

A man in a dark blue suit, light purple checkered shirt, and blue tie stands in a textile factory. He is positioned on the left side of the frame. The background shows industrial machinery, including a large green machine with a colorful plaid fabric (red, blue, yellow, green) draped over it. The lighting is bright, typical of an industrial setting.

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Export success

The Silk Route: *Sudbury's global market*

Vanners of Sudbury have been exporting their exquisite silk textiles worldwide since 1740. Today they're beating off competition from Far Eastern rivals: what's the secret of their long-term success? Vanners' MD **Richard Stevenson** talks to **Jane Chittenden**.

We're taking a tour of the silk weaving mill in Sudbury. It's a blur of brilliant coloured reels of silk stacked up neatly on shelves and complex webs of threads rising from the looms into the mill ceiling. There's a tremendous noise as the jacquard looms shuttle up and down – chug-chug-chug - and a steadier roar in the background. The loom operators intervene constantly, changing threads, winding on new reels in what's clearly highly skilled work.

Richard Stevenson explains how the company moved here in the 1870s from Spitalfields in London's East End to escape from high rents and minimum wages (there's nothing new in business!). They settled in Sudbury as it was not far from London and had access to fast-moving water to power their new machines. But at this point the textile industry in the region was collapsing, never to recover: nearby Lavenham's weavers had already gone out of business

and Norwich's immensely profitable textile businesses were on their knees. How could Vanners survive? And centuries later, how could it deal with the challenges of cheaper goods from the Far East, not to mention the challenges in the home market?

"We've stood by quality and service; that's what the company has always done," says Stevenson. "And to be honest, we don't have a choice. In our market the middle





market's been really squeezed – so it's either the very top or the very bottom; those are the booming markets. At the bottom, there's always someone who can do it more cheaply than you, whether it's somebody just down the road or further afield – Eastern Europe, China or Vietnam..."

Vanners' customers are among the world's top brands, including the UK's Burberry and Thomas Pink, and US brands Polo and Brooks Brothers. Long-term relationships with customers are essential to the way Vanners does business. "At our level of the market personal relationships are important. We're aiming to be very close to our customers, providing them with a great service and responding to their requirements in a unique way." Silk is woven at Vanners for neckwear (men's ties), furnishing fabrics and fashion fabrics for couture designers. It's important to have this diversification, Stevenson explains, because the textile industry is affected by the vagaries of fashion. "For example, Dress-Down Friday, when men don't wear a tie to work, wasn't good news for us. We took the decision to diversify our customer

base at that time, for a number of reasons, which meant that when the global banking crisis hit we had been fortunate in taking preventative action before the storm clouds appeared." Neckwear is currently the company's biggest product, but they've had periods when the furnishing fabrics have been more important, or fashion fabrics – even parachutes! "Historically the company has always been reasonably adept at moving into other markets. If one market isn't performing well, we can switch our focus into another, never keeping all our eggs in one basket."

There's another secret to Vanners' success over the centuries: a commitment to investment in new equipment. Two hundred years ago they were weaving on state-of-the-art jacquard looms; these were developed to use punched cards – the direct precursors of modern computers. This simplified the process of manufacturing textiles with complex patterns without compromising on quality. And today they continue in the same way: they have top-quality modern electronic jacquard looms operated by very skilled people.

Investment in equipment and people is vital, says Stevenson. "The problem with making those investments is that when markets aren't great – as they aren't, at the moment – it takes real courage to say: 'Okay, I'm going to take a longer term view and invest heavily in the latest equipment.'" It seems risky. But the flipside is that if you don't do it, you'll put yourself into serious difficulties in the not too distant future.

"We have invested over the years and we're investing now. And it's not just about large pieces of the plant. We've got a CAD design studio, so we're constantly investing in our design archive. It's got to go hand-in-hand; you've got to be able to design it, produce it, come up with new and innovative ideas, whether it's our designs, the yarns we're using, or the construction techniques – and all that's got to be blended together, to make a product people want to buy."

There's a twist to the tale. We learned that this small market town in Suffolk is home to not one but at least three world-class silk weaving mills, whose textiles travel the globe. Stephen Walters and Company started out in Spitalfields, like Vanners, and relocated to Sudbury around the same time; they offer a similar range of products. (Gainsborough Silk Weaving, the third company, concentrates on bespoke furnishing fabrics, often reproducing historic designs.) "It's a friendly rivalry," says Stevenson. The two companies together help to attract more customers in a global market. They're able to compete with the best of their Italian competitors, offering top quality from similar-sized mills. It's a great Suffolk success story.