'hopping along'. The years of hardship seemed to be paying off.

Sam Wernick leans against the entrance to his trade stand at an agricultural show in the late 1940s.



3 | A family concern 1947-1971

There was no sudden return to national prosperity after the war. In achieving victory, the country had crippled itself financially. The pervading sense of exhaustion was exemplified by the nation's inability to produce enough power to meet demand, resulting in several months of power cuts. These were aggravated by the miserable winter of 1947, the worst in living memory, as already struggling power stations became snowbound. Many wartime controls, including rationing, lasted well into the 1950s while others, such as bread rationing, were introduced for the first time. Sweets were rationed until 1953 and meat until 1954. The state maintained control over repairs and maintenance until 1948 and new building work until 1954. Basic materials, such as timber and steel, which were rationed, and bricks, which were not, were in short supply. Productivity was low, standards having fallen through the wartime dilution of labour, whilst skilled men returning from active service were in need of retraining.

Sam's boys all came back to work in the business. Max returned in 1946 and Nat and Joe in 1947. The desperate state of the British economy did not discourage Sam, ever the optimist, who was so pleased with the progress of the business and so convinced of its future that he turned it into a limited company in the autumn of 1946. Eileen Wernick recalled the first sale of sheds in the yard at Waterloo Road after the war, which was so successful that Bertha wondered why one should not be held every weekend. Eileen would work alongside Pat Niemen for some years, helping with the growing volume of paperwork.

Sam was eager to keep the next generation involved and Solly, Nat, Joe and Max, who had all taken up shares in the business, were appointed his fellow directors. The same offer had been made to Sam's other sons-in-law but they preferred to concentrate on their own careers. The first meeting of S Wernick & Sons Ltd was held on 17 September 1946 at the offices of the company's solicitors, Quadrant Chambers, in Princes Square, Wolverhampton.

The first annual general meeting took place at 127 Waterloo Road in the summer of 1947. In contrast to the freezing winter, the summer was dry and hot, the third warmest on record. Sam, who took the title of general manager, was busy allocating responsibilities. With his accumulated experience, Solly was put in charge of making portable buildings. Sam asked Max to help him with the trailers that were still being built, and he also hoped it might be possible to make caravans. Sales and deliveries were allocated to Joe but he was still in the army, and until his return later in the year, Solly and Max took care of them. Nat, however, was leaving the company to move to London, partly because his wife wanted to live there, and partly because the business was not yet big enough to support all of them. Sam wanted to keep open the possibility of his return to the business, and as a result Nat was given the agency for the company's products in London.

The company pattered along for a few years. Eileen Wernick remembered that even in the late 1940s the family was not well off. The whole family could afford to run only one car, each

branch of the family taking turns to share it, firstly once a month, then later once a fortnight. Even so, by 1950, the family as keen football fans felt able to present the Wernick Cup to the Walsall and District Football League, which would eventually become the League's major competition.

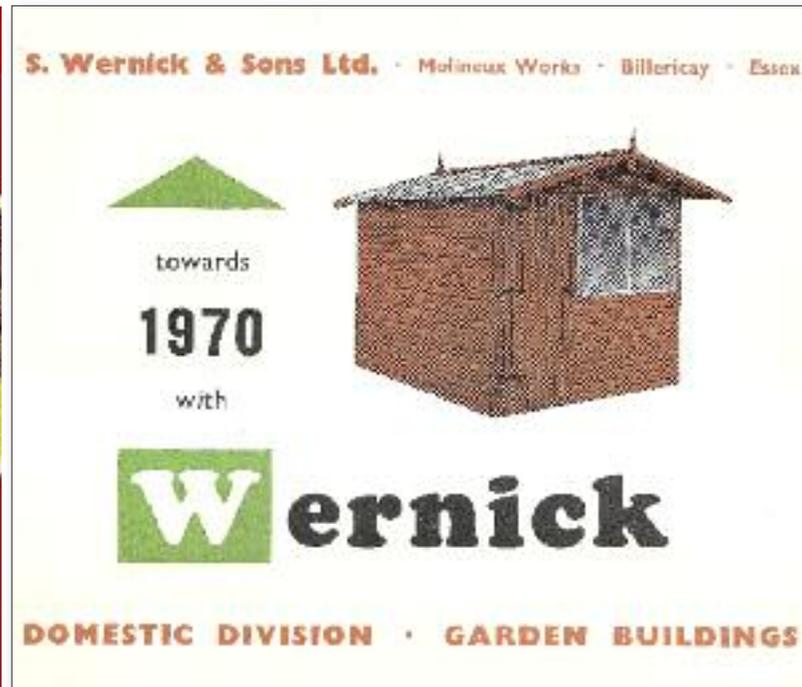
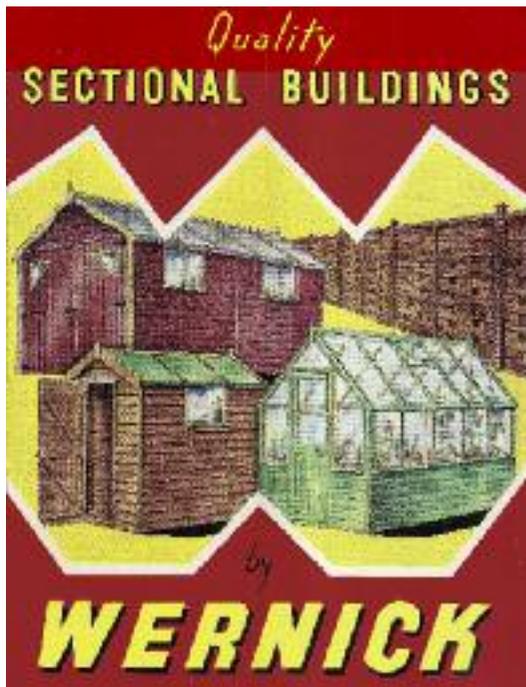
Joe was a born salesman, and his work in developing a spreading network of agents for selling sheds across the country was the key to the growing success of the business as the economy picked up during the 1950s. Lionel was still in the sixth form when he went out on the road with Joe for the first time, calling on small businesses, such as garden centres, and offering them sheds for display.

As enquiries came in from further afield, the company began considering setting up another factory for making sheds in the south. Although Waterloo Road was becoming cramped, finding a new site in Wolverhampton would not solve the problem of delivering bulky sheds over

longer distances. The roads were simply not up to it. In 1953 they were described as full of 'bottlenecks, sharp turns, blind bends, inadequate sight lines, narrow and often hump-backed bridges, low bridges, congested built-up areas and a carriageway for the most part only wide enough for one line of traffic in each direction'. The start of a modern road network would not begin until the opening of the Preston bypass in December 1958, the first section of motorway in the country. The first stretch of the M1 was opened between Rugby and London in November 1959. Even so, by 1963, only 194 miles of motorway had been created and journey times remained slow, hindered by long stretches of unimproved highways.

The family discussed the idea, and agreed to try and find a suitable site. This was an ideal task for Nat, who was welcomed back into the company and joined the board in January 1952. After some searching, he found a huge tract of land in Billericay in Essex, and the company bought a plot containing a shed along an unmade-up road

Mail order was an important source of sales and many people had a Wernick shed in their back garden.



on Charity Farm Chase, not far from the railway line. It was enough to get started. Nat recruited the first four employees, put in a circular saw and began making sheds in August 1952. Later two more sites would be acquired, although they would be separated by the road, necessitating a great deal of manhandling of timber and goods from one side to the other.

A turning point for the Billericay factory came out from an unexpected event. At the end of January 1953 the east coast of England was devastated by the worst natural disaster to hit the country in the twentieth century. A storm surge brought major flooding to areas of Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk, Kent and the Thames estuary, causing 307 deaths, the evacuation of 30,000 people and damage to 24,000 homes. The impact was even more destructive across the North Sea in the Netherlands, where more than 1,800 people were killed.

Amongst the damage caused by the flooding was the destruction of countless beach huts, including those on the beach at Frinton, the seaside resort between Clacton and Felixstowe. The company was contacted by a local estate agent, Mr Downes, who asked them to supply replacements, not only at Frinton but at other seaside towns along the ravaged Essex coast. It was more than Nat could cope with on his own, and his brother-in-law Max came down to help him.

In September 1953 Nat was also joined by his youngest brother. Lionel had graduated in chemistry from King's College, London, and had begun studying for a doctorate, which was interrupted by national service. A talented linguist, like his other brothers, he spent his time serving as a regional liaison officer in Germany. When he left the army, he gave up his research to come into the family business, and joined Nat and Max in Billericay. He became a director in October 1953.

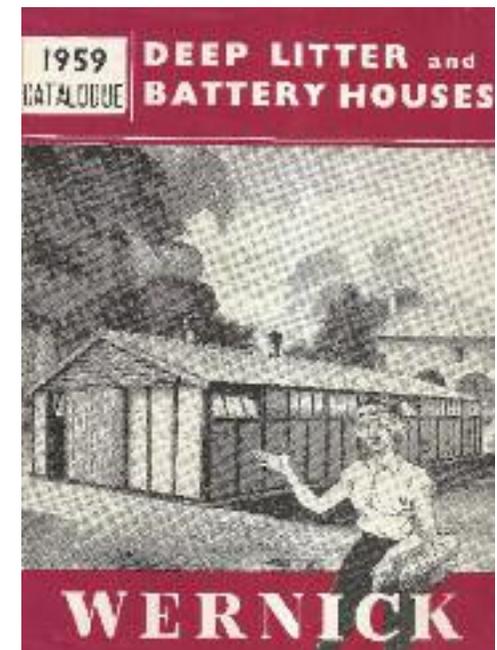
Another fillip that helped to establish the

Billericay factory in its early years came indirectly from the move towards independence in Malaya. From 1948 onwards, communist rebels had been attacking Malayan rubber plantations, often killing their European managers. This boosted the campaign for Malayan independence and many managers, foreseeing the curtailment of their own careers, began to leave the country. Those coming back to the UK were looking to invest in another business and as coincidence would have it, they found their opportunity in the beginnings of the UK broiler chicken trade.

Poultry production in Britain had always been regarded as a secondary activity on most farms. Some soldiers returning from the First World War had invested in poultry farming but it remained on a small scale and most people saw chicken as a delicacy for special occasions, such as Christmas or Easter. This changed in the early 1950s when a bird grown for its meat alone was introduced from the US. These birds were called 'broilers' since their tender meat was produced without the need for lengthy roasting. At the same time the rationing of poultry feed came to an end, which made larger flock sizes possible. This new era in poultry breeding, which would transform chicken from a luxury into an everyday food, was promoted along the east coast by Birds Eye, the food processing company that had been part of Unilever since 1930.

The opportunity was obvious to Nat Wernick in Billericay, and the potential was confirmed by

The Wernick deep litter house was first introduced in the 1950s, when dozens were erected along the east coast, and remained a staple product for many years.



the advice given to Joe Wernick by a consultant, J C Muckleston, who had previously been an advisor to the Ministry of Agriculture. The firm's response was the Wernick Deep Litter House, some 120 feet long by nearly 40 feet wide, built in ten-foot timber sections. Equipped with a food store, automatic feeding system and air heaters, the Deep Litter House was mass produced, transported in kit form and erected on sites along the east coast. Lionel Wernick recalled meeting the directors of Birds Eye, who then placed an order for more than twenty deep litter houses.

Don Richards, later the Wernick sales director, led a team of erectors, who supervised the casual labour employed to put up the buildings. Labour was freely available in seaside towns out of season. Every Saturday Lionel Wernick would call on each site, bringing with him not only the team's wage packets but also bars of chocolate.

It was also suggested to Joe Wernick that the company might consider setting up its own broiler chicken business. This was managed by Nat Wernick under the name of Suffolk Broilers on a site in Suffolk where eight broiler houses were erected. It was successful but, like Sam's trailers during the war, was only ever a sideline and was sold several years later. Over the next few years several other short-lived ventures were set up with varying degrees of success. Amongst them was Videorama, based in nearby Willenhall, which for a number of years made cheap cabinets for Decca radiograms.

There was no shortage of labour for the Billericay factory. Local schools provided a ready supply of eager young school leavers looking for work. Since they were only fifteen when they left, Lionel Wernick devised a voluntary education scheme for them on Saturday mornings, teaching the boys English,

Lionel Wernick was always eager to recognise achievements by apprentices and here he is presenting an award, supported by John Cavadasca, Brian Hart (who was still working for the Group in 2014) and Brian Humphreys.



maths, geography, map reading and woodwork. Lionel always believed that 'all the people taken on became part of the Wernick family'.

A number of these young boys would spend their entire working lives with the company, ending up as respected senior managers and directors. Brian Humphreys, Ray Hunt and John Cavadasca, for instance, all joined the company in 1952. Brian and John were slightly younger than Ray and came straight from leaving school. Working at a local coach-building business, Ray was encouraged by his friend John to join him, and after three attempts he was taken on as an apprentice carpenter.

This was the era of National Service, when young men between 17 and 21 were called up to spend two years in the armed forces, a scheme some conscripts loved and others loathed, which finally came to an end in 1963. There was no need for men to return to their original jobs but most of those working for Wernick, including Brian, Ray and John, returned at the end of their service. In 1960 Ray did leave the company briefly, when his promotion to acting foreman was withdrawn following the return to work of the incumbent after illness. His departure rankled with Lionel, who prized loyalty like all the Wernick brothers, and ushered him off the premises when he came back to see his friend John with the words, 'You don't work here anymore!' Within months he was back. Harry Peacock, who had just been appointed sales manager for the South (John Wilkinson was his opposite number in the Midlands), invited him to become sales representative for Essex. Ray never looked back, eventually becoming sales director in the 1970s and retiring in 2001 as joint chief executive alongside David Wernick.

The Billericay factory was a close-knit place in its early years. As Ray's widow Edna recalled, 'If you went out with a Wernicks man, you too became part of Wernicks.' The workforce was small enough for everyone to know each other, and in any case most of them lived locally. Quite often

several members of the same family worked there, such as the Turner brothers and the Amber brothers, and often across the generations too: for instance, Ray Hunt's son, Raymond, joined his father for a short while, and his grandson Nathan would become the company's first graduate trainee in 2013. Other family members would step in when they were needed. Doris Cavadasca, John's widow, remembered being called in to cover part-time for an employee who was ill, and her mother and aunt once came in to run the factory canteen for a couple of weeks. People always did their best to get in to work, regardless of the weather. The 1950s were years of dense, deadly, sooty fogs, which often reduced visibility to a few yards during the autumn and winter, but factory workers insisted on making their way on foot to Billericay from Laindon, an hour and a half's walk away, rather than stop at home. The tradition of regular annual outings for staff and their families, which Sam Wernick had already begun in Wolverhampton, was perpetuated in Billericay, where there were trips to shows and concerts in London's West End. There was also the annual Christmas dinner-dance, once a fixture on company calendars up and down the country. The event for the Billericay factory was often held at a hired hall close to Shenfield railway station, five miles away. For Doris Cavadasca, 'being taken out for Wernick's Christmas dinner was something special. You'd spend weeks searching for the right dress and hours making sure your hair was just right.'

