

# ‘It’s all in the genes...’

kbbreview  
**30**  
1984  
2014  
PRINT • ONLINE • EVENTS

Industry veteran Geoffrey Pidgeon and his three sons are proud ancestors of ‘bathroom genius’ Frederick Humpherson, inventor of the first wash down wc. David Harris hears more about their businesses and the many changes they’ve witnessed along the way



The Pidgeon family: (Left to right) Laurence, Geoffrey, John and Michael in Laurence's Fulham showroom

**T**hirty years is a lifetime for kbbreview, but to many of those trading in the sector, the past three decades is a small part of a much longer history.

Take the Pidgeon family. The business, which has three different bathroom and kitchen showrooms for three different sons, originated in the 19th century as Humpherson & Co in Chelsea, London.

The family's most illustrious ancestor, Frederick Humpherson, a son of founder Edward, produced the first wash-down lavatory, or to give it the full description from the 19th century advertisement: the Beaufort pedestal “water closet, urinal and slop closet”. One of four known remaining examples of the Beaufort is now in the Science Museum.

Frederick was, according to the current head of the clan, Geoffrey Pidgeon, “the undoubted genius of the family”.

Frederick is now spoken about with awe. Geoffrey says: “He was apprenticed to Thomas Crapper, but during that time he was also

studying all sorts of different things, including physics, metallurgy, machine construction and drawing and hydraulics. All of this gave him a feel for what he eventually ended up doing and he was an apprentice plumber at the same time. He lived opposite the Thomas Crapper factory in Chelsea and walked miles all over London to jobs at the same time as this studying. That was the nature of the man.”

It was an exciting time for plumbing and for Humpherson & Co, whose factory was at 297 Fulham Road.

The Beaufort won a medal at the 1885 Inventions Exhibition, which was held in Exhibition Road, South Kensington, and the world of lavatories has not been the same since.

“It was the first time a pan was made in one piece as a wash-down closet. The DNA of the Beaufort is in every pan made since,” Geoffrey proudly tells me.

The Beaufort came in many different forms, with some interesting variations. You could, for



instance, have a hinged seat (avoiding “unpleasant splashes”) but those intended for the use of maids had the seat screwed on to the pan because “they didn’t need to lift the seat”, says Geoffrey.

The Humpherson name began to fade from the company when it passed to Geoffrey’s mother (her married name was Pidgeon) from his grandfather. One of the few places it is now seen is in the bathroom department of Heal’s on London’s Tottenham Court Road, still called Humphersons because the family used to run it.

Geoffrey himself, the fourth generation, took over the family business in 1956 after which, as he attests: “I wouldn’t say it took off, but it did take off.”

Geoffrey is a firm believer in natural talent being an inherited characteristic.

He says: “I do believe that if you can call it a flair for bathrooms and kitchens, I have this – I think it is in the genes – and my three sons have it as well. Quite why this is, I don’t know, but I don’t see why something that was so strong in a man like Frederick should not continue down the family.”

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**We didn’t make much money out of the basic bathrooms, but we made a fortune in replacing the onyx tap heads, which people used to steal to use as paperweights.**

**At one point, the Intercontinental was ordering them in boxes of 100 at a time every other week**

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Today, Geoffrey’s three sons Laurence, John and Michael, all run their own individual businesses and all of them, as Geoffrey’s assessment of the family talent implies, are passionate about the business.

The three brothers started working with their father in the 1960s and 1970s and have seen the sector develop significantly since then.

Eldest son Laurence, who runs the Laurence Pidgeon showroom in Fulham High Street, the setting for our chat, says that one of the biggest changes is that it never used to be the homeowners who bought the bathrooms.

He says: “Bathrooms have become much more an item that is bought by the end user. When we started, it was plumbers or builders that were buying the bathrooms. And people didn’t change them as much. If you had a 1930s house, it would quite likely still have a 1930s bathroom in it.”

And, of course, showers were a relative rarity a few decades ago.

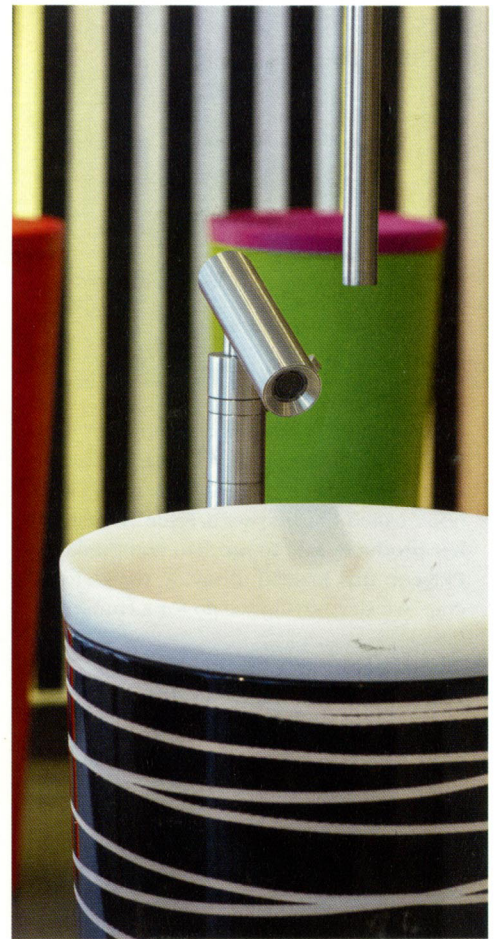
John remembers: “The first time I stayed in a hotel in America, I can remember the walk-in shower I had. I’d never seen anything like it.”

