

Striking the right Chord

NOW ALMOST 40 YEARS OLD, THE CHORD COMPANY IS STILL BRITISH THROUGH AND THROUGH – AND PROUDLY INDEPENDENT. CHRIS FRANKLAND TALKS TO MD ALAN GIBB ABOUT THE COMPANY’S PHILOSOPHY AND SOME OF THE SECRETS OF A GOOD CABLE

This year, British cable specialist The Chord Company will be two years away from its 40th anniversary. During that time, it has constantly evolved, researched materials and technology for its ever-expanding range of products, and met the challenges of the brave new digital world head-on.

I am sitting in the boardroom of its Wiltshire headquarters with MD Alan Gibb, keen to find out more about this company’s long journey, especially as – while many iconic UK companies have ended up in foreign ownership – The Chord Company has remained proudly independent.

It was set up in 1984 to make cables for Naim Audio’s US retailers who were crying out for better quality DIN-to-phono interconnects. It was early days for Naim, and that company had enough on their plate keeping up with demand for their amplifiers.

Founder Sally Kennedy was then married to Naim executive Paul Stephenson and The Chord Company started out making cables in her home helped by a few Naim employees in the evenings. The first order from the States for the new Chrysalis cable was for 250, and in 1986 things really took off when they got a good review in my old magazine, *Hi-Fi Review*.

The Chord Company now employs 26 staff at its Amesbury base, to which it moved to in 2003, when Alan Gibb joined the company. Three years ago, there was a significant change at The Chord Company. Gibb tells me that Sally had been wanting to step back from the business and enjoy her retirement, but was determined to preserve the integrity of the company: “She didn’t want to retire and sell it to some faceless corporation that would just want to make more money by having everything made in China. She wanted the company to continue to develop and grow on the basis of making good, honest products.

“So it seemed very natural for her that the people who had been here the longest, and had contributed to all of that, would still have a job and that stuff would still be made here. So, three years ago, myself, Doug Maxwell and Richard Senior, formed a management buyout team. Doug was doing all of the sales work, I was doing more of the product development.”

Gibb adds: “I am still MD, Doug is sales director and Richard is operations director, but in essence we have a third each and the really significant decisions

need all of us to agree. It is a good structure and we all want to carry on as before.”

He tells me that turnover has consistently grown by between 15% and 20% a year and even in 2020, with the Covid-19 pandemic, which created a spike in demand with people not spending on eating out and expensive holidays, sales increased by around 49%.

Everyone’s an enthusiast

I ask Gibb about the ethos behind the company. “Everyone in the company is a hi-fi or music enthusiast. Richard’s a good drummer. Dave Shannon sings. Dave Mardell on production is a member of a band, so they care how things sound.

We’re very focused on making something you’d want to have yourself: if we didn’t want to buy it, how could we expect someone else to?”

Before joining the company, Gibb was export sales manager at Linn Products in Scotland. As he explains: “I came in to here help with sales and – with the help of some of the guys here – we found a way to export all the data from Sage into Excel and started to manipulate and analyse it. And I would say things like, ‘why don’t you sell to Japan?’, but the company was fully occupied making the stuff and didn’t have the connections I’d built up at Linn. I’d phone someone, in whatever country, who I knew might not want to distribute us, but might be able to suggest a decent company that would – guys more interested in performance than box-shifting. And we started to do more and more business.”

Shows were a key part of that drive. He recalls: “I said that when we go to a hi-fi show, we’re not just going to sit in a room, play music and chat to our mates – we’re going to play them the differences between things, so you can actually hear what happens when you do stuff. If you just play music, people will stick their head in and think this doesn’t sound very good, or they don’t like that music; play them a difference, and they remember that change.”

Gibb travelled abroad extensively to promote The Chord Company in markets such as Japan and

Hong Kong, and of course the product range has expanded massively since those first Chrysalis cables. Now there are seven ranges, from the entry-level C Series to the top-of-the-line Music series, and analogue and digital interconnects with a variety of terminations from phono to Burndy, speaker cables and even tonearm cables.

“The Chord Company started from that Chrysalis cable, and we worked our way up from there,” says Gibb. “We spent a lot of effort trying to make everything as affordable as possible. And even when you look at some of our flagship products, they’re a substantial investment and a lot of people struggle to appreciate how a cable can be so expensive. But the current C Range starts around £50, the Clearway starts around £100, up to the Music range, which could be around £5,000.”

Driving evolution

What were the factors that drove that product evolution? “Some of it was dictated for us. When I started, the great demon we always tried to avoid with record players was hum, which was low frequency. With the advent of high-frequency noise from Bluetooth, LED and LCD lights, Wi-Fi, etc, any piece of wire can act as an antenna. It won’t be transmitting much, because of the voltages involved, but it is acting as a soak. So the way the company designs cables has evolved in response to what is going on in people’s living rooms: we’ve always spent time and effort to try to make sure the cables work in the real world. So the shielding has changed from being something that we had on our flagship cables, but not really on the cheaper stuff, until now even the C Range is fully shielded.

“We’ve always stuck with silver-plated copper for the conductors, which gives you a better bandwidth, and we also use that for the shields in our top cables. As you go down the range, they are aluminium foils with magnesium, and all of these are trying to give you the benefits of the shielding but without the financial hit.”

Gibb’s role is now essentially to look after R&D: “That’s what I mainly do now: Doug and Richard look after everything else. A lot of it is just keeping abreast of materials, improvements, trying stuff out, fixing problems and finding suppliers.”

One thing I am very keen to quiz Gibb on is the new GroundARAY high-frequency noise-reduction device the company first launched a year ago in Japan. But before getting into that, I want to get some insights from him about how they approach cable manufacturing and design.

Most of the cables from The Chord Company are assembled in its own factory, but Gibb acknowledges it’s a small company and there are only so many minutes in a day. He continues:

