

Most AI's like to give a nod to their heritage, but Spiller AI in Yeovil can trace their business back further than most. George Spiller started his ironmongery and hardware business in nearby Sherborne 200 years ago, making the company one of the longest established in the business.

Despite the proud picture of the old Spiller Hardware store ('The House of Satisfaction') on the office wall, this is not an organisation trading on its past. Under new owners Wilson Marshall and Chris Pearse, the company is focused strongly on the future, bringing together impeccable technical credentials with a new, forward-looking business management plan.

Spiller AI made the leap from local hardware store to successful Architectural Ironmonger under the ownership of the Thompson family. They bought the business in 1972 when the last Mr Spiller found life a bit too much and 'ended it all' under a train. Colin and Sarah Thompson developed the business into a successful, fully-fledged AI and moved it into the purpose built premises it still occupies today.

Wilson Marshall and Chris Pearse, both industry outsiders, acquired the company last year, recognising a technically strong business that could benefit from Wilson's experience in sales and marketing and Chris's in financial management. Colin Thompson stayed on for a year to smooth the transition. "Colin was the first to admit that he was completely focused on the products and the projects", explains Wilson, "He was quite proud of the fact that he hadn't made a 'cold call' in 10 years. He relied purely on reputation for the business, which says a lot". The management team is strengthened by the promotion of Gary Hewitt to General Manager. Wilson, meanwhile is keen to point out that he has already completed his part one GAI exams.

"The company has two real strengths", he explains, "A highly-experienced team of staff and a strong, broadly-spread customer base". Of the 16-strong Spiller team eight are qualified Dip GAIs and the average industry experience is over 10 years. The company runs a busy trade counter and has a 2-man lock-smith team. "We find it a real advantage to have that in-house", says Wilson. "We do a lot of work with local schools and health authorities so having a quick turnaround on keys is a huge benefit. It's also nice to be able to help out with more



OVER SPILL

AIJ Reporter Simon Turner heads west to visit west country AI Spiller Architectural Ironmongery Limited



Owners Chris Pearse (left) and Wilson Marshall (right) with General Manager Gary Hewitt (centre)



The Project Management Team (left to right) Martin Pitman, Stuart Wadner, Rob Ayers, Mike Trowbridge and Dan Hawkins



The Spiller Trade Counter



You wouldn't find these on the high street. Church key blanks.

*Spiller in the 1960's.
'The House of Satisfaction'*

unusual requirements", he adds, as Master Locksmith Mike Drayton shows off a couple of giant church key blanks. "Now you wouldn't find those on the high street!"

Spiller AI prides itself in being a full service AI and has strong markets in a wide range of sectors. Retail has been a busy area for them with the development of some key client relationships. "We have supplied over 300 stores for New Look Fashion," explains Wilson. "We have sent fittings all over the UK and Europe for their stores. We've also worked with Wagamama, Suzuki and Pizza Express". Account Manager Mike Trowbridge is particularly proud of their work with the RNLI. "We have kitted out over 250 lifeboat stations" he says. "You won't find a more demanding environment for ironmongery than that."

Spiller AI also has a strong local market supplying public sector projects and regional contractors. "Being a local company is important to those customers," says Wilson, "The trade counter, and the showroom and our in-house local delivery operation all help support this. On paper it would make more sense to outsource all our deliveries to couriers, but the customers like our vans and it builds a much stronger personal link with them".

So how is business holding up? "Despite all the dire predictions of doom, things are looking OK," says Wilson, "The start of the year was excellent, though recent weeks have been a little more challenging than last year. Spiller AI was never heavily involved in the volume housing market so we've avoided the sudden drop-off in that sector. High end residential is still holding up pretty well." When asked to name-drop a few top-end residential clients, Spillers score well: Johnny Depp, David James and Mrs (wife of the late Tiny) Rowland are all recent recipients of their ironmongery.

Interestingly, the company doesn't currently employ any dedicated sales staff. They prefer to rely on the experience of their project management team to support their customers and deal with any requirements they may have - from specification through to installation.

When Wilson and Chris took on Spiller AI last year, they got a business that has untapped potential. With their plans for carefully refining and updating the management systems and more pro-active marketing and customer development, Spiller can head into its third century of operation with confidence.

For more information on Spiller AI, visit www.spillera.co.uk