Geoffrey claims that the family were the first to “make a showroom look like a bathroom, with towel rails and towels and so on” and Laurence identifies a bathroom exhibition at Harrods in the 1970s as a turning point in public taste. He says that another key moment was the publication of Alexander Kira’s report for Cornell University on the bathroom – the expanded second edition of which came out in 1976.

Many modern trends in bathroom design, he says, can be traced to Kira’s influence.

Here he is on showers, for instance. Bear in mind this was written at a time when very few British homes had any shower other than a rubber attachment for taps.

Kira wrote: “Showers are too small; they should be larger, have a built-in seat, and be enclosed to the ceiling except for the entrance. Different shaped handles, square for hot and round for cold, would permit the soapy-eyed bather to adjust water temperature without alternately scalding or freezing himself. To avoid slipping while balancing on one leg, a



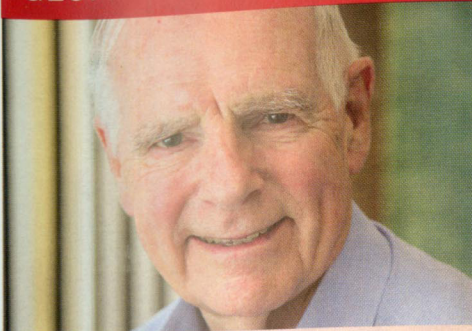
**Above:** Wet Bathrooms column washbasin in translucent polyethylene illuminated from the base. The basin is called Fusion. Taps by Cea

**Below:** View along the front window of Laurence’s Fulham showroom looking from the Elmar Slim kitchen and shelving system into a white Elmar ELQ1 kitchen. Backdrop is a photo of Roberto and Ludovica Palomba – the designers of the Slim kitchen





## GEOFFREY PIDGEON ON....



### Thomas Crapper...

I was interviewed by Barbara Walters about the claims made for Crapper in a book called *Flushed with Pride*. After that, her producer said to me: "Do you think Mr Pidgeon that instead of saying we go for a crap, we start saying we go for a Humph?"

### Selling...

The thing about selling in this field, with kitchens in particular, is that you need knowledge. You need deep knowledge in this game to do the job properly.

### The internet...

By all means use it to promote yourself, but if you are talking about buying from internet firms, then you need to face the fact that you need somebody to explain how everything works.

### Changes in retailing...

Overall things have largely improved – to the benefit of the public. Bear in mind that the vast majority of bathroom equipment was sold by the local builders merchant – as an adjunct to his overall business. Bathroom and kitchen specialists were thin on the ground.

### The future of retailing...

I can only see a further polarisation of the market. That will mean progress for those who understand how to present their showroom displays, select good products and who have staff that can engage with customers. You cannot sell a £20,000 bathroom without devoting time to getting to know the client and their needs.



wraparound safety bar is needed."

Kira also predicted, accurately enough, that changes in requirements for personal hygiene would drive the development of showers.

It certainly got designers thinking, although Laurence says that design now is not what it used to be.

He adds: "To the extent that there was design before around 1980, it was for particular projects. So you'd get, for instance, specially designed bathroom fittings for The Economist building in St James's. Twyford did the fittings for the flats at the Barbican, again specially designed small sinks for the space available. Innovations in those days were driven by the architectural needs of particular sites. They were not driven by the retail market at all. That's a crucial point."

All this did not necessarily mean that there was not money to be made for bathroom suppliers to particular projects. The hotel market, for example, provided steady business for the Pidgeon family in hotels including the Intercontinental on London's Park Lane.

**Above:** Elmar Slim kitchen island and shelving system with two Elmar EL01 double-pocket door units at the end enclosing V Zug ovens. Westin hood

**Below:** Häcker kitchens with Atag appliances and an assortment of Chinese antiques. Westin hood

Geoffrey says: "We didn't make much money out of the basic bathrooms, but we made a fortune in replacing the onyx tap heads, which people used to steal to use as paperweights. At one point, they [the Intercontinental] were ordering them in boxes of 100 at a time every other week. In each bathroom there were nine heads, five in the shower, two on the bidet and two on the mixer."

Laurence adds: "In the end, they glued them all down."

John, who runs AJP Bathrooms in Kingston, and Michael, who runs Original Bathrooms in Richmond, both agree that retailing in any sort of modern form did not really exist before the start of the 1980s.

John says: "Right up until the 1980s, bathrooms were sold to plumbers. Most bathroom shops reflected this and were organised like trade counters."

The contrast with today is radical, says Laurence. He says: "It's become a true retail business now. It's been a hybrid trade/retail sector for a long time, but now the trade counter element is minimal. The end user now wants to see what showers they are going to have."

Mike remembers that the family firm "used to make pocket books detailing products to show to all their clients", which was generally the closest homeowners got to seeing their bathroom suites before they were installed.

Another big change, say the brothers, is the amount and nature of bathroom furniture that is now sold.

Mike says: "You used to get a bath, a basin and a toilet and maybe a wall cupboard to go with it. Things have changed since those days."

John says: "Last week, I got an invoice from a supplier for one vanity unit for £5,000. Twenty years ago, you wouldn't have dreamt of that."

Thirty years ago, many wouldn't have dreamt of the internet either. But, whatever the strength of its challenge, it cannot replace personal advice and support, say the Pidgeons.

Geoffrey says: "One thing is certain, it is not easy to exchange a cast-iron bath if it is not right (or chipped), especially if someone has carried it up two flights of stairs."

Much better, says Geoffrey, for customers to put their business, and their fate, in the hands of a local specialist. Retailers may be under pressure from the internet, but it can't offer customers the same service as a knowledgeable retailer. **kbb**