The way the company looked after its staff paid off. Edna and Doris recalled that for many staff the company 'was like an obsession with them. People were totally loyal to that company'. There were many long-serving Wernick employees, although this was an age when people changed their jobs far less frequently than they do today, and many businesses had long lists of long-serving employees. John Cavadasca remained with Wernick until his untimely death aged 60 in 1998, having become a senior director in charge of production in the south, while Ray Hunt

retired as joint chief executive on the verge of 50 years' service in 2001. It was a time when people made their own enjoyment, either in each other's company or with their work colleagues. Cinema-going was still common, there were only two channels on television (and not everyone owned one), and people did not have the distractions of Xboxes or smartphones. It was the close-knit camaraderie of the workplace that helped annual outings and dinner-dances retain their popularity for so long. The personal interest that Nat, Joe, Lionel and Max took in their staff rubbed off, with staff as they became more senior taking an equal interest in those they managed.

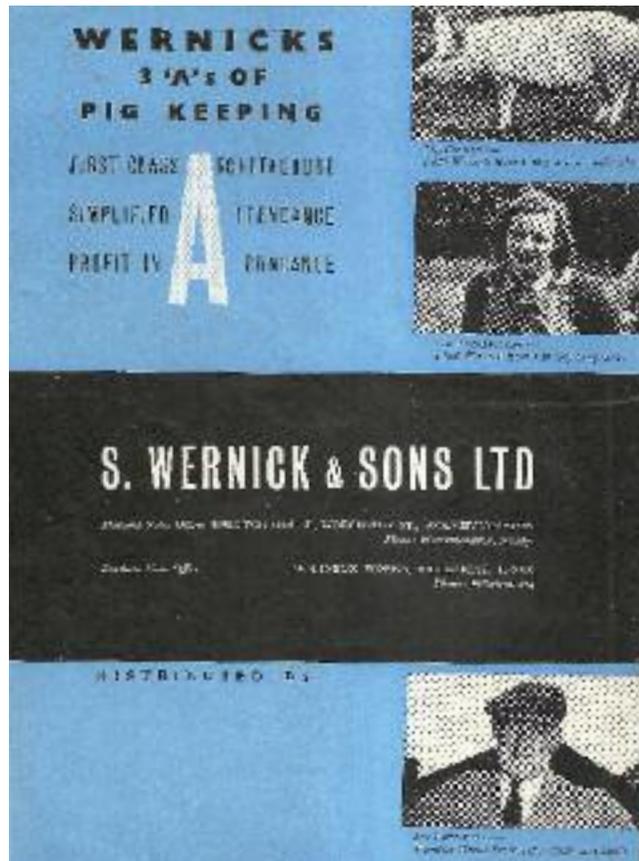
Ray Hunt recollected in 2002 that when the company finally decided to take him on, 'we were still producing greenhouses, sheds and

chicken sheds. There were only six people working at Billericay – I never thought it would last or grow to the size it has today'. But the factory grew steadily as Nat followed Joe's example by seeking out more agents. The most important was the major London department store, Gamages Ltd, established in 1878 and based in Holborn. Once a week Wernick's own lorries delivered sheds ordered through Gamages to customers in and around London. For a brief period at the end of the 1950s the company even opened a small office at 64-66 Oxford Street to serve its London agents.

Poultry sheds remained a staple product for the Billericay factory. Ray Hunt spent part of his time helping to put up these sheds along the east and south coasts. At a time when Ray and Edna were saving up to get married, this was one way of earning some precious overtime. In December 1958 Ray and his team had finished erecting sheds near Margate on the most easterly tip of the Kentish coast. Finishing work, they took their well-earned wages to spend at the local fair, turning up later that evening outside Edna's home in their bottle-green Wernick van to present her with the prize that had cost them most of their wages – an unusual pair of china bookends in the shape of black elephants!

By the late 1950s Wernick had opened another factory in the Midlands. Waterloo Road, just one third of an acre in a residential area, with restricted access, making timber deliveries difficult, creating an inefficient layout and excessive handling, had never really been a suitable site. Peter Tanner, who began working there in 1959, remembered how half a dozen timber lorries queued up outside the yard every Monday morning, each waiting in turn as the men laboriously unloaded every piece of timber by hand. The place was also riddled with rats. Jack Woodward was the unofficial rat-catcher, putting down several cage traps every night and drowning the captured rats the next morning. Waterloo Road employed about 30 men, 'all good bench hands,' Peter Tanner recalled, 'all

The pig says, 'I like Wernick Houses, they are so comfortable'. An ingenious marketing approach by Wernicks to farmers, a major source of sales for many years.



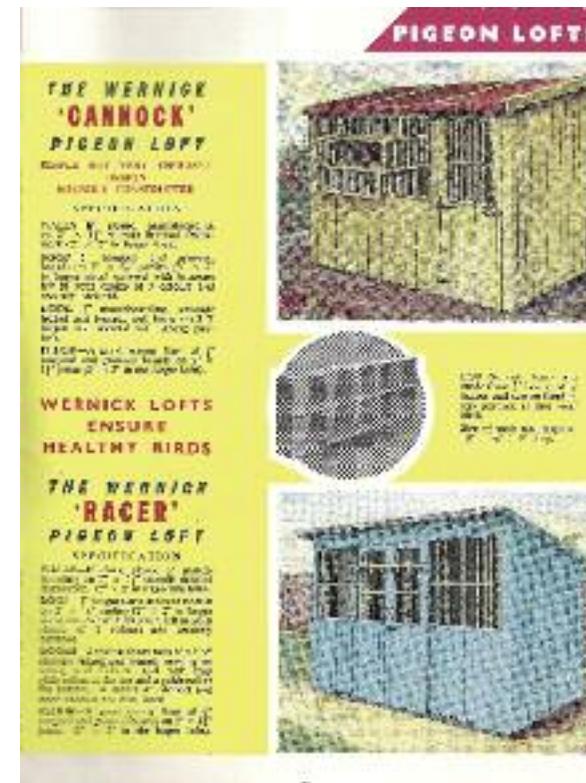
good men'. They turned out chicken coops, pigeon lofts, rabbit hutches and sheds by the thousand as well as some larger sectional buildings. 'The quality was superb. How the hell we turned all the work out, I don't know, but it was first-class stuff.'

As a driver's mate, Peter Tanner helped to deliver these goods directly to customers, often with fourteen or more drops on every run. The bottle-green livery of the lorries, which delivered to customers free of charge across most of England and Wales, was on the verge of being changed to the gold and black of Sam Wernick's beloved Wolverhampton Wanderers. As well as delivering goods, the drivers occasionally brought back goods that had not been paid for. Peter Tanner was once sent to retrieve a pigeon loft, first having to take out all the pigeons, some of them flying after the lorry all the way back to Waterloo Road.

Sam, remembered Peter, was 'a little man often with a big cigar in his mouth'. In his prime he was reckoned to have been immensely strong, capable of holding up a truck for a jack to be placed underneath it. It was said that he would stop everyone in the yard at half-past three every afternoon and make them pick up and straighten out any bent nails, a thrifty habit inculcated by long years of struggle and counting every penny.

Peter Tanner, like Ray Hunt, also spent time away from home putting up Wernick buildings, this time home extensions, garages and sheds in towns like Blackpool. He later led a team of erectors putting up larger buildings for the company as a self-employed sub-contractor. The conditions could sometimes be atrocious, with weather so cold that it froze the glue used to hold the buildings together. During the bitter winter of 1962-63, when Peter was helping to erect chalets at a holiday camp in Great Yarmouth, the sea froze over. He remembered how the wind got up, blowing down the gable of a chalet he was working on, which didn't crush him only because in an instant he had dropped down below the level of the brick piers intended to support the floor.

The huge variety of sectional buildings offered by Wernick included a range of pigeon lofts for pigeon fanciers.



The new Midlands factory was at Lindon Road, Brownhills, about ten miles east of Wolverhampton. Opened in 1956, it was on a spacious one-acre plot with good access, came with an efficient layout, and was equipped with

The cafeteria built by Wernicks for Cleethorpes Zoo and Marineland.

up-to-date saws and planers. There were spoil heaps from the mines behind the site, and Sam Wernick would tip the lorry drivers taking the spoil away ten shillings to dump a load at the factory, using it to lay down the roadways all around the factory. Solly was placed in charge, moving from Waterloo Road, which remained open until the mid-1960s.

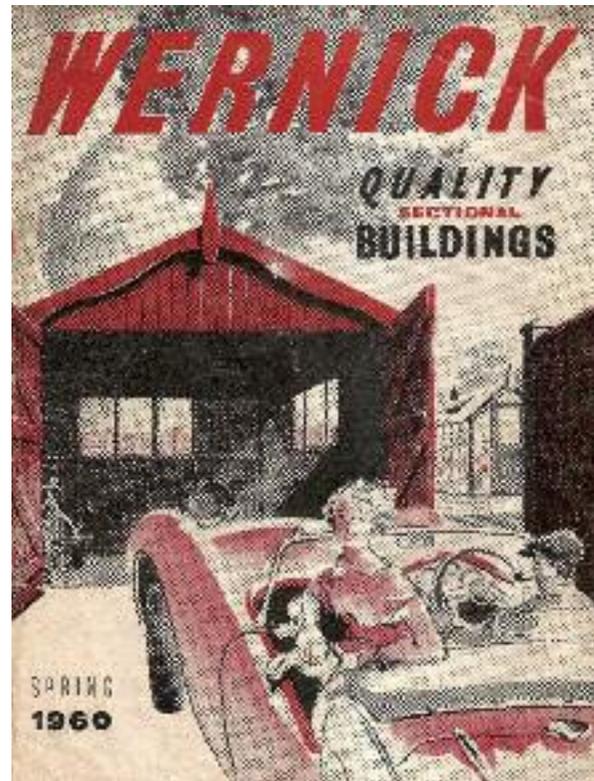
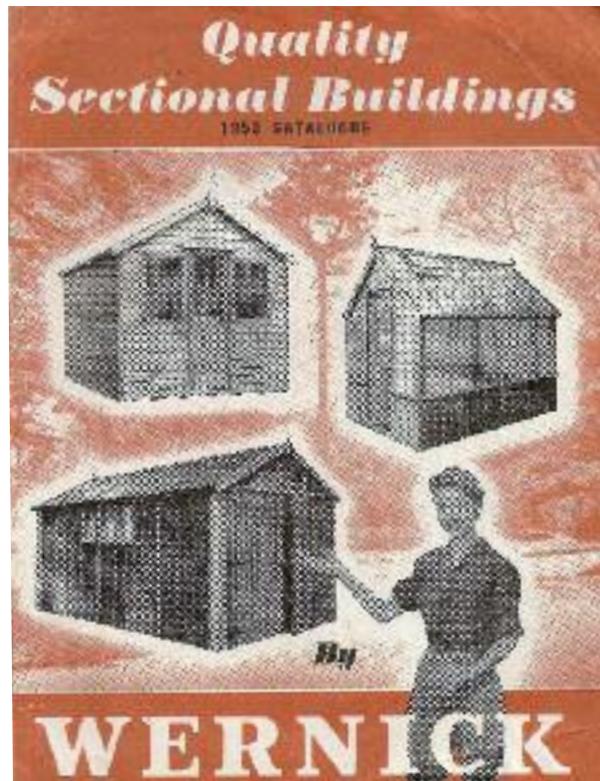
By the late 1950s, the company's sales exceeded £200,000, thanks largely to Billericay. They were boosted by the new Brownhills factory, reaching nearly £700,000 in 1960. By then 41 men were employed at Waterloo Road, 78 at Billericay and 90 at Brownhills. This was a time when, as Harold MacMillan, the prime minister, remarked in 1957, 'You will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime – nor indeed in the history of this country. Indeed, let us be frank about it, most of our people have never had it so good.' Wartime controls were at

last a thing of the past and interest rates were low, unleashing pent-up demand from which shareholders, executives and workers alike all benefited.

The catalogue for 1958 illustrated the company's progress since the war. It boasted that 'By concentrating on mass production of a few popular sizes, we are now able to offer a quality-built shed of the utmost strength'. The sheds came with a 25-year guarantee. The range was extensive: sheds, workshops and garages, greenhouses, poultry houses and kennels, aviaries and pigeon lofts, chalets, conservatories and pavilions, coal bunkers, garden frames and fencing. The sheds, workshops and garages had names like the Popular, the Wulfrun and the Superb, the Supreme, the Epping and the Royal, the Forge, the Enville and the Stormguard. The company sold not only to the general public, but had a number of bigger customers, including

Typical products made by the company feature on the cover of this 1958 catalogue.

As motoring became more and more affordable in the 1950s, everyone wanted their own garage.



government departments, the armed forces and local councils. There were also major businesses such as Birds Eye, Lotus, Sir Alfred MacAlpine and ICI, for whom it was designing larger timber sectional buildings, such as canteens, classrooms and site offices. These were the precursors of the modular buildings the company would develop much later. The poultry business remained strong and other agricultural products had been added, including a range of pig houses, designed once again in conjunction with J C Muckleston.

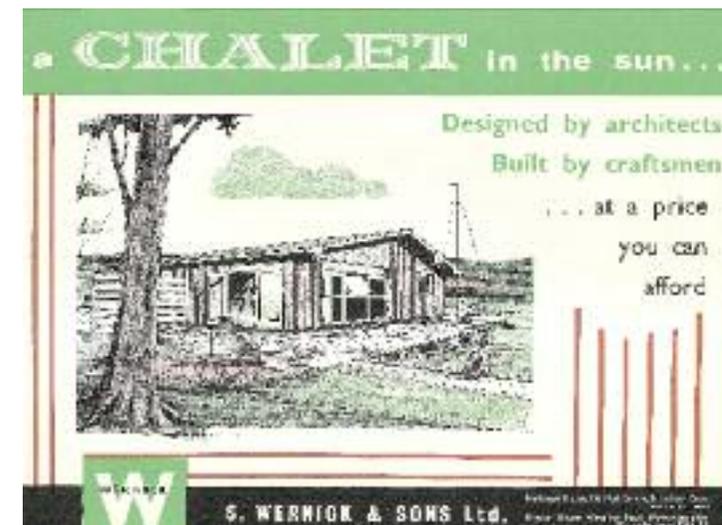
With the growth in turnover after the opening of Brownhills, Sam and his sons decided the time had come to appoint an outsider to cast an eye over the company's performance. Every year higher sales targets were set and every year they were outstripped. The company was appointing more and more agents in England and Wales, complemented by advertising in the national press, including the Radio Times.



Sam Wernick in full voice at a family gathering in the early 1960s.

The consultants brought in by the company, Urwick Orr & Partners, pointed out that Wernick had more than 70 standard designs in a range of sizes, creating more than 400 different products. Since the company was determined to keep delivery charges to a minimum, each factory had to make a comprehensive range of buildings, with a few exceptions, for instance, all broiler houses were made in Billericay and all classrooms and office units were still made in Waterloo Road. Window sashes, window frames, doors and door frames were bought in. In addition, the report went on, 'Your policy is to accept orders for modified standard buildings and to quote for special buildings, such as school classrooms, huts to the specification of large building contractors, and

ranges of buildings for other organisations.' An analysis of orders received over three months from across the North recorded 700 popular sheds, 110 workshops, 300 garages, 70 chalets, 280 greenhouses, 48 garden frames, 50 coal bunkers, 15 allotment huts, 83 pigeon lofts, 77 conservatories, 79 cedar sheds, 36 poultry



Wernick chalets were a popular product for many years at home and abroad.

crates, 22 nest boxes, 21 perch assemblies and eight dog kennels. The weekly output of each factory was valued respectively at £7,000 for Billericay, £5,500 for Brownhills and £2,600 for Waterloo Road. At Billericay Nat had set up a small planning and estimating department while in Wolverhampton a subsidiary called Dainty Smith managed by Solly's eldest son, Peter, made a range of timber greenhouses. Under its own name, the company also sold steel-framed greenhouses, concrete bunkers and work benches supplied by other manufacturers.

