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“Somebody has to pay for Canary Wharf Rob!”

These were the words used by my then bank manager back in 1991 when I complained that I was paying too much for the Company overdraft. Seventeen years later not much has changed. Once again smaller businesses will pay for decisions made by larger ones during boom years. It started me thinking about those times, how we traded, the equipment we used, and how we behaved with regard to credit and trade in general.

In hindsight, that reply did me a great service. From that point on I resolved to repay debt and strengthen the balance sheet, a long slow process that possibly meant we missed some opportunities along the way but now find ourselves more confident about the future than we were back then.

Trading wise, not much as changed. We still run our own cold store and trucks. We still deliver daily within the M25. We still even have some of the same staff - only the location has changed - “Todd’s of Woolwich are now at Tuvey’s in Aveley. I’m not sure Todd’s of Aveley has the same ring to it! The way we trade has changed. I now write orders into a diary or straight onto the computer system. Seventeen years ago I would write them directly onto the desk, a system of traceability that fell down every month because Ken would then clean the desk with Vim! Business was conducted over a telephone with a receiver and lead, we were called to the telephone when in the depot and were even “unavailable” at times because both lines were busy! Telephones were larger and designed for “slamming” as opposed to today’s which are definitely designed for “throwing” Back in ‘91 we hadn’t long taken delivery of a fax machine, a marvelous piece of kit that would spew huge lengths of expensive fax paper with black splodges on them, confirming deals that had been done and that I forgotten to scrawl on the desk! Now we have e-mail with photos and contract notes linked to shipping advices, linked to delivery schedules, linked to invoices. Without all this instant technology thinking time was longer. Now when I receive an offer over the phone, it is confirmed by e-mail within a minute of putting the handset down and often includes pictures and is followed a few minutes later by a call asking “do I want it or not?”. Back in ‘91 you could have left it “firm” for 24 hours. Now we have paper trails, check lists, check lists for check lists, back up discs, and back up discs for back up discs. Back then I couldn’t answer a query because Ken had cleaned the desk, hence our memories and our word would be sufficient.

Not everything has changed. The cheque is still largely in the post and still takes longer to arrive in January than it does in May. Our business is still conducted with a smile and a joke and largely without the need for written confirmation in triplicate. Deliveries from Ireland are still late and customers are still an inconvenience to truck drivers and the love of scratching the sales book still remains constant. In these troubled times it is good to look back and try to remember the lessons of the past, but we as a company are looking forward. In truth systems may have changed but our business is still all about people and relationships - and that thank goodness has remained the same.



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