

Memories

# On the second attempt

*By Steve Verney, founder of JS Humidifiers*

Steve Verney founded JS Humidifiers in London in 1982. The "J" stands for Jackie, Steve's wife, the "S" for Steve. In 1994, the company moved from London to the southern English coast to Rustington, West Sussex. It is still located there today - since 2011 as part of Condaire, now trading as Condaire Ltd.





"We were always down-to-earth engineers, not dazzlers. Quality and service are always what mattered. We'd never been golfers- too boring- but had always sailed! Sailing combines engineering, passion, enjoyment and team spirit, the hallmarks of my company, JS Humidifiers. The company even had its own yacht, Juliet Sierra, the nautical name for our company initials.

I founded JS Humidifiers in London in 1982. It started with me, one product, and one employee: my wife Jackie. The company worked from my garage. Hardly anyone thought I could succeed. Friends said: "Steve, it rains almost every day in the UK, why should anyone want to add more water to the air?"

In the first year of business, our sales totalled £41,725, mainly in the printing and textile industries. I was convinced that my JetSpray technology - using compressed air to atomise mains water- had advantages over the competition. My system was more hygienic than other pro-

ducts in the market, because it didn't have a water reservoir, and it really took off. I needed help and called my brother, Mike, who was selling cricket balls in Australia. Our sales quintupled in the second year of business so we needed more people. One was Rik Prowen, a science teacher, who initially worked in the school holidays and then full-time as of January 1, 1985. Rik became an important part of my top team.



Mike Verney

The rain continued to fall but we continued to grow, and JetSpray soon found customers around the world. We took on the other humidifiers from Europe and elsewhere. With this broad portfolio, JS became the UK market leader, the first to offer solutions for all commercial, heritage, HVAC and domestic humidification needs. In 1994, we took on the opportunity to sell the world's best steam humidi-

fier, Defensor Mk4. By 2003, our turnover was £5 million.

Even though the Mk4 was lucrative for both JS and Defensor, this didn't suit everyone. As William Shakespeare wrote, "The path of true love never did run smooth". In fact, in 2003, the company that owned Defensor, AxAir (part of the Walter Meier Holding), approached me: they wanted their entire humidifier range to be sold in the UK and ultimately to buy us! I wasn't ready to sell JS- we were having too much fun being independent- and were very happy with the other products we sold, so we ended our relationship with AxAir. We found an alternative and continued to grow in the UK, despite the rain, and abroad. We were passionate about what we did!

In 2010, we made close to £9 million in sales with 65 employees. In the intervening years, we'd stayed in touch with Walter Meier Holding's activities at exhibitions and conferences, with people like Martin Jola and Ruedi Strebel. I knew them well and appreciated them as real experts from our Defensor days. Our door was always open to Condair and Defensor, after all they were the world's leading humidifier brands and we had enormous respect for their engineering professionalism. Through this channel, I learnt that Silvan Meier, who then headed Walter Meier Holding, had taken a direct interest in

humidification and was keen to meet to discuss possible futures.

We always met our most important business partners at the Baillifscourt Hotel, on Climping Beach. It was just the right place to meet Silvan and CFO Jochen Nutz in September 2010. Rik, Jackie, Mike and I were there from JS.

When Silvan took the floor, it became immediately clear to us: this man has vision and genuinely shares our passion for humidification! He wanted to form a global company of shared expertise acquired from around the world! And he left us in no doubt that he wanted to return to the UK, preferably with us.

I was 60 years old at the time. My father had taken early reti-

rement and was enjoying a long life. It would be great to do the same. I consulted with Jackie, Mike and Rik. We all recognized in Silvan's plans an opportunity for our employees as well; they would become part of a global leader, with opportunities we couldn't offer on our own.

We went back to the boardroom, and I turned the tables. I reminded Silvan of the unsuccessful takeover discussion in 2003 but that we were now happy to consider being a part of his vision for the future- if the terms were right!

We quickly came to an agreement and, in 2011, were pleased to join the Walter Meier Holding. To ensure an orderly transition, Jackie and I stayed with the company for another year,

and Rik for two years more to manage the rebranding to Condair. Most of our colleagues are still working with Condair today, and some, such as Tony Fleming, Carl and Debbie Batchelor, Nat Wheeler and Duncan Buxton are working as part of the international group. The company continues to thrive- it's worked out well for all concerned.

And someone else left Condair: Juliet Sierra. She came with us. We might have retired from humidification but not from sailing, whether in sunshine or the rain."



Left to right: Tim Scott, Silvan Meier, Oliver Zimmermann, Tony Fleming