The business, noted the consultants, was run in two halves: in the Midlands, Max looked after Waterloo Road and Solly the Brownhills factory, while Joe was responsible for all sales in the north Midlands, the north of England and Scotland. In the South, Lionel managed the Billericay factory, with Nat in charge of sales in the south Midlands and the south of England. The consultants were impressed by the company's rate of expansion and the effectiveness of the simple procedures employed in the works and offices, but believed that better management information, including monthly trading accounts, was needed for a company of its size. At the time the only

financial information used by the company came from the annual accounts.

The family paid heed to the report. Waterloo Road was earmarked for closure, although this would not happen until 1968. And in 1962 preference shares were offered to the Industrial and Commercial Finance Corporation (ICFC). This raised £30,000, more than half of which was applied to expanding the Brownhills and Billericay factories, with the remainder invested in new plant, new lorries and additional working capital. ICFC had been formed in 1945 by the Bank of England and the major banks to fill a gap in the market by offering long-term funding for small and medium-sized manufacturing businesses. Although ICFC only began raising external funds for investment in 1959, it rapidly became the largest provider of outside capital for unquoted companies in the UK. It would remain a Wernick shareholder until 2005, by which time it was known as 3i.

By 1962 Sam, who had lost his wife Bertha in 1955, had retired. After a lifetime of hard work he died at the age of 78 on 28 July 1967. He had stepped down as chairman in 1957, when he was succeeded by his eldest son Solly. Everyone

Nat Wernick (far right) and Pat Nieman (looking towards the camera) and Ray Hunt (second from left) on a works outing in the early 1960s.



liked Solly, often seen, like his father, with a large cigar in his mouth. But Solly's heart was never in the business, even though he had played a full part in its development. The love of gambling he had developed in his youth, stemming from his fondness for boxing and horse-racing, was still something he wished to pursue professionally. His chance came in the early 1960s when the gambling laws were liberalised, beginning with the Betting and Gaming Act 1960 and continuing with the Gaming Act 1968. Solly successfully applied for a gaming licence and he opened Wolverhampton's first casino at the top of the Queen Victoria Hotel. This was the prelude to his departure from the family business. Solly turned to his brother Nat as they left a board meeting and told him he had had enough. 'OK,' said Nat, 'I'll take that as your resignation.' On 26 July 1967 Solly sold his shares to his brothers.

Solly invited his brothers to join him in one of the casinos he operated. They were open-mouthed to see how much money was pouring in, but they also knew that running a gambling operation was a precarious occupation. They tried, without success, to persuade Solly to bring

the casinos within the wider family business. Being the oldest of the siblings, and having a very strong and independent personality, he viewed the possibility of his younger brothers being able to interfere in the running of his business with great suspicion. Solly died in Wolverhampton in 1990.

Nat took over from Solly as chairman but never felt comfortable in the role, which also caused some aggravation with his brothers. In 1971 his proposal that the chairmanship should rotate amongst the brothers was accepted. Lionel Wernick's comment at the time, recorded in the board minutes, that 'the most important matter was the internal goodwill and trust between directors' reflected the inevitable tension between the brothers. It also underlined their determination to run the business as much as possible by consensus. At the same time as the role of chairman changed, the brothers also agreed to create two separate positions of managing director, one for the Midlands (Joe Wernick), the other for the South (Lionel Wernick), which also confirmed the way the business had been run as two halves for many years. (Nat took the title of group finance director while Max became company secretary.) The brothers met together regularly and although, as Lionel recalled, there were plenty of arguments, they were close to each other and usually reached agreement. The minutes for a board meeting in October 1969 contained the hope that any development introduced either in the Midlands or in the South would be agreed by all the directors. 'We all worked together,' stressed Lionel. On the other hand, if the brothers failed to agree with each other, it often made little difference, since each of them just did their own thing anyway. Board meetings were usually held every month, alternating from the late 1960s between Brownhills, Billericay and The Bull in Stony Stratford, regarded as a halfway point between Brownhills and Billericay. (The Bull was one of two coaching inns in Stony Stratford, the other being The Cock, which, it is alleged, gave rise to the phrase 'cock and bull stories',

Solly, Sam's eldest son, with his wife Dolly.

arising from the increasingly fanciful tales exchanged between increasingly inebriated groups of travellers making an overnight stop in the town.)

The 1960s was a time of mixed fortunes for the British economy. In 1964, after thirteen years of Conservative rule, the electorate returned a Labour government under Harold Wilson. In 1963 he had confidently predicted the country's technological advance, promising that 'the Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or outdated methods'. He was hopelessly optimistic. His new government found that the stop-go economic policies common since the mid-1950s, when governments manipulated interest rates and the flow of credit to heat up and cool down the economy, had left the biggest trade deficit since the war. Sterling was regularly under pressure on the foreign exchange rates and in 1967 the currency's position was so weak that the pound was devalued against the dollar by fifteen per cent.

Even so, despite the government stumbling from one crisis to another, economic growth in the UK averaged around three per cent per annum. Many businesses – and Wernick was amongst them – benefited from increased investment by national and local government in health, education and transport. By the early 1970s local government had become a staple customer of the Billericay factory. During 1973-

74, for example, the factory's orders included a community hall on Canvey Island, temporary housing for several other Essex councils, classroom units for Brent Borough Council and Kent County Council, and a supply of garden sheds for the Borough of Brighton. There was work for other government sectors too, such as an extension of Selly Oak Hospital in Birmingham.

But there was plenty of work from the private sector too. Edna Hunt remembered how at the end of the 1960s the company won the contract to supply buildings for a new safari park. The



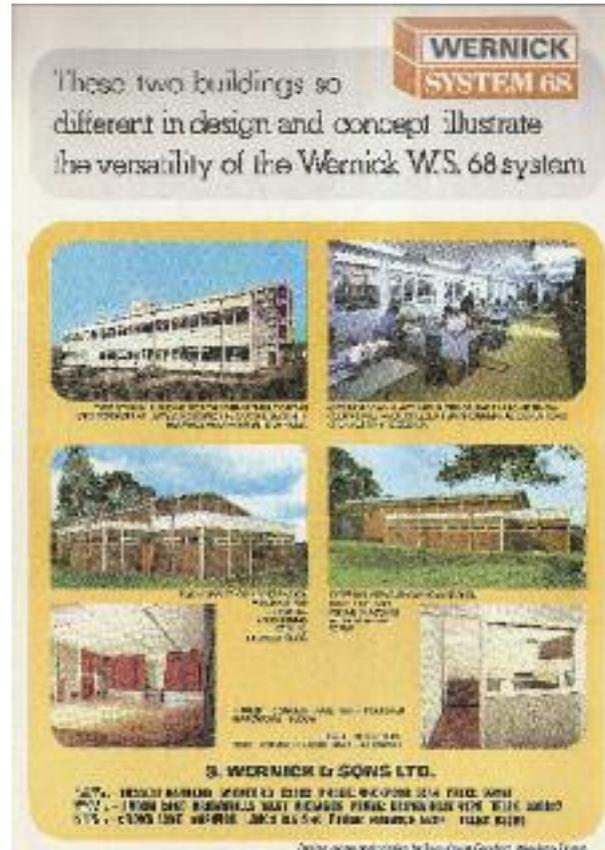
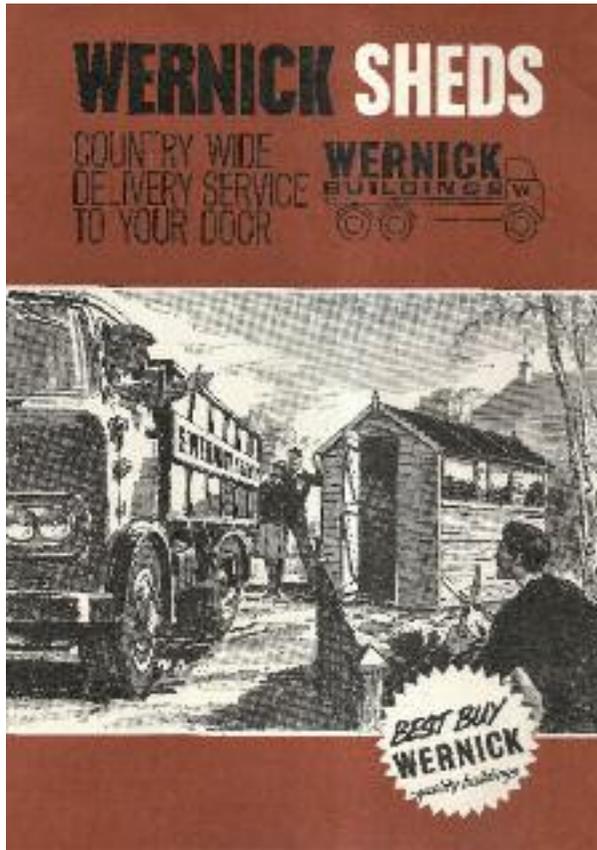
Local authorities became a fruitful source of contracts in the 1960s.

first one in the UK had opened at Longleat in 1966. Three years later the second was opened, the brainchild of Billy Smart Junior, who had taken over the family circus founded by his father in 1946. Billy Smart's Circus was still touring the country, its big top capable of holding six thousand spectators. Billy Smart Junior lived at St Leonard's Hill, Windsor, a sprawling Victorian house known after a previous owner as Dodge Mansion, and opened Windsor Safari Park in the extensive grounds in 1969. The Billericay factory made buildings for housing some of the animals and ancillary accommodation. Ray Hunt, recalled Edna, visited the site so regularly that the rest of his family, for whom the excitement of the original excursion had palled, refused to go with him anymore. Ray dealt principally with Billy's brother Ronnie, who was often ringing him at home and asking him to come out to the park. The park was formally opened by Princess Margaret, with her son Viscount Linley, on 31 March 1970, and Ray and Edna Hunt, along with Lionel Wernick and his wife Faye, were among the guests. Ronnie Smart continued to stay in touch with Ray even after Ray's retirement from Wernick.

Brownhills was expanding steadily. In 1968 the factory absorbed staff transferred from Waterloo Road after its long-delayed closure. Brownhills, recollected Garry Sylvester, was a very friendly place, with a good mix of men. In 1969 Garry became the first apprentice to be taken on at the factory and was still working for the company as a contracts manager in 2013. His father Bill Sylvester was manager of the timber mill, one of three 'Bills' running the factory, the others being factory manager Bill Bates and deputy manager Bill Reynolds. Several other staff who joined Brownhills around the same time are also still working for the company. One was Garry's colleague Alan Hollyoak who joined in 1973. Another was Sylvia Harper, who joined the company from school in 1966. She began as a junior invoice clerk and receptionist on a weekly wage of £4 10s 6d; she would eventually become one of the company's senior divisional managers.

By the late 1960s the Brownhills factory was making more and more 'Relocatables' or 'RLs', as they were known, early mobile accommodation units. Alan Hollyoak remembered that each man would make a complete shed from start to finish, although windows and doors were still supplied by an external manufacturer. The factory was also making fencing panels, greenhouses, garden sheds, garages and pig-houses, mostly sold to domestic customers. Amongst the factory's business customers was a woman who ran her own poultry farm, and every year supplied Sylvia Harper and her friend Carol Howdle with chickens for Christmas. In 1970 the factory launched the Fast-Lock range of panel buildings, mainly for accommodation on building sites, taking its name from the system used to bolt all the sections together. There was also the Key-Pack range of collapsible flat-pack buildings, mainly used for export, and a superior panel building known as the WS68, made for use as a temporary classroom, a sector proving quite successful for the company.

There was some attempt at coordinating production between the two factories. In 1970 the brothers agreed that site hutting and beach huts would be produced at Billericay, while Brownhills would make all domestic sheds, mobile units and home extensions. Both factories would produce modular buildings (distinct from mobile units in that modular buildings were fixed), chalets, latrines and individually designed bespoke buildings. This arrangement was revised again in 1971, when it was agreed that Billericay would make all major system buildings, with Brownhills responsible for site hutting, chalets, agricultural buildings, domestic buildings and the Fast-Lock range. Nat Wernick had also set up a costings department, and the accounts functions for both factories had been merged into one office in Billericay High Street. By now the company had been formally structured into Wernick Midlands and Wernick South. The erection of the company's buildings on site was now incorporated within a new construction division.



4 | Exports and hire 1971-1995



The domestic market for sheds was still strong in the late 1960s.

By the late 1960s, Wernick had moved a long way from just making small timber sheds.

As the 1960s came to an end, a member of the third generation of the family was just beginning to take an interest in the business. David Wernick, Lionel's young son, started in the business at the age of eleven during his school holidays. As a junior storeman in the Billericay factory, his first job was sorting out thousands of bolts, a task he accomplished so well that Sid Ruffles, the senior storeman, told his father that David would make a wonderful storeman. David also helped to make floors, roofs and wall panels for site hutting, working

on a bench in the factory alongside Brian Sampson, who trained all the young starters. Later he became a driver's mate alongside Robbie Dodd and Les Freeman. His only complaint was that he was being paid too little, which led him one summer to add a year onto his age to get a job at a higher rate of pay at the local garage. But the monotony of removing the protective grease from newly delivered cars soon put paid to that, and he went back to the factory. He would never seek employment anywhere else again.

Businesses faced a difficult economic situation during the 1970s. The boom engineered by Ted Heath's Conservative government, coupled with the hike in oil prices in 1973-74, created soaring inflation. Peaking at 25 per cent per annum in 1975, it averaged thirteen per cent per annum during the decade. To conserve energy, a three-day working week was introduced in December 1973. Early in the following year the power shortage was aggravated by the second national miners' strike in three years, leading to a snap general election that returned the Labour party to office. The new government tried with little success to mitigate the worst effects of high

inflation through complex legislation which attempted to control pay and prices. Widespread labour unrest and political uncertainty culminated in the so-called Winter of Discontent in 1979 which played a major role in the election of the Conservative government under Mrs Thatcher that May. Economic growth during the second half of the 1970s was half the rate achieved in the 1960s.

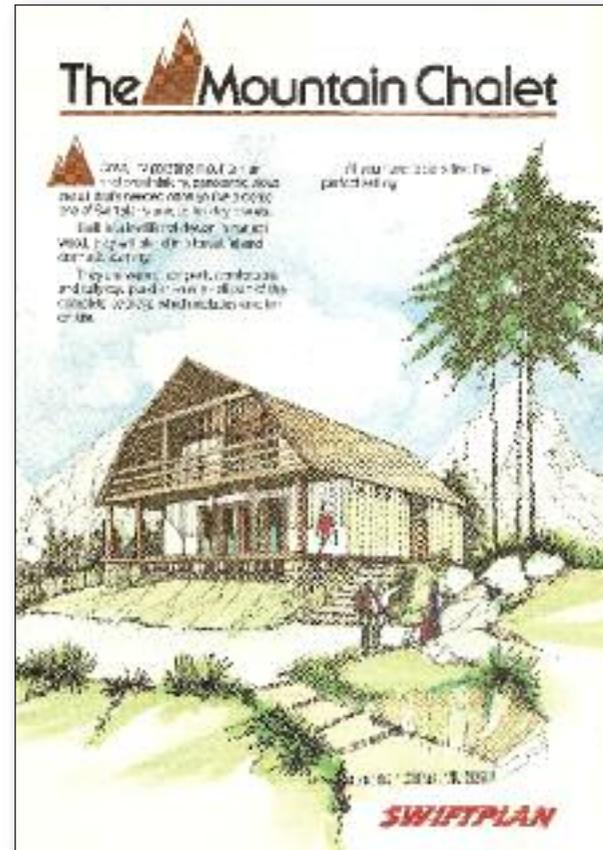
Ironically, it was the surge in oil prices that helped exports become an important part of the Wernick business during 1970s and early 1980s. The export campaign was spearheaded by Nat

This development (Marconi Radar Systems Centre in Writtle Road, Chelmsford) highlights the growing scale of the company's projects by the 1970s.

