A business leader with sticking power amid industrial revolution

**MARK THOMAS**

**talks to the man stepping down from the helm of Liverpool’s oldest company**

It was just like something out of Dickens. We even had sloping desks. I half expected to see quill pens. I bought an Adler adding up machine and people looked at me as though I was mad. It took long time to mould to this place. I can tell you.”

“The company, which dates back to 1843, has had to overcome numerous difficulties, including a period of road works which wiped out the roads in the 1880s during the May Blitz of the Second World War which was wiped out by the Luftwaffe during the May Blitz of the Second World War which failed to halt production for long. The company’s thermoplastic road markings were still the predominant form of road marking today in the UK, and beyond.”

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.

The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear. The trains you travel around Britain on tracks whose longevity is ensured by a special grade developed by RS Clare to protect the curved sections which are most vulnerable to wear and tear.
known to local authorities – our name was like Hoover in vacuum cleaning to them – so we only had one rep selling those products, and our MD used to sell to the major oil companies.

“So when I came in I thought we’ve got to broaden the base and we’ve got to get away from the dependence on major oil companies.”

The company had developed a whole range of lubricating oils and greases in the early twentieth century under the brand name Clargine. Ian’s grandfather had met Charles Wakefield, owner of oil giant Castrol, while on a cruise on a Bibby Line ship to see the pyramids in the 1920s, and by the end of the holiday had won a contract to make specialist grease for Castrol, which lasted for 30 years.

“We were so complacent, we’d given up on our own brand. It was so much easier to sell 100 barrels of one grade to Castrol, then Castrol moved to Ellesmere Port in the 1950s and decided to build their own grease plant. So it was goodbye.

“The old man ran around like a blue-ended fly and after four years managed to get the business of Regent Oil, which became Texaco. They became twice the size of Castrol.

“But the same complacency set in and in 1968 Texaco decided to build a grease plant to cover the whole of Europe and bang! We lost it again.”

“Four years later the old man got cancer, I came home and I vowed we would never get in that situation again.”

But within a few years, Castrol, Texaco and Shell had all approached them asking them to make products specially designed to their own industry needs.

“We were back in a worse position than ever we’d been. We were totally dependent on the major oil companies,” recalled Ian.

When Shell decided to take their grease production back in-house, the warning signs were clear.

“It made us wonder why we had to do something, so we looked for some niche markets where we could probably get a better margin and be under the radar when it came to the major oil companies. We needed to find business areas too small for them to focus on. And the first one we went for was rail track lubrication.

“We developed some much better products than were being used. We went to British Rail as it was then, and said if we can produce a grease which reduces the wear on your curves so that your lines last many more years would that be of interest to you?”

The proposition was a stark one – the new product would cost twice as much as the existing one, but the savings in terms of the increased life of the railway lines would be make it well worth it. After a lot of persuasion, they won the argument and a major new revenue stream. But as the business developed, there were also fundamental structural problems that needed addressing.

“It was really hierarchical. Father sat at the top and the people stood at the bottom and said tell us what to do, and on a Thursday night they all got paid and went over to the pub.

“The office people didn’t speak to the people in the works and vice versa. There was a blue door that nobody went through into the works.

“The old man was good, but it was very paternalistic. He didn’t involve people and they just waited to be told what to do.”

After ten years running the business exactly as his father had, Ian had what he describes as his Road to Damascus moment, watching legendary business guru John Harvey-Jones talking on a TV programme about SMEs in 1989.

“He said now that we are in the Common Market, SMEs cannot carry on operating on the old boy network, agreeing to keep out of each other’s markets. If you don’t change you are going to die. I thought, that is exactly us. We aren’t innovative. We’ve got friends we’ve had for 30 or 40 years who buy from us. We can’t rely on that continuing because so much more competition is going to come in.”

The next day Ian gathered the whole staff together, climbed on top of a stack of four pallets and told them of the impact of Sir John’s words.

“I said I can see that’s us – we aren’t going to last. I don’t know if you care that Clare’s isn’t going to last, but unless we change it absolutely isn’t. The last 240 years doesn’t mean a bloody thing. We are as good as next year.

“Probably I’ve got to change more than you. I’ve got to broaden the base. I’ve got to rely on you people to make this firm work, not just me. But there’s no trust in this place and we need to develop trust. I want to know what sort of company you want to work for.”

A staff survey revealed that the workforce wanted three key things – decent two-way communication, teamwork, and delegation of responsibility and authority. It fitted in precisely with his own aspirations.

Major staff training programmes were implemented, winning them a national training award in 1990. They studied world-class manufacturing techniques, launched a sports and social club, and improved industrial relations by talking directly to staff about their problems rather than doing everything through the union.

“It took about 20 years, but the spirit in this place today is fantastic compared with what it was.”

In 2011 RS Clare received the Queen’s Award for Enterprise for International Trade, in recognition of more than doubling exports over three years when the global economy was flat.

The cash-rich business turned over approximately £10m in 2016, and has recently invested £2.5m in modernising and extending its offices and factory, which now covers a 3.5 acre site near the Caithness Brewery, including the site of the former Southern Hospital. It has another £5m of development plans up its sleeve for the next few years.

It employs 180 people, half of them at the Wilson and Scott subsidiary, and its products, notably its oil and gas field valve lubrication greases and anti-slip surfaces, are exported around the globe. But if the diversification is impressive, Ian remains wary for the future.

“We aren’t moving fast enough. Nothing lasts,” he says. “Complacency has hit us several times over the last two centuries and we must be ready for the next change all the time.

“We have a key performance indicator that says that 25% of our business must be no more than three years old. Something will fall off the table, so we have to have a lot of new projects coming through all the time.

“At any time we’ve got two dozen projects on the go. That’s why we’ve got eight R&D chemists. R&D is everything. I don’t think we are at 25% – it’s probably nearer 19 or 20% but it’s there.”

Ian celebrated his 71st birthday last month and has confidence that the new CEO, Paul Vann, who he appointed last summer, will keep the business driving forward. There is also a sixth generation Meadows in the company, in the shape of David Meadows, great great grandson of William Alfred Meadows.

Ian says: “Getting to 70 you really suddenly feel mortal. It’s very true to say make the most of every day you’ve got because it might be your last. I’m very conscious of that.

“I certainly don’t want to be here when I’m no use, and I’m delighted we’ve got a very young team here. If I’ve achieved one thing I’ve changed it from being a hierarchical place.”