

# A world of opportunity through innovation

Founded in 1960 by an RAF WWII veteran, Ellis Patents has been producing fixings and accessories for the plumbing and electrical sectors for nearly half a century. The innovative spirit of Mr Ellis continues to animate the business to this day, as the current management team fosters the growth of bright ideas that can be translated into innovative products. Carol Hitchcock takes a look at some of the latest developments.

Can you remember the brand name of the last boiler you bought? How about your drill? Or even the grout you might have used in that last big bathroom project? Of course you can remember, because not all boilers (or drills or grouts) are created equal. But what about the pipe clips you use? That might be a bit tougher to answer. After all, even the MD of pipe clip manufacturer Ellis Patents agrees that this product isn't a sexy one: "It's a commodity about as interesting as elastic bands or drinking straws. The average plumber has no idea what brand he uses or what it costs," says Richard Shaw.

Whilst the end user might not get too excited about pipe clips, the people at Ellis certainly do; but they realise their job of spreading their enthusiasm is a tough one and have had to think creatively to generate ideas. 'Opportunity Through Innovation' is the guiding principal behind the development of the company's plumbing products, trade mouldings and electrical products. Customer input is often the catalyst that gives rise to a new product, as in the case of 'nesting' nail clips. Engineering Development Manager Andy Booth explains:

"Late last year we were approached by a customer who was keen to install pipes closer together, particularly where cut-outs in timber were required. Within a week, we'd identified a solution, created a prototype and put the new product into production. To say the customer was impressed by the speed of our response would really be an understatement."

The nail clip is designed with a nesting groove that allows close placement of pipes without compromising strength. Andy says that the clips use less plastic than conventional nail clips and demonstrate better pull out strength.



Nesting nail clips

## Under cover

The spirit of innovation was also behind the development of the company's new range of pipe cover accessories. The aim was to create a product that saves on installation time as well as providing a quality, attractive finish. Made from moulded white ABS, the covers are simply secured into place using a standard sealant. The innovative design reduces the amount of time needed for cutting mitres and pipe cover lengths to fit exactly during installation.

Creative thinking has also been a driver behind marketing techniques at Ellis. The company's biggest marketing initiative for pipe clips, for example, targets merchants and distributors, the ones who have the power to place the product on the shop floor and encourage customers to buy one over another. The 'Brand Your Own' campaign allows the independent plumbing distributor to put its own name, address and logo on the bag.

Richard Shaw says: "The pipe fixing market is not brand driven, so the merchants and trade counter operators can sell their own self-branded products. This is a great opportunity to put their personalised stamp on something that will be in front of plumbers day after day."

Martin Carton, the Sales Representative leading this campaign, points out that the company's biggest competitor has put a lot of effort in promoting its brand name; but he sees greater benefit in helping the independent merchant publicise himself: "He is more likely to try and sell his own brand rather than somebody else's," comments Martin. "And this doesn't affect the plumber, because one brand of clip is as good as another to him. When it comes to customer



The Ellis team (l to r): Stephen Crawley, Richard Shaw and Martin Carton

loyalty, his allegiance is to the store and the people who run it. He doesn't debate between brand names when it comes to pipe clips."

## Closer to home

Ellis is also trying to appeal to independent merchants who prefer to sell products made in Britain. "That's the clincher," Martin says. "People still do like to buy something that has been made in this country, and that is an important selling point." Not only are all Ellis Patents products British made, their production plays an important part in the economy of Rillington, a small village in North Yorkshire where all aspects of the company's business, from administration to design to production, are carried out. It is also the largest employer in the community, with 26% of its employees calling Rillington home.

Established there since 1974, the company has seen continual growth over the years and has involved the community in this success. One of its more unusual initiatives to keep production confined to Rillington has been to outsource some of the labour to the local residents in the village. Stephen Crawley, UK Sales Manager, explains: "Most of the nail clips sold in the UK are made in China because it costs so much in terms of human labour to actually put the nail in the clip. Ours are produced here in the village. A van delivers the parts to some of the local residents who prefer to work from home. And there is a pool of people queuing all the time, so we have a constant stream of people asking for that type of work."

Richard emphasises the importance of offering British made products, especially now when people are getting just plain tired of hearing about China. With the upcoming Olympic games in Beijing, new problems are presenting themselves for those who buy Chinese goods. In an effort to improve air quality in the capital, Beijing has ordered the complete shutdown of all polluting factories within a 200 kilometer radius for nine weeks to clear the smog during



Brand your own bag for pipe clips



Ellis in the community

the Olympics and Paralympics. From the middle of July until late September, hundreds of factories will be out of commission. Richard observes: "There are loads of people in the UK who are buying seriously from China and are now worried about the impact the factory shutdown will have on their supply. We have been able to assure our customers that this will not effect them."

## Quality control

The company's ability to deliver what the customer expects, when he expects it, is a particular source of pride. For example, Ellis claims to be the first manufacturer to be able to supply product to Plumb Center over two consecutive years without a single complaint in terms of quality or delivery. Richard attributes this to the centralisation of all aspects of production: "We are self-contained and self-sufficient, which helps us to maintain quality control over the entire process and also benefits our designers who can interact with the people on the factory floor. This is especially important in the initial stage when there is a lot of exchange between designer and maker. I don't see how you can practically design something in one country and make it in another – not as effectively as when you do it all together."

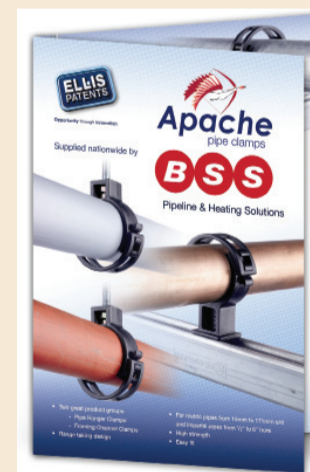
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## Apache pipe clamps

Ellis has agreed to continue its exclusive rolling contract with BSS for the supply of Apache pipe clamps. The relationship, which is now in its fifth year, has seen BSS sell over a quarter million of the Ellis manufactured clamps through its nationwide chain.

Manufactured in the UK, there are two versions of Apache clamps which allow pipes to be either hung with the use of a screwed rod or directly fixed onto a framing channel. Available in 16 sizes, Apache products are suitable for metric pipes ranging from 15 to 171mm and imperial pipes from 1/2in to 6in bore. This flexibility is further enhanced by the product's ratchet design that enables each clamp to accommodate a range of different pipe sizes. The company says that robust product design and its good chemical resistance ensure its longevity.

A 'twist fit' mechanism features on all Apache framing channel products. Designed to dramatically reduce installation time so that the installed price of the product is cheaper than competing product, it enables



the installer to securely fit the clamp by simply inserting it into the channel, twisting it and then snapping it shut.

Richard Shaw, MD of Ellis, comments: "The success of our relationship with BSS is very much down to the quality of the product and its appeal to the BSS customer base. And, as the Apache range still stands out from others on the market due to its innovative design and labour-saving features, I'm confident we will continue to enjoy the benefits of this relationship for many years to come."