Wernick exported many chalets to the Continent in the 1980s.

Wernick. There were two obvious markets. The first was the nearest, the Continental market across the Channel, where business was much simpler following the UK's entry into the European Economic Community, as the EU was then called, in 1973. In the autumn of 1976 Nat began investigating the possibility of supplying garden sheds to garden centres in France and Germany. An agent was also appointed in Belgium, and premises were leased in Brussels, where sheds and chalets went on display. The chalets proved remarkably popular, with many being supplied for holiday use in the Ardennes. Lionel would fly regularly from Southend to Ostend to spend the day in Brussels on business. Travel, even air travel, was much less complex then. On one occasion, behind schedule as he arrived at Ostend, Lionel took the chance of scaling the perimeter fence, avoiding customs formalities entirely, and dashing along the runway to join the rest of the passengers as they boarded the flight. Wernick chalets also had customers in Switzerland, with

Wernick built a flourishing export business, supplying accommodation units for expatriate workers employed on major Middle East infrastructure projects.



different loading standards for the roof, depending on the weight of snow and how far up the mountainside each chalet was located. Garden sheds seemed popular in Germany, one load a week being regularly despatched to the Continent from the Billericay factory.

The second obvious market was the Middle East, where countries were awash with money following the steep rise in oil prices. The international arms of major UK construction companies were already active in infrastructure projects in the area. Nat began looking into the market towards the end of 1975 and by early 1976 had won several orders for flat-pack units for UK construction companies. By the beginning of 1977 export activity had become 'very brisk', and the company was displaying its products at



an exhibition in Jordan. There were even proposals to establish a joinery factory in Jordan to support the company's export drive and bring down costs but this was regarded as one step too far by a majority of the directors.

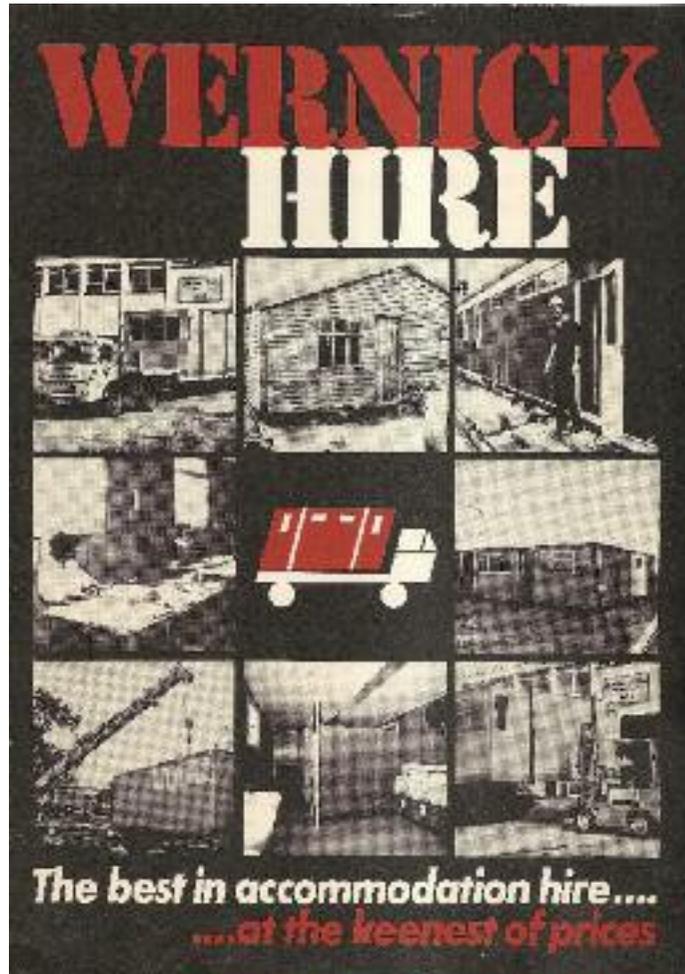
Wernick supplied mainly units for housing construction site labourers. In 1978 the company added specially designed accommodation units to its range of collapsible or 'knock down' Flat-Pak units, packed flat for export and easy erection on site. The basic unit was intended to house up to four men in two bedrooms plus a toilet-cum-shower room. These were high-quality modular buildings, which could be used independently or linked to create larger complexes. Each unit was already decorated in its flat-pack form, and took no more than five hours to assemble, using unskilled labour under minimal supervision, all keeping costs down. The first order for this particular range, which was also fitted with air conditioning, was 70 units despatched within seven weeks for a camp set up by Costain Process Engineering Construction in Qatar. Similar orders were also received for projects undertaken in the

Sudan and Nigeria. They were not all for accommodation: in 1982 the company won an order worth £250,000 to supply 40 units to form school laboratories in Libya.

The company's largest single export order came in 1977, largely through the efforts of Nat Wernick. This was a contract worth £2.5 million to supply and erect units to create the library for the University of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. But it was also the order that gave the company the most headaches. First, there were problems with the signed contract, which was in Arabic. Then the original site was changed, resulting in extensive and costly foundation works on the new site, creating a substantial loss on the overall contract. The agent appointed by the company siphoned funds into his own account, a significant loss which was written off over several years. And the working environment was an alien one for workers sent out from Essex: two roofers were forced one Friday to witness a public execution, an experience that shook them up so much that they took the first flight home and refused to return.



Public authorities have always been major customers of the group. This building was supplied for use as a police station in Kilburn, North London.



The first brochure for the hire business in the 1970s.

All these problems made the brothers think twice about further Middle East orders. In any case orders were beginning to dry up. Major infrastructure projects involving UK companies were coming to an end and they faced increased international competition for new contracts. Local manufacturers were emerging who could supply modular buildings more quickly and more cheaply, particularly since quality was often a secondary concern for purchasers. There was also a glut of second-hand units on the market. And the standard three-metre-wide flat-packs previously shipped on cargo ships were incompatible with the 2.4-metre-wide containers carried by the new container ships.

The anxiety caused by the Riyadh contract may well have contributed towards the decline in Nat Wernick's health. By April 1979, through ill-health, he was no longer able to attend work, and he died two months later.

In paying tribute to him, his brothers also highlighted the work he had done to develop the company's hire business. The brothers had been eager to promote hire since the 1960s, after realising that the one small shed hired for several years to an American company had more than covered the costs of production. But hiring was done haphazardly until Nat began to think seriously about it. In the summer of 1971 he began compiling a monthly list of buildings available for hire, which he circulated to the company's sales offices. By the autumn he had persuaded his brothers to agree to a small advertising campaign and, as the minutes recorded in September 1971, 'to set machinery in motion for buildings on hire'. In the following month, another subsidiary, Dainty Smith, was earmarked for refurbishing hire units that had been returned from site. By the end of the year, insurance cover had been arranged, and contract hire was being offered to major construction companies. The vehicle used for the hire business was a subsidiary called Lindon Finance that, after being renamed several times in the interim, became known as Wernick Hire from 1974 onwards. Progress was unspectacular and by the summer of 1975 Wernick Hire had just 90 units in stock, of which 85 were out on hire.

Nat also strove to persuade his brothers that the two factories should standardise production of the cabins being ordered by Wernick Hire for the hire fleet. It was not easy. A previous suggestion that some of Brownhills' products should be transferred to Billericay to ease capacity in the Midlands factory had met resistance from his brother Joe. The stress on consensus, and the lack of a single managing director, which might have seemed understandable when three brothers and a brother-in-law with very different

personalities were working together, sometimes made coordination difficult. In 1976, for instance, it turned out that while Billericay was selling sheds direct to the public, Brownhills was selling the same sheds wholesale to local agents who were competing directly with the Billericay factory. It also made forward planning difficult. In 1975, for the first time, the brothers had appointed non-family members – Harry Peacock, Ray Hunt, Brian Humphreys, Don Richards, Bill Wilkinson and Bill Reynolds – as directors of Samuel Wernick & Sons Ltd, and simultaneously created local management teams. It was the local southern directors who pointedly queried in 1976 whether the company had any long-term plan. This intervention may have led to the appointment of Peacock, Hunt and Richards as the first non-family group directors in 1977. Coordination took another step forward during this period with the introduction of common advertising and promotional material. On the other hand, encouraging a group-wide approach was hindered by denying directors and management teams outside the group board access to group results, and confining them to results for their own part of the business. In September 1979 the group board noted that



the factories 'will stay independent but will produce whatever is agreed and laid down by the Group Board'.

By then the hire business, under the management of Harry Peacock, assisted by Geoff Springett, was growing again. In 1977 it recorded annual sales of £250,000, and opened its own depot at Brownhills under Joe's son Julian. It was soon bursting at the seams and looking for more space. In May 1979, as the new Conservative government took office, 200 cabin units were on hire, and plans were being made to increase the fleet to 500.

Wernick's hire business began in 1971, taking the name Wernick Hire in 1974. Here an early hire unit is seen outside the offices in Billericay.



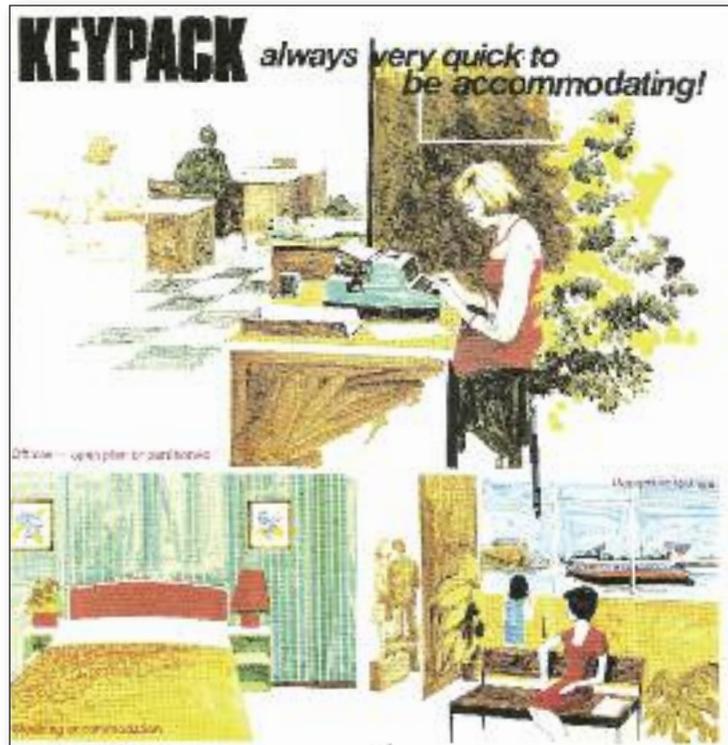
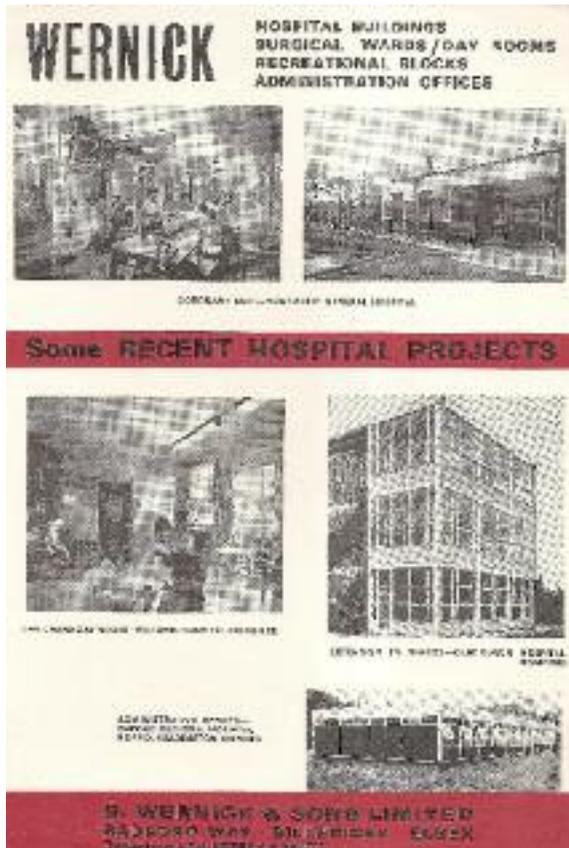
Ray Hunt (far left) and Brian Humphreys (far right) at their 25th anniversary presentation, with Max Nieman,

A more pressing matter was the cramped capacity of the Billericay factory, which had reached the end of its life. Steve Pridmore, who joined the company from school in 1977 as a junior in the drawing office under Bob Hooks, described it as old-fashioned, the offices housed in an old bungalow, manufacturing conducted in several small sheds. The factory was still turning out a mass of different products, which made factory planning so difficult, and had not yet moved on from panellised buildings. With the site divided in two by a public road, traffic congestion was a problem. There was also a perception that the company was lagging behind rivals like Portakabin and Elliott who were already producing more advanced modular buildings. Locally, recalled Pridmore, the factory was known as ‘the shed manufacturer on Radford Way’.

This was a bit of an under-statement. A brochure from around 1977 advertises site huts, ablution blocks and latrines; timber-framed, plywood-clad and plastic-covered cabins and mobile units; semi-permanent and permanent sectional systems, such as Fast-Lock, Supa-Lok and Key-Pack; and demountable and relocatable systems, providing interlocking units for offices and classrooms. But the brochure disguised the fact that similar products were being manufactured to different specifications at Brownhills and Billericay, including two completely different interlocking systems, the Fast-Lock at Brownhills and the Key-Pack at Billericay. In 1978 Harry Peacock advocated the adoption of a more advanced and up-to-date steel-frame building system, already being adopted by other companies, but his idea was not taken any further.

A selection of the prefabricated buildings supplied by Wernick for hospital use in the early 1970s.

A stylised brochure for the Keypack building system in the 1970s.



A decision on the future of Billericay was long overdue. As it happened, Lionel Wernick was friendly with John Mellon, the owner of a similar business called Secometric based in nearby Wickford. The factory was more modern and much larger than Billericay and also operated a design and build subsidiary at Horwich in Lancashire. An even greater advantage was Secometric’s expertise in timber-framed modular buildings. The business was essentially profitable but it had been neglected and there was some discontent amongst the workforce. It was too good an opportunity for Wernick to miss and Lionel concluded the purchase for £750,000 in January 1980. Within a few months the Billericay factory had been closed and most employees had transferred to Wickford.

Production was also augmented at Brownhills, where a new factory (which became known as the ‘Bottom Factory’) was built alongside the existing factory (the ‘Top Factory’).

Buying Secometric coincided with the onset of the worst recession to hit the British economy since the 1930s. The deflationary policies of the new Thatcher government resulted in a savage recession that devastated large parts of UK manufacturing industry. At the same time, as a result of the privatisation programme, people working in public corporations shrank from eight million to three million and the contribution of the sector to Gross Domestic Product halved from ten to five per cent. The recession hit Wernick’s bottom line. In 1981, while sales stood at more than £7 million (equivalent to about £23 million today), operating profits at the depth of the recession were just £83,000. Costs were cut, jobs were lost, bad debts were written off, and there was even a suggestion that Wickford should be closed and production transferred to Brownhills but the company came through the recession relatively unscathed. Joe Wernick believed this could be attributed to the company’s ability to respond quickly to events, its accumulated expertise and its wide product range. It was, he said, a firm run on ‘liberal lines’,

and he pointed to the good working relationships with staff, many of whom had been with the company for many years. ‘There is no “them and us” mentality,’ said Joe. ‘There are no demarcation lines. We all work as a team.’ It was through Joe’s initiative in the 1970s that the company had first introduced a staff sickness benefit scheme and began recognising long-serving employees. In 1975 he had proposed ‘a scheme for the future of worker participation’, an idea that never got any further, but in 1979 employee profit-sharing was introduced, which lasted for many years.

The company was still winning export orders in the 1980s. Garden chalets were still being sent abroad, and in 1983 the value of orders placed by Swiss customers exceeded £100,000. But otherwise the few export orders handled by the company tended to be one-offs. In 1980 two major earthquakes devastated parts of southern Italy and northern Algeria, and the company supplied units to the Red Cross for emergency accommodation. Alan Hollyoak was amongst those sent out to Algeria, while John Cavadasca, who came from Italian roots, flew out to Italy. The locals were impressed by John’s work ethic but rather less by his lack of appreciation of local food, telling him, ‘You work like a giant and eat like a mouse.’ Garry Sylvester was part of the team sent out to erect the units shipped out to Armenia following the earthquake in 1988.

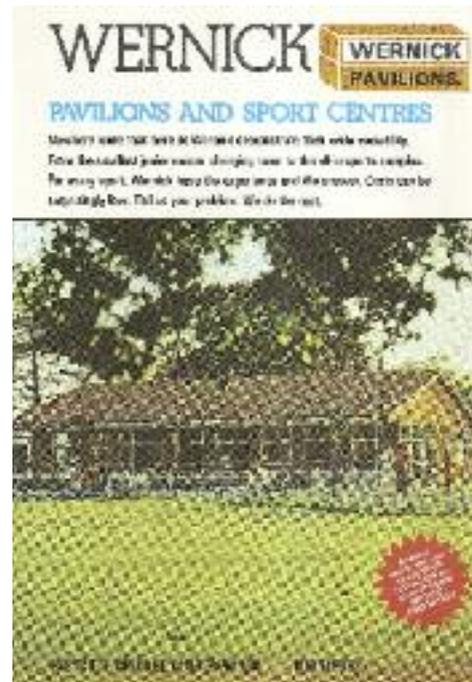
Wernick supplied emergency buildings in the aftermath of several disasters, including the Algerian earthquake in 1980. Seen here with the erection squad is Don Richards at the front, with Julian Wernick sitting immediately behind him on the Land Rover.



This brochure highlights the versatility of the sectional building, in this case for sports use.

Those attending a sales meeting in the early 1980s include Norman Goldspink, Steve Pridmore, Joe Wernick, Lionel Wernick, Don Richards, Betty Homer, Ray Hunt, Jack Barton, Barry Watts and Terry Kenny.

On two occasions the company was asked to supply units for remote islands in the South Atlantic. In 1982, when a school party travelled to the remote Inaccessible Island, part of the Tristan da Cunha archipelago in the South Atlantic, the complex they used for four months was made up of modular units supplied by Wernick. Three years later the company won a contract worth £600,000 to supply ten buildings for the Royal Air Force base at Wideawake on Ascension Island, located roughly half-way between the east coast of South America and the west coast of Africa. This was built as a direct result of the Falklands War. It was a demanding environment and the contract was not without problems. The island was covered with volcanic dust, requiring the constant use of water bowsers to keep it at bay with temperatures soaring above 90° Fahrenheit. The buildings, for administrative use, were flown out on RAF aircraft, but the steelwork, for which the company was not responsible, was shipped out.



Since the island lacked a proper quay, the steelwork had to be transhipped, and in the process much of it ended up bent, buckled or broken, which had to be rectified prior to the main works commencing. Peter Tanner led his own construction team on behalf of the company, and hired extra labour from neighbouring St Helena, the island where Napoleon had spent his final years in exile. Peter and his team expected to spend three months on Ascension Island, but stayed six months as a result of the problems they encountered.

By now exports were an occasional phenomenon for the company. The company's future lay in exploiting the still considerable untapped potential of the UK market. The company continued to supply system or panellised units to government departments, local authorities, police authorities, hospitals and schools.



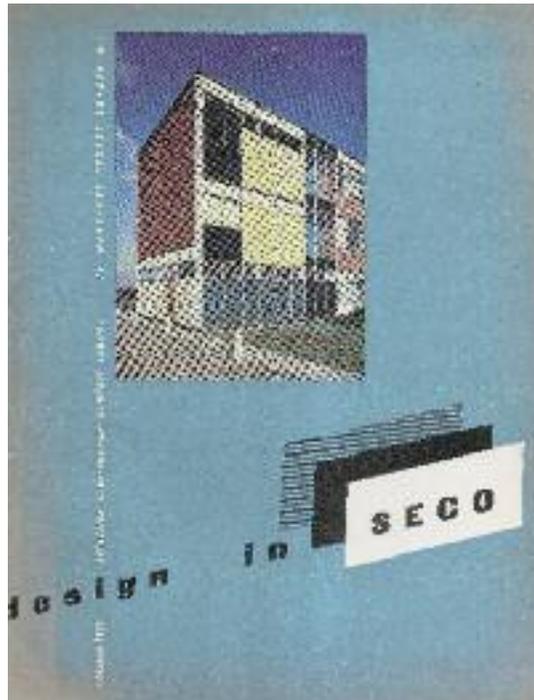
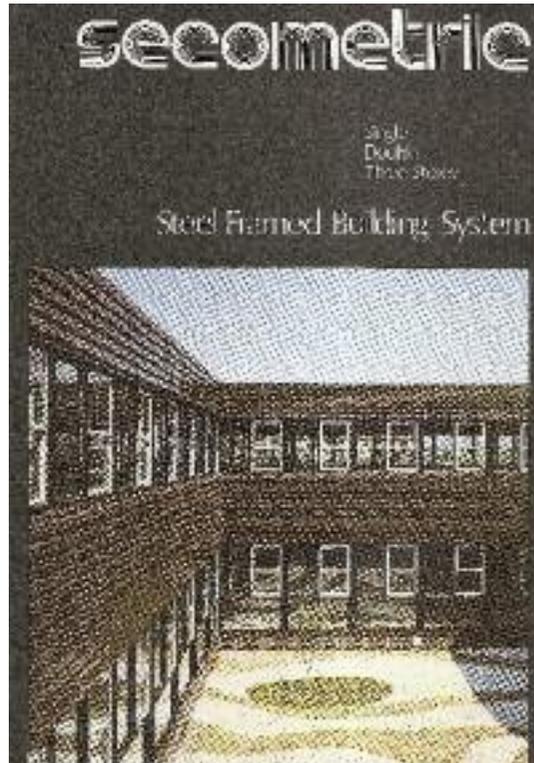
A Wernick building formed the police control centre used during the wedding of the Prince of Wales to Lady Diana Spencer in 1981. Wernick also made site accommodation for contractors involved in nearly every new motorway project, such as the M25, as it had ever since the late 1950s. It also provided accommodation for staff working on the Docklands Light Railway, one of several railway-related projects.

The three-storey site building seen in the foreground was specially erected on scaffolding for the contractor Bovis during the renovation of a major hotel on Euston Road in London in the 1980s.

Wernick site accommodation supplied for the building of the M25. Wernick units are still a common sight at major road works around the UK.



The acquisition of Secometric in Wickford in 1980 enabled Wernick to move into a more modern factory.

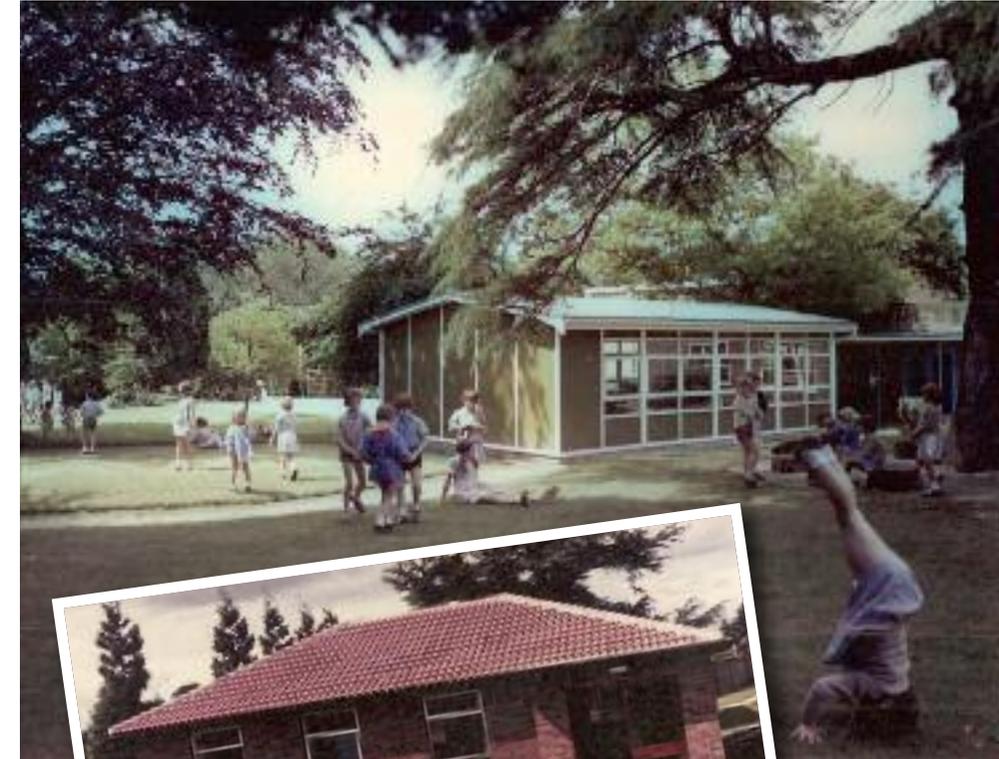


The acquisition of Secometric was fundamental to moving Wernick away from the rag-bag range of products that had traditionally dominated its sales catalogues, and into the field of modular building and the concept of 'design and build'. The idea of working closely with clients to meet their specific overall requirements in terms of modular buildings was not new, and was already practised by a number of rivals, but it increased the scope of contracts the company could take on. By keeping design and production under one roof it also achieved greater control and improved customer relationships by creating just one point of contact. In 1983, for instance, the company was widely praised for the design and speedy construction of an antenatal clinic for Royal Glamorgan Hospital. There had been deep snow that winter but the construction team cleared most of it away by hand, maintaining the schedule that allowed the clinic to open on time in April. The contract covered not only design and construction but also foundations, drainage, lighting, power, fire detection, heating, water, ventilation, plumbing, fitting out and landscaping.

Other examples of Wernick's design and build capability in the early 1980s included offices for several London boroughs, including a series of area housing offices for the Borough of Islington, worth nearly half a million pounds. An article in a local Essex newspaper illustrated the way the company was changing: 'The name of Wernick has long been known in the area ... It progressed from the role of building garden sheds to many of the more sophisticated portable buildings of today. Children are educated in them, thousands do office work in them. Many more spend happy leisure hours in the recreation centres they house. And the enterprise continues to gather momentum despite

the gloom ... Enterprising salesmen backed up by reliable products from a concerned and involved workforce. This is the stuff of which success in the struggling 80s is made.' The external perception of modular building, a

name that sounded much more respectable than pre-fabricated, was also changing as more and more high-quality modular buildings appeared. Wernick was beginning to build a name for itself.



These are typical of the many classroom buildings supplied by Wernick in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1985 the company's steady growth led to management changes, the aim being to increase central control over key operations in order to improve customer service. Ray Hunt became group sales director and Brian Humphreys group production director. Julian Wernick, Joe's son, was appointed group hire director and David Wernick, Lionel's son, became group construction director. Julian and David had both joined the company in 1978, Julian to run the first hire depot in the Midlands, and David joined the sales department in Billerica. David

worked under Ray Hunt, with whom he developed a close working relationship, selling site huts and sheds to construction companies and local authorities. He moved from sales to construction, and became a director of the construction division in 1981. Julian too, who had joined the Midlands sales team, had been appointed a director in 1981, and both cousins joined the group board in 1983. Max Nieman retired as company secretary after 38 years and was replaced by Frank Bessant. Joe and Lionel remained joint chief executives. Lionel was then

Julian Wernick and fellow director Gary Griffiths at the opening of a new Wernick Hire centre in Neath in the early 1990s.



Staff from the southern office, with Ray Hunt on the far left, David Wernick on the far right of the back row, and Brian Humphreys in the foreground.



in his last year as president of the Prefabricated Buildings Manufacturers' Association of Great Britain.

The company's systems reflected an age before the arrival of the advanced technology taken for granted in the modern world. The typing pool, populated almost exclusively by women, was a common component of most larger businesses. At Wernick these women spent most of their time typing up quotations from the handwritten notes supplied by the sales team. Steve Pridmore remembered the first time he was given a mobile

phone, as big as a couple of house-bricks, acquired second-hand from the local ambulance service. Wernick was slow to adopt computerisation or innovations such as the fax machine. When one construction client told Steve Pridmore that he would fax specifications to the Wernick office, Steve had to tell him that the company did not have a fax machine; instead, he arranged for the material to be faxed to his mother, whose place of work did have a machine. At least the experience finally persuaded the firm to invest in its first fax machine.

David Wernick and his cousin Julian joined the company in the same year, 1978.



Bob Hookes, head of the drawing office in the southern office, with Lionel Wernick and John Cavasdasca, the factory manager.

The sales team from the southern office: behind Ray Hunt are (left to right) Tony Bircham, Jack Barton, Steve Pridmore, Norman Goldspink and Barry Watts.



In 1989 Wernick took the opportunity to take over one of its rivals, a decision with far-reaching consequences for the future of the business. Swiftplan was eating into Wernick's market share, its better quality steel-clad modular units finding greater favour than Wernick's plastic-covered and timber-framed units.

Serendipity again played a part. Lionel Wernick was friendly with George Borwell, a senior director of Taylor Woodrow, Swiftplan's parent company. George approached Lionel when Swiftplan was put up for sale and asked him if he would be interested in buying the business. Lionel travelled to see the company at Neath in south Wales, liked the business, its management and premises, persuaded his brother Joe that they could overcome the difficulties facing the business, and negotiated the purchase for £750,000. His accountant told him it was a bargain. Swiftplan became part of Wernick on 14 July 1989.

Acquisition of Swiftplan, Neath, 1989: (left to right) Don Richards, Kenneth Johns (chairman), unknown, Ray Hunt, Eddie Shaw (managing director), David Wernick, Joe Wernick, Simon Reffell, Lionel Wernick, George Borwell and unknown.



Taylor Woodrow was one of the UK's leading construction companies, and Swiftplan's main role was the manufacture of site accommodation for Taylor Woodrow International. It also supplied other construction companies working overseas, as well as other international businesses active in Africa and the Middle East. Originally based in Hayes in west London, the firm had taken advantage of grants aimed at encouraging businesses to move to areas of unemployment, and relocated to Neath in 1980. There it merged with an existing business, also part of Taylor Woodrow, called Cymru Buildings. The latter was the successor to a business called Holder Prefabricated Industries, already well established in Neath by the early 1970s, which made cheap site cabins clad in painted plywood.

Two of Swiftplan's longest serving employees in 2013, Jeff Pritchard and Dennis Gibson, began work with Cymru Buildings in 1979 and 1977 respectively. They recalled their own days as apprentices, when foremen were invariably tough and invariably inclined to humiliate young apprentices. They also had to put up with traditional teasing, such as being sent to the stores to ask for 'a long weight' or 'a left-handed hammer'. At Christmas the tradition was for each of the apprentices in turn to stand on the table at the Christmas lunch and sing a carol; those who refused were 'greased', that is, covered in glue and sawdust. Most apprentices put up with all this but some left. The factory, Jeff and Dennis remembered, could be very cold. During wintry weather, they had to shovel snow out of the factory before work could start. One winter they were able to skate along the frozen canal that ran alongside the factory.

This was a time when work-related social activities were still popular. A successful football team played for several years in the Swansea & District Sunday League, winning the fourth division title in its first year. A lot of informal sport, football, cricket and rugby went on in lunch breaks on the land alongside the factory.



The annual Wernick football match played between the Midlands and the South during the 1980s.

The men played hard and there were plenty of torn ligaments, broken ankles and knocked-out teeth. One lunchtime game of football even ended up with an arrest for assault and several court appearances.

The merger of Swiftplan with Cymru Buildings in the 1970s coincided with the deterioration of the UK economy and the decline in international contracts. Although the company moved to making steel-framed modular units in 1984, Swiftplan struggled and by 1986 it was losing £600,000 a year. The workforce was demoralised and the calibre of senior management was poor. But the business still had the confidence of Lord Taylor, the chairman of Taylor Woodrow. He appreciated the efforts of Simon Reffell, the company's newly appointed marketing manager, to turn around the company's image, and supported him against the incumbent managing director, who had met Lord Taylor to ask for Simon's dismissal, but instead found himself without a job. A trained roofing surveyor, Simon had joined the company in 1986, having previously been the divisional manager of a roofing company and managing director of a contract roofing business.

In 1987 Eddie Shaw was appointed field sales

manager. After joining Vic Hallam, a leading modular building company, he became export sales manager before being recruited to run a similar business in South Africa, where he spent seven years before returning to the UK. At the time of his interview Swiftplan was doing so badly that the factory itself was empty. (Julian Johns, working as a draughtsman, remembered there were times when the plans for the last building on order were on the drawing board.)

Both Shaw, who quickly became deputy managing director, and Reffell, appointed marketing director, believed that the plans put forward by Swiftplan's then chairman were insufficient to turn the business around, but their alternative approach faced resistance from some staff who would have preferred redundancy. In fact, Taylor Woodrow had told Swiftplan that the business would be closed unless it reverted to profit within a year. 'It was a bit of a battle,' recalled Shaw, 'and a really big challenge.' But both men had the support of Taylor Woodrow as they worked hard to overhaul the business. Steadily the business began to recover, winning several major contracts, and although it was breaking even rather than making a profit, Taylor Woodrow was impressed enough to keep the business going.



This floating base camp was supplied by Wernick in 1988 for the London Docklands development.

In particular, under Eddie Shaw, the Neath factory concentrated on steel-framed modular buildings and improving quality standards. This was already the way the market was moving – clients preferred modular buildings since they did not rot, there was no risk of infestation, they avoided the chemical treatment necessary to preserve timber, and cold-rolled galvanised steel neither rusted nor corroded. The units were durable, flexible and energy-efficient. An early example of the flexibility of these units was the contract to build Wales’ first ‘American-style, drive-in, fast-food restaurant’, called Burger Master, next to the M4 near Port Talbot in 1988. In the same year the company also built a floating base camp, lifted into position onto a barge on the Thames, for the managing contracting team leading the development of Canary Wharf in London’s Docklands.

Taylor Woodrow was fighting off an unwelcome bid from rivals Bovis, who accused the company of failing to concentrate on its core activities. A review of the company classed Swiftplan as a non-core business, and a search began to find a suitable buyer. Within Wernick, there was a mixed reaction to the acquisition, since Swiftplan was seen by some as a threat to the future of the Wickford and Brownhills factories. There was trepidation in Neath as well. As a major public company, Taylor Woodrow had been run on very professional lines, often a little too regimented and inflexible, but with a reputation for looking after its employees. Wernick, on the other hand, was still seen as ‘a run-it-by-the-seat-of-your-pants’ organisation, although Shaw, now managing director, and Reffell, now sales and marketing director, both relished the encouragement given to managers



to use their initiative. While they found Joe and Lionel Wernick relatively cautious and conservative, David Wernick, who was taking a bigger part in the business and took over as Swiftplan’s chairman, was very dynamic, although incredibly cost-conscious. He resisted, for instance, Swiftplan’s computerisation programme, and refused to authorise the purchase of a fax machine – which nevertheless went ahead without his authority.

Both the acquisition of Swiftplan and the economic boom of the late 1980s helped Wernick achieve sales of nearly £22 million and operating profits of almost a million pounds in 1990. Capital employed had risen from less than £2 million in 1981 to nearly £5.5 million, and the number of employees had reached 393. By then, as the company was working on a contract worth £850,000 to build an extension for the airport on Gibraltar, it was ranked amongst the top ten firms in its field in the UK. With the UK market for modular buildings worth in excess of £200 million, this handful of firms accounted for half the market, and Wernick had an estimated market share of around seven per cent. The other fifty per cent of the market was split between nearly a hundred smaller firms.

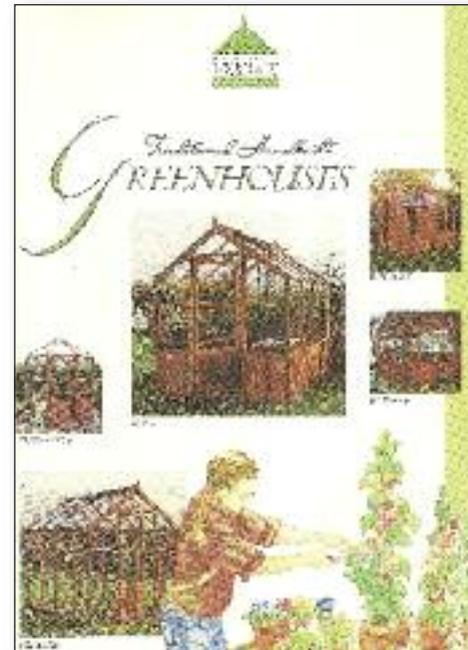
Eddie Shaw, managing director of Swiftplan, receiving an award from the local MP, Peter Hain, in the early 1990s.

This building for Beal School in Ilford demonstrates Wernick’s progress in design and construction by the early 1990s.



During the second half of the 1980s, the UK economy had reached a record annual growth rate of 3.7 per cent. Income tax had been steadily reduced, the standard rate falling from 33 per cent to 25 per cent and the top rate from 83 per cent to 40 per cent. But the upturn was just the precursor to yet another downturn, as the sequence of boom and bust that had plagued the UK economy since the 1960s carried on. By the end of 1989, it was clear that the boom, which had greatly benefited the construction and allied trades, was coming to an end. Falling tax and interest rates had overheated the economy. Manufacturing had suffered so badly in the early 1980s that it was unable to respond to increased demand for

A range of elegant greenhouses marketed by the company in the 1980s.



Staff outside the former Brownhills offices: (Back left to right) Carl Warren, Joe Beale, Peter Kirton, Ben Yates, Alan Hollyoak, Garry Sylvester and Bill Nicholls; (front left to right) George Stewart, Kerry ?, Trevor Goodwin, Margaret Webster, Terry Kenny, Diane Wilks, Ron Wood, Joyce Loat and Sylvia Harper.

consumer goods, which were once again sucked in from abroad, creating a record balance of payments deficit. House prices soared, the rate of inflation grew to ten per cent and interest rates rose to fifteen per cent in 1989-90. As boom turned to bust, thousands of home owners were left with houses worth less than the price they had paid for them. While inflation dipped, unemployment climbed again.

Unlike the recession of the early 1980s, Wernick was this time caught out. Quality problems were not being tackled effectively. Only now was it finally agreed to go ahead with the computerisation of the drawing office. Falling orders were aggravated by the economic slump. But the company was also affected by serious

losses from a development led by David Wernick to convert two properties in Little Venice in London into ten apartments that went badly wrong for a variety of reasons and ultimately cost Wernick half a million pounds. As David later recalled, the company could not cope simultaneously with manufacturing losses, recession and a loss-making property development that 'was sucking the lifeblood out of the company'.

Financial figures worsened steadily during 1990. By the beginning of 1991, the company's losses led to the introduction of a three-day working week at Wickford and Brownhills. Strict spending controls were imposed. As summer approached, the outlook remained grim. Lionel Wernick



discussed the situation with the company's bank to make sure reserves were sufficient 'to keep the company buoyant', as the management committee minutes put it. By the autumn, senior management salaries, including those of shareholders, were being cut and more jobs were lost, as Lionel warned that 'the position cannot continue into next year'. Ray Hunt pointed out that too often Wernick was missing out on tenders in spite of discounts and low margins, while David Wernick wanted unprofitable products purged from the range. David had always been critical of the quasi-independence of the Brownhills and Billericay factories and it had taken him ages to persuade his uncle Joe and his father Lionel to standardise the product range. He was also questioning the focus of the business on manufacturing, when he was convinced that the hire business was much more profitable. At the end of 1991 plans were being discussed to invest further in production at Neath to meet the increasing demands of customers. By then Wernick's sales had fallen to less than £16 million, with an operating loss of more than £400,000.

The failure to staunch the haemorrhage of cash as losses mounted during 1991 led the company's bankers to insist on a financial review to determine whether or not to continue to support the business. The company persuaded the bank that it should commission its own accountants to conduct the review. This recommended the sale of one of the manufacturing sites to raise the cash needed to pay off the money owed to the bank. The company had always pursued a policy of investing in the freehold of all its properties wherever possible but the Neath site was actually leasehold. The choice therefore lay between Brownhills and Wickford. Since Wickford (and Neath) was a more modern factory, the decision was made to close Brownhills. It was the strength of the company's property assets, coupled with stringent cost controls, that finally pulled the company through its worst crisis. For Eddie Shaw, 'Wernick survived

on a wing and a prayer.'

Implementing the closure proved emotionally draining for Joe and Lionel Wernick. Making the announcement to the Brownhills workforce, Lionel Wernick remembered, was 'one of the toughest things I have had to do in my life'. Arrangements were made for staff either to transfer to Neath or receive help to find alternative jobs. The closure finally brought to an end the division between the Midlands and the South but left Julian Wernick in particular feeling that he had no future in the business, which ultimately led him to decide to leave, taking with him a small mail-order subsidiary, Park Lines, specialising in garages, workshops and garden buildings, bought some years earlier. On top of this, the bank refused to allow the company the funds needed to carry through the closure, resulting in the sale of several other smaller properties.

A full working week was restored in January 1992 but times were still hard. The company finally returned to profit at the end of March for the first time in eighteen months. Sadly, Brian Humphreys, who had risen from the shopfloor to become group production director, died of cancer in the early summer of that year after nearly 40 years with the business.

The crisis brought Steve Potter into the company in 1993 as the company's first externally appointed finance director-designate. It had become clear that Wernick had grown beyond the capability of Pat Poel, who had given such excellent service as the company's book-keeper. She had joined the accounts department in 1965, eventually becoming accounts director, and would continue as Steve Potter's deputy. She was working for the company until shortly before her death aged 82 in 2005. Steve Potter had come to know the company well as one of its external auditors, and he had helped to prepare the financial data required by the company's bankers. He realised that the company's financial systems needed bringing up to date in order to

Joe and Lionel Wernick at a family day at Joe's house in Wolverhampton in the early 1990s

give management current financial information, and he finally persuaded David Wernick and Ray Hunt, neither of them enthusiasts for modern technology, to begin the long overdue process of computerisation, with the first PC being installed in 1994. Today the company operates a group-wide network of some 300 PCs and tablets.

The company broke even in 1993, making a small operating profit on turnover further reduced to less than £12 million. At the end of the previous year both Joe and Lionel Wernick had given up executive involvement in the business, taking up the roles of joint non-executive chairmen. The financial crisis had taken its toll on both men. Joe Wernick died at the age of 73 in the summer of 1994. After his brother's death, Lionel's own long and devoted service was recognised by his appointment as the company's life president. The responsibility for the future of the Wernick Group was now in the hands of David Wernick and Ray Hunt as the new joint chief executives.



5 | A nationwide business 1995 onwards



David Wernick and Ray Hunt were the perfect foils for each other, one the swashbuckling entrepreneur, the other more cautious. But both men were ambitious to expand the group in the aftermath of the financial crisis of the early 1990s.

Ray Hunt's contribution to the group was immense. Never having had the opportunity to further his own education, he had worked his way up through the business like several of his peers. One of the many who had been mentored and trained by Lionel Wernick, he felt

great loyalty towards him. Shrewd, able and financially astute, he was gifted with great charm and had proved an outstanding salesman, known for his catchphrase, 'Get it in the book!' He had worked with David Wernick since David had first entered the business and Ray's wisdom and experience proved invaluable in what was an excellent working partnership. Ray himself had mentored youngsters joining the company, including Steve Pridmore, for whom Ray was 'a tough guy, a rock, a fair, people-minded person', willing to allow others to use their initiative.

Ray Hunt and David Wernick receiving the Growing Business Award from BDO Stoy Hayward in 1997.

David Wernick and Ray Hunt were supported by members of a new executive board formed in 1994, which included Eddie Shaw and Simon Reffell as well as Graham Craine, who was deputy managing director of hire business until his retirement in 2005. In 1996, on his appointment as finance director, Steve Potter, who had been acting as company secretary, also became a full member.

The recession of the early 1990s presented the Wernick Group with a great opportunity. The Group had survived a recession that had left many other construction-related companies seriously weakened. With more than a hundred businesses operating in the hire sector, there was plenty of choice. For David Wernick, this was a chance for the Group to strengthen the hire division, which he had always regarded as the part of the business with the most potential. Under Julian Wernick, the division had been profitable, but it had always been regarded as an appendage of the manufacturing business.

The first opportunity came in 1995 when David Wernick heard that the owners of one of the major modular building firms, Vic Hallam, were selling the hire division. David Wernick, Ray Hunt and Eddie Shaw met to discuss the idea of making a bid for Hallam Hire. Ray Hunt was cautious about the proposal but David Wernick and Eddie Shaw were both enthusiastic. David also persuaded his father to back the idea. As Eddie Shaw later reflected, 'It was the beginning of the rise of the Wernick Group.'

David Wernick was almost too late in contacting Hallam's parent company, Hillsdown Holdings. Heads of agreement were just being finalised with another bidder. Arranging an appointment, he drew up an offer letter and travelled to Hillsdown's Hampstead headquarters. He set out the price he would pay for the business, and promised to transfer the following day a £10,000 non-returnable deposit into the company's bank account, but only if he was granted exclusive bidding rights. In return, he would hand over the

agreed purchase price of £1.8 million within four weeks.

It was an audacious approach, and it paid off. Hillsdown agreed to the deal. But having made the commitment to buy the business, then and only then did David Wernick approach the company's bankers to negotiate the loan he needed. Steve Potter recalled accompanying Lionel Wernick, David Wernick and Ray Hunt to meet the bankers in London. When they put forward their request, the bank executives were initially concerned but once David had fully explained the rationale behind the deal they were fully supportive.

With sites at Isleworth in the south, Langley Mill near Nottingham in the Midlands, and Rochdale in the north, and a hire fleet of one thousand units, Hallam Hire doubled the size of Wernick's hire business. The experience taught David Wernick a lot about making acquisitions, and gave him the confidence to repeat the process. He did not wait long. Within a year Vibroplant had approached the company about selling its fleet. David submitted his initial offer for the business, which was rejected in favour of a higher alternative. But after a couple of months Vibroplant contacted David again to ask if he would still stand by his original offer. By then, the business had deteriorated further, and David Wernick reduced his initial offer accordingly. When this drew an initially adverse reaction, he responded that any subsequent offer, in the light of the company's poor condition, would be even lower. The deal was sealed for £2 million in the summer of 1996. As a result, the number of Wernick's hire depots expanded from seven to twelve, with new centres in Glasgow, Dundee, Leeds, Newcastle and Newport, and the size of the hire fleet more than doubled to 5,500 units. The acquisition proved a great success, particularly in expanding Wernick Hire's presence in Scotland. The hire centres in Glasgow and Dundee were so successful that they very quickly had to be relocated to larger premises. The Scottish business was further

extended with another small acquisition in 1997 of the Glasgow-based firm Donald Smith (Container Leasing) Ltd, with a fleet of 300 steel security stores.

It was the Group's great good fortune that this rapid expansion was accompanied by sustained growth in the UK economy. By 1995 the economy was growing at five per cent every year, and the average annual rate for the decade after 1997 was nearly three per cent. Despite the tremors caused by the dot.com fiasco in 2000, this was a time of economic stability and prosperity.

With a template successfully established, a steady stream of other acquisitions followed. In 1998 the purchase of the northern division of MAC Containers, Samson of Wakefield and Alliedcabin's hire business added a further 1,500 hire units and two more hire centres in Brackley and Newton Abbott. Another 1,500 units and four more depots (Edinburgh, Newcastle, Hull and Shaftesbury) came with the takeover of UK Cabins and Portable Cabin Services in 1999.

In two years the Group had invested £8 million in Wernick Hire, with the number of hire centres standing at 17 and the number of hire units at more than 8,000. Coverage of Scotland continued with the addition of an Aberdeen centre through the acquisition of Securastore in 2001. Two years later the hire fleet exceeded 10,000 units following the purchase of the Jarvis hire business and the Rok Build fleet, based in the south and south-west. Expansion resumed in 2005, with a string of acquisitions taking Wernick Hire to 27 hire centres and 17,000 hire units: Accommodation Hire from Andrews Sykes, CDC Instant Space, based in Cornwall, and the Selwood Group's hire division. In addition, York-based PK Accommodation, named after its founder, Paul Kenyon, was acquired, specialising in the sale of refurbished modular units. Many of these businesses came with leasehold premises. The financial crisis of the early 1990s had underscored the importance for Wernick of maintaining a strong asset base, and one of the challenges in the wake of these acquisitions was to find new freehold sites.

A modular building being refurbished at the York workshop of PK Accommodation.



Gregor Munro shakes hands with David Wernick in August 2006 on the sale of his business Scotia Kabins to the Wernick Group.

Well-known for being on the lookout for acquisitions, the Wernick Group was regularly approached by owners wishing to sell. They were also attracted by the speed with which David Wernick took decisions, often critical for sellers, and by his record for sticking to his original offer. Between 2006 and 2012 another dozen hire businesses were accumulated. The most significant were Rollalong Hire, with 4,000 units, in 2009; Rovacabin, with 4,000 cabins and modular buildings, in 2011; and, in 2012, Kier Group's 3,500-strong hire fleet. The latter deal also came with an exclusive five-year agreement to supply all Kier's site accommodation needs throughout Britain, which demonstrated the extent of Wernick's reputation in the field.



The integration of so many different businesses into Wernick Hire was accomplished with very few problems. Pat Shayler joined the group in 1999 following the acquisition of UK Cabins, and soon became manager of the Stockton hire centre. Kath Hodges, who joined in 1996, eventually became responsible for quality control nationwide. Both of them believed that any feeling of 'them and us' disappeared very quickly, and that the family nature of the business helped to unify the business. David Wernick always emphasised that staff were the cornerstone of the business. Staff from across the hire business come together on a regular basis, whether for presentations recognising the best performing hire centres or for training sessions. In recent times pay awards have been made annually with only one exception, and staff receive the usual benefits and recognition for long service. It also helped that senior managers running the hire centres were given a great deal of responsibility, and allowed to get on with their jobs without interference provided they met their budgets. Given a lot of discretion,

they were able to manage their centres almost as separate businesses, with their own profit and loss accounts. The Group was very transparent about its overall financial performance, a quality that impressed employees who came into the Group having worked for much less open businesses. And in a male-dominated industry, the Group is exceptional in the number of women that it employs in senior management positions.

Turning over £50 million a year, Wernick Hire has become the Group's financial powerhouse. A large manufacturer with a small hire business had been transformed into a leading hire business with a significant manufacturing business. It is a financially stable business in an industry notorious for financial instability. By 2013 the business operated from 32 centres with 24,000 units across the UK. It was a testament to the success of a policy of buying badly run businesses in a booming sector and turning them around through good management. Wernick also refused to follow other rivals in the dangerous policy of discounting rates in difficult times. As David

Wernick was fond of telling his centre managers, 'We'll be here when our rivals have all gone.' The strategy of building up the hire business had a major impact on the Group's financial performance. Hire was indeed more profitable than manufacturing. In ten years sales nearly trebled from less than £12 million in 1993 to more than £33 million in 2003, but the improvement in profitability was even more marked, with operating profits of more than £4 million. This pattern continued, with turnover reaching more than £80 million in 2013, operating profits exceeding £12 million and earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation of over £20 million.

It was not just the breadth of coverage that helped the business to grow. From the outset there was an emphasis on raising quality and improving service to meet the increasing demands of customers. It was all about the ability to make quick decisions, remaining flexible, keeping promises, fulfilling specifications and meeting delivery times. All this helped Wernick Hire to command a premium in a volatile market. The company took pride in striving to meet customer specifications. Pat Shayler was proud to say that never once had she had to say no to a client. In 2007, when a construction company approached Wernick with a plea for a cheaper vandal-proof unit for use on site, it resulted in the AV-Flex System, cheaper, quicker to install, more robust and more flexible. The System became increasingly popular with construction companies, and highlighted the advantage the company had in manufacturing its own units. For Pat, every day brings different challenges. 'You never know what the next phone call will bring. No two days are the same.'

At the same time a new hire business emerged from the spate of acquisitions. When Wernick took over the hire fleet of Andrews Sykes in 2005, it struck David Wernick that part of the fleet had been built up specifically for special events. For example, the business had supplied the Commonwealth Games in Manchester. These



Top to bottom:

Stacked Citycabins at Swansea City FC's first team training facility.

Blast rated accommodation hired by Vivergo Fuels.

Stacked Avflex GreenSpace accommodation, in which Wernick is the market leader, supplied to Vinci Construction.

Wernick units can be found anywhere in the UK. This one was sitting at the foot of the castle in Durham.

units, along with others, formed the initial fleet for a new company, Wernick Event Hire, launched at the beginning of 2006. Partly from acquisitions made on behalf of Wernick Hire, and partly from acquisitions made specifically with Wernick Event Hire in mind, the latter grew quickly, increasing turnover from £700,000 in 2006 to nearly £7 million in 2012. Operating from five hire centres, the company covers the entire UK. There are few major events the company is not involved with. The rapid growth of the business, according to Liam Muldoon, the company's general manager since 2007, owes much to family ownership, with short lines of communication and minimal bureaucracy making it possible to have almost immediate answers to questions. Echoing the views of other managers not only in the hire business but across the Group, he felt they were given the freedom to achieve for the company in a challenging environment.



A Wernick Anti-Vandal unit being craned into position at a Wernick depot.



Although the emphasis had been on investment in the hire business, manufacturing was not neglected and there were major changes in the years as manufacturing also took advantage of a stable and growing economy. Eddie Shaw was insistent that all modular units should be steel-framed if the business was to remain competitive. Steel-framed production, which brought significant savings in labour costs over the old-fashioned timber-frame method, was already being used by rivals. Eddie also had his eye on the more profitable permanent-build sector and wanted to move away from the increasingly competitive market for site accommodation.

In 1998 Wernick Buildings launched RapidPlan 3000, a new steel-framed volumetric building system using galvanised steel-frames that never rotted or rusted, were capable of being clad in brick or steel, and could be used for buildings of up to four storeys. The prototype was the £1.3 million two-storey head offices built for Newbury District Council (later West Berkshire Council) in just 26 weeks. Eddie Shaw and Simon Reffell had been debating the adoption of galvanised steel-frames for some time. One day when their office was covered in segments of cold-rolled steel the client from the council was shown in, took one look at them and immediately said, 'Yes! That's what we want!'

It was not a universally popular move. Ray Hunt, in particular, was cautious about the idea, bearing in mind its impact on Wickford. But a review of production at Wickford revealed that it was lagging behind Neath in several areas. First, Neath was simply more profitable. This was obvious to Richard Jackson, who had been employed at Neath since 1979, when he was asked to spend some time training men at Wickford: 'Wickford could not keep up with us.' Lower margins had forced Wickford to take on orders for only the simplest of panel buildings, but the knock-on effect was insufficient orders to maintain Wickford's profitability. Also, a shortage of local skilled labour ruled out the possibility of

converting the factory to produce steel-framed units. Conversely, in Neath, there was a pool of skilled industrial workers. In January 2000 the end of manufacturing at Wickford was announced, and all production was transferred to Neath, where another assembly line was added. To fund this restructuring, parts of the Wickford site were sold off, but the Group has kept its head office there.

With manufacturing concentrated at Neath, the emphasis shifted from supplying units to the hire business, which tended to acquire any units it needed elsewhere, towards developing Wernick Buildings as a provider of high-quality permanent modular buildings designed and built to



Breaking ground for Bishop's Park College in Clacton: the group features Steve Pridmore, Harry Peacock and David Wernick.

An aerial view of the site of the Neath factory, acquired by Wernick in 1989.



Wernick's flexible RapidPlan 3000 system was first used for the head offices of Newbury District (later West Berkshire) Council in 1998. A decade later it was used to create a striking modern building for Bishops Park College, Clacton.



individual client specifications. Computer-aided design (CAD) had been in use at Neath for some time, giving scope for more creative ideas, helping to move clients away from the perception that modular buildings were no more than a series of linked boxes, and enabling the company to respond more imaginatively to ever-increasing client expectations.

The range of contracts demonstrated just how far the modular building industry had come. There was, for instance, a £2.6 million clinic for AIDS and tropical diseases for the Western General Hospital, Edinburgh, in 1997. In the same year Wernick was commissioned by Liverpool City Council to build a new school to designs by the city architect to replace the decaying original premises still housing Monksdown County Primary School. The complex, worth nearly £1.3 million, was completed under

budget in 36 weeks with a traditional brick-clad exterior. The contract was managed from the Wernick office at Aldridge under Sylvia Harper, who recalled Monksdown as the most memorable of all the contracts she had been involved with. At the opening of the school, she had been moved by the song performed by the children that featured her by name.

Contemporary prefabricated buildings are almost indistinguishable from those constructed by traditional methods. This is an ancillary hospital building.

This sophisticated isolation clinic built for Edinburgh's Western General Hospital in 1997 showed how far modular building had developed.

Monksdown County Primary School built by Wernick in 1997.





Built as a direct consequence of the Challenger space shuttle disaster in 1986, the Challenger Learning Centre at the National Space Science Centre in Leicester is a distinctive timber-framed Wernick building erected in 2000.

Amongst the more unusual contracts fulfilled by Wernick Buildings were modular petrol filling stations for BP in Russia. Ian Griffiths, who joined the company in 1988, spent three weeks in Moscow in the summer of 1997 putting one complex together with his seven-strong team. The temperature, he recalled, hit 42° Centigrade at times, but three days were also lost to rain, creating a sea of mud that bogged down the on-site crane. The poverty was appalling and the local mafia appeared to have their own corner in every hotel. The Russian workers on site appeared aloof until the last day when they threw the most amazing party for Ian and his colleagues. In the spring of 2000 Wernick designed and built an unusual timber-framed building, the Challenger Learning Centre, at the National Space Science Centre in Leicester, Europe's first such centre, sponsored by the families of those lost in the space shuttle disaster in 1986. In 2008 Wernick Buildings designed and produced an innovative new modular police cell, a patented all-steel structure made to strict specifications to meet Home Office standards.

Opposite top: The innovative all-steel Pcflex modular police cell developed by Wernick for the Home Office in 2008. When Workington police station was flooded in 2009, a Pcflex custody suite was supplied and installed in five days.

In the same year the firm completed a new dialysis unit for Hayes Cottage Hospital, a two-storey, 24-bed hospital building constructed from

37 factory-built sections delivered and craned into position in just four days, with the fitting out completed in eight weeks. The client had allowed the company to begin with a blank canvas, permitting a more imaginative design appropriate to the site. For Julian John, who had spent his career as a designer with the firm, this highlighted the creative freedom given by modern technology. 'It's all about putting your mark on something in a small way.'

In 2012 Alan Hollyoak undertook his most challenging project as a contracts manager, supervising a complex and difficult £3 million contract for the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. In the same year his colleague Garry Sylvester faced his most challenging project, overseeing the construction of a £4 million 44-bed two-storey brick-faced isolation wing for Warwick Hospital, completed in what the client described as 'the miracle time of 26 weeks'. Prompt delivery according to specification – and overcoming problems should they arise – is a crucial part of the Group's commitment to clients. An integral part of Wernick Buildings is the separate construction company that ensures high standards of quality on site.



The dialysis unit for Hayes Cottage Hospital completed in 2008.



The light and airy reception area of the multi-million pound extension for Warwick Hospital built by Wernick in 2012.



The flexibility of Wernick buildings makes them ideal for use as marketing suites.



This state-of-the-art timber-clad building supplied by Wernick is the clubhouse for Hillingdon Cycle Circuit in West London.



Clyst Heath primary school in Devon.



An expanding workload only highlighted the inadequacy of the Neath factory. It had never been truly satisfactory. It was a leasehold site, and increasingly cramped, limiting the size of units that could be made. There were plans in the mid-1990s to transfer to a larger site but complications over the lease prevented the move taking place. As it turned out, this was fortunate, as the Group struck a much better deal in 2013 to take over a freehold factory at nearby Kenfig from the receivers of the previous owners. The building itself was 40 per cent larger, with wider bays that made it possible to make larger units, and came with nine acres of land for storage. The Group has invested more than £2.5 million in the site and manufacturing is due to be transferred in the second half of 2014.

Jonathan Wernick, David's eldest son, had joined the company in February 2012. Like his father, he had spent his school holidays and university vacations working in the business. He had never thought of doing anything else. 'I always felt like I was growing up into the family business. It's kind of cool being the fourth generation of the family.' He feels that the business is part of his personal life and that being part of the family gives him an additional drive to succeed. He cares deeply about the business and its future. There are pressures: 'you're judged by your name and you've got to live up to expectations so you find you have to work twice as hard as anyone else. People expect a lot from you and you don't want to let your dad down.'

Wernick units being constructed at the Wernick Buildings factory in Neath.



Like his father, he is working his way up through the business, learning from experience as well as from his colleagues. He recalled the Diamond Jubilee holiday in June 2012 when he and his deputy manager at the event hire depot in Aldridge realised that if they were to have 14 toilet blocks delivered on time to a client the following Wednesday, they had no option, given the intervening holiday, but to overhaul the units themselves, and they both worked 15 hours a day that weekend. Jonathan agreed to do the repainting, which took him so long that he was on the verge of giving up when he remembered how he had been complaining only the week before that a member of staff had been taking too long doing the same thing! Jonathan is currently general manager of Eventlink, the temporary seating division of Wernick Event Hire.

The family nature of the Wernick Group remains an intrinsic characteristic of the business. The structure of family ownership had changed at the end of the 1990s. The growth of the Group not only attracted approaches from those wishing to sell businesses, it also brought approaches from those wishing to buy Wernick. The most serious of these came in 1999 when a major foreign company made a bid. This was rejected by the family but for the first time it had set a market value on the business. This led the family of the late Joe Wernick to sell their shares, achieved through loan notes redeemable over several years, to Lionel Wernick and his family, giving them outright control. Shortly afterwards, 3i, which had first invested in Wernick in 1962, also sold its holding back to the family. For David Wernick, this cleared the way for a long-term strategy for future growth that

Wernick Event Hire supplied the gantry for the finish line of the Bupa Great North Run. A Wernick cabin can be seen in the background.



could be implemented without any tension or pressure from external shareholders.

Following the retirement of Ray Hunt in 2001, executive management of the business was in the hands of David Wernick and the executive team. But David Wernick, an instinctive entrepreneur, who at one point insisted on scrutinising every invoice, always recognised that the way the Group was managed would have to change as it became bigger. The Group's success and dynamism helped to attract the talented managers needed to fill places in an expanding management team. David Wernick, with a focus on long-term strategy, has stepped back into the role of executive chairman. Simon Doran, who joined Wernick in 2004, initially as Wernick Hire managing director, was appointed group chief executive in January 2013. Alongside Steve Potter and Simon Reffell, the team was completed by Michael Thistlethwaite as managing director of Wernick Hire and Andy King, who succeeded Eddie Shaw as managing



Andy King,
Managing Director of
Wernick Buildings.



Left: Steve Potter,
Group Finance
Director.



Right: Michael
Thistlethwaite,
Managing Director
of Wernick Hire.



Wernick Hire staff at a seminar in 2014.

director of Wernick Buildings. Both Michael and Andy were examples of the talented managers recruited to senior management positions from outside the Group. Beneath them there is a spread of capable management within each of the subsidiary companies. While senior executives are fully involved in the business, managers are allowed to exercise their initiative and encouraged to be entrepreneurial within the Group's overall strategy and budget. Accountability, simplicity and transparency are important parts of the principles that guide the Group.

David Wernick, Chairman, Wernick Group.

David Wernick takes the view that structure, financial control and enthusiasm are vital for business success. He has always encouraged a dynamic culture, recognising the importance of



constantly challenging how things are done, although he has never been in favour of change for change's sake, which he believes is destabilising for employees. Managers, he is certain, must never lose touch with the basics of what makes the business tick. And he feels that one way of making up for the lack of intimacy in a larger business is generating a sense of excitement amongst employees at being on a shared journey within a successful business, which helps to create confidence.

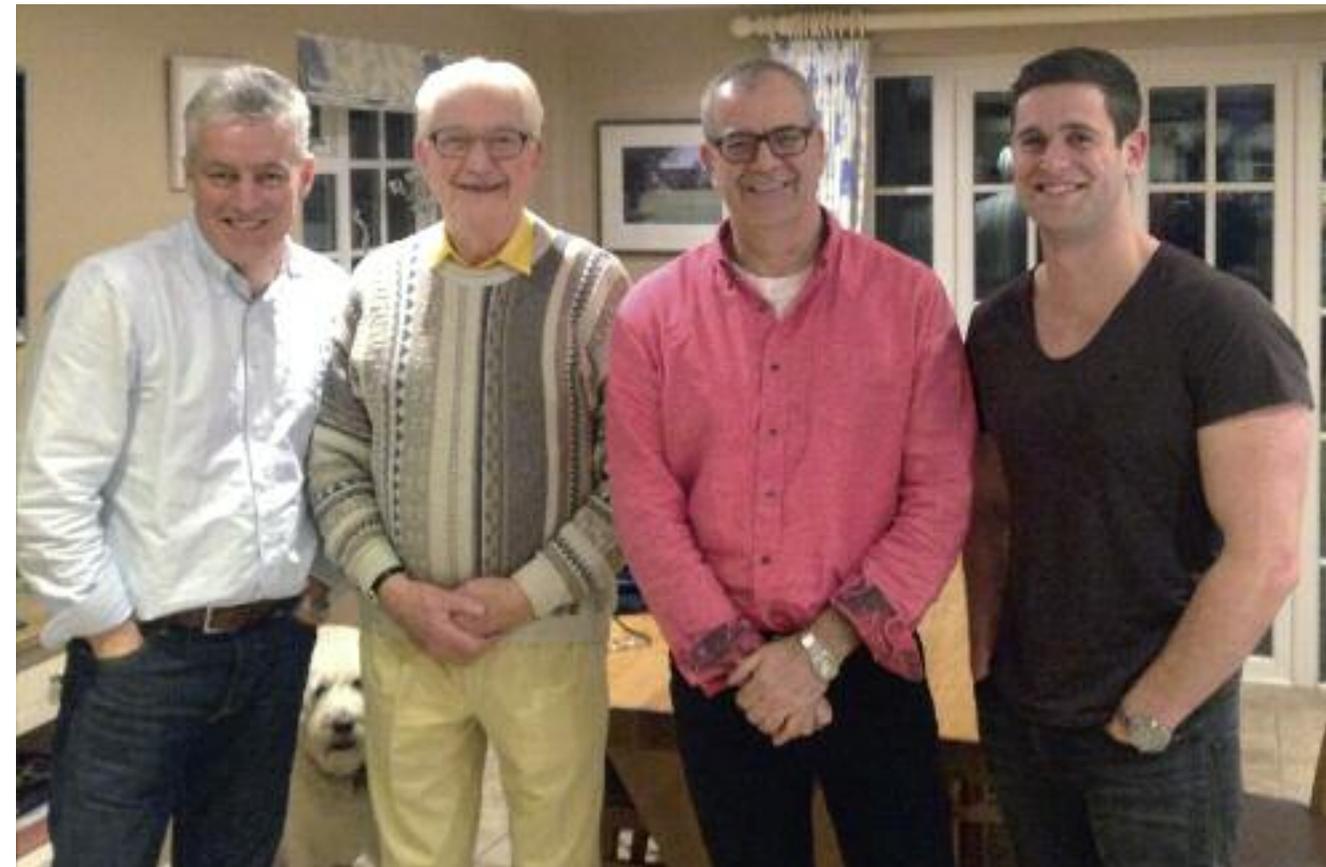
As the Group celebrates 80 years in 2014

- The Group has five operating companies: Wernick Buildings, Wernick Construction, Wernick Hire, Wernick Event Hire and PK Accommodation (shortly to become Wernick Refurbished Buildings)
- The Group has turnover of £90 million and net assets worth £56 million
- The Group employs 550 people
- The Group operates from 36 sites (33 are freehold)
- Wernick Buildings will move to a new nine acre site at Kenfig by the end of 2014

- Wernick Refurbished Buildings will move to a new seven acre site at Shipton, near York by the end of 2014
- The Group is the oldest company in the UK operating in their market and
- Jonathan Wernick is the fourth generation of the family to work within the business

The journey made by the Group over the last 80 years has been colourful and eventful. The determination and commitment, inventiveness and entrepreneurial instincts of Sam Wernick, who laboured so hard for so long to see his business established, remain part of the make-up of today's Wernick Group.

An informal snap of three generations: (left to right) Simon Doran, Lionel Wernick, David Wernick and Jonathan Wernick.



Note: page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations. SW refers to Sam Wernick.

- Alexander II 6
 Alexander III 6
 Algeria 33
 Amber brothers 17
 Armenia 33
 Ascension Island 34–5
- Barton, Jack 34, 39
 Bates, Bill 25
 Beal School, Ilford 43
 Beale, Joe 44
 Belgium 28
 Bessant, Frank 38
 Billericay factory 14–18, 20, 21–2, 24–5, 26, 30–1, 32–3
 Bircham, Tony 39
 Bishops Park College, Clacton 54
 Borwell, George 40, 40
 Brownhills factory 19–20, 21–2, 25, 30–1, 33, 44, 45
- Cavadasca, Doris 17
 Cavasdasca, John 16, 17, 33, 39
 Challenger Learning Centre, National Space Science Centre, Leicester 56, 56
 Cleethorpes Zoo and Marineland cafeteria 19
 Clyst Heath primary school 60
 Coke Street 6, 7
 Craine, Graham 48
- Dodd, Robbie 26
 Doran, Simon 63, 65
 Downes, Mr 15
 Duke Street 7
- East End, of London 6–7, 9
 Europe 28
- France 11, 28
 Freeman, Les 26
- Germany 8, 11, 15, 28
 Gibson, Dennis 40
 Goldspink, Norman 34, 39
 Goodwin, Trevor 44
 Griffiths, Gary 38
 Griffiths, Ian 56
- Hain, Peter 43
 Harper, Sylvia 25, 44, 55
 Hart, Brian 16
 Hayes Cottage Hospital 56, 57
 Heath, Ted 27
 Hillingdon Cycle Circuit, West London 59
 Hodges, Kath 50
 Hollyoak, Alan 25, 33, 44, 56
 Homer, Betty 34
 Hookees, Bob 39
 Hooks, Bob 32
 Howdle, Carol 25
 Humphreys, Brian 16, 17, 31, 31, 38, 38, 45
 Hunt, Edna 17, 18, 24, 25
 Hunt, Nathan 17
 Hunt, Ray 22, 31, 34, 38, 39, 40, 47
 career 17–18, 31, 38
 Windsor Safari Park 25
 financial crisis 45
 joint chief executive 46–8
 galvanised steel-frames 53
 retirement 63
 Hunt, Raymond (son of Ray) 17
- Inaccessible Island 34
 Italy 33
- Jackson, Richard 53
 Johns, Julian 41, 56
 Johns, Kenneth 40
- Kenfig site 61, 65
 Kenny, Terry 34, 44
 Kensington Park Road, Notting Hill 9
 Kenyon, Paul 49
 King, Andy 63–4, 63
 Kirton, Peter 44
- Linley, Viscount 25
 Loat, Joyce 44
- MacAlpine, Sir Alfred 21
 MacMillan, Harold 20
 Marconi Radar Systems Centre, Chelmsford 27
 Margaret, Princess 25
 Mellon, John 33
 Middle East 28–30
 Monksdown County Primary School 55
 Muldoon, Liam 52
 Munro, Gregor 50
- Neath 40
 Neath factory 42, 45, 53, 53, 55, 61, 61
 Newbury District (later West Berkshire) Council offices 53, 54
 Nicholls, Bill 44
 Nieman, Max 12, 13, 15, 18, 22, 23, 31, 38
 Nieman, Pat (Yetta) (née Wernick) 7, 12, 13, 22
- Oswestry 9
- Peacock, Harry 17, 31, 32, 33, 53
 Perry, Fred 11
 Plumbers Row, Whitechapel 7
 Poel, Pat 45
 Poland 6–7
 Potter, Steve 45–6, 48, 63, 63
 Prestwood Road, Wolverhampton 9
 Pridmore, Steve 32, 34, 39, 39, 47, 53
 Pritchard, Jeff 40
- Reffell, Simon 40, 41, 42, 48, 53, 63
 Reynolds, Bill 25, 31
 Richards, Don 16, 31, 33, 34, 40
 Ruffles, Sid 26
 Russia 6, 8, 11, 56
- Sampson, Brian 26
 Saudi Arabia 29
 Scotland 48–9
 Shaw, Eddie 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 48, 53, 63
 Shayler, Pat 50, 51
- Shipton site 65
 Smart, Ronnie 25
 Smart Junior, Billy 25
 South Atlantic islands 34–5
 Spencer, Lady Diana 35
 Springett, Geoff 31
 Switzerland 28, 33
 Sylvester, Bill 25
 Sylvester, Garry 25, 33, 44, 56
- Tanner, Peter 18–19, 35
 Taylor, Lord 41
 Thatcher, Mrs 27
 Thistlethwaite, Michael 63–4, 63
 Turner brothers 17
- Wales, Prince of 35
 Warren, Carl 44
 Warwick Hospital 56, 58
 Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton 9–11, 9, 13–14, 18–19, 20–2, 25
 Watts, Barry 34, 39
 Webster, Margaret 44
 Wernick, Bertha 7, 9, 10, 10, 22
 Wernick, Big Solly (SW's nephew) 7
 Wernick, David 38, 39, 40, 47, 50, 53, 64, 65
 starts in business 26
 career 38
 Swiftplan 43
 financial crisis 44–5
 joint chief executive 46–8
 and acquisitions 50
 Wernick Event Hire 50–2
 freedom from shareholders 62–3
 business vision 64
 Wernick, Dolly 23
 Wernick, Eileen 10, 11, 12, 13
 Wernick, Faye 25
 Wernick, Hetty 11
 Wernick, Issa 6
 Wernick, Joan 7
 Wernick, Jonathan 61–2, 65, 65

- Wernick, Joseph (Joe) (SW's son) 34, 40, 46
birth 7
early career 11–12, 13–14
poultry sheds 16
interest in staff 18, 33
company structure 22, 23, 30, 38
Swiftplan 40, 43
financial crisis 45
end of career 46
- Wernick, Joseph (SW's brother) 6–7, 9
- Wernick, Joseph (SW's uncle) 6–7
- Wernick, Julian 31, 33, 38, 38, 45, 48
- Wernick, Lionel 16, 34, 39, 40, 46, 65
birth 7
early life 9, 10
early career 14, 15
interest in staff 16–18
company structure 22, 23, 38–9
Windsor Safari Park 25
European market 28
Wickford factory 33
Swiftplan 40, 43
financial crisis 44–5
company's life president 46
loyalty of Ray Hunt 47
Hallam Hire 48
and family gain outright control 62
- Wernick, Miriam 6
- Wernick, Nathan (Nat) 11, 22
birth 7
early life 11
early career 13
Billericay factory 14–15
Suffolk Broilers 16
interest in staff 18
company structure 22, 23, 25
export business 27–30
- Wernick, Peter 22
- Wernick, Rebecca 6–7
- Wernick, Ruben 6
- Wernick, Sadie 7
- Wernick, Samuel (Sam) 7, 12, 21
early life and arrival in England 6–7
First World War 8
business growth 12–13
starts in business 9–11
staff outings 17
character 19
Brownhills factory 20
uses consultants 21
retirement 22
entrepreneurial instincts and legacy 65
- Wernick, Shanka 7
- Wernick, Solomon (Solly) 7, 10–11, 13, 20, 22–3, 23
- Wernick, Yetta see Nieman, Pat (Yetta) (née Wernick)
- Western General Hospital, Edinburgh isolation clinic 55
- Wickford factory 33, 44, 45, 53
- Wilkinson, Bill 31
- Wilkinson, John 17
- Wilks, Diane 44
- Wilson, Harold 24
- Windsor Safari Park 25
- Wolverhampton 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 23
see also Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton
- Wood, Ron 44
- Woodward, Jack 18
- Yates, Ben 44