

Alec Davis, outgoing Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Davis & Shirliff

By JAMES WANZALA

Tell us the story behind formation of Davis & Shirliff?

Davis & Shirliff (D&S) was founded in 1946 by Eddie Davis and Dick Shirliff. Mr Davis had just left the army with a gratuity which he spent buying a stake in a small plumbing business he had worked with as a contractor.

Mr Shirliff soon joined him and the initial expertise was provided by Italian ex-prisoners of war.

The company was based at Westlands (now the Nyota Petrol Station site) and grew rapidly as the country recovered after the war focusing on boreholes, water supplies and the coffee industry. Notable early projects included the water supply for Karen Estates, the entire water supply infrastructure until the mid-60's being installed by D&S.

How does it feel steering the company for 25 years until achieving 70 years of existence?

I feel proud having made a contribution since the business we are in has improved people's lives for the past 70 years through provision of clean water.

We have now sold nearly 1 million water pumps so far. We lead the industry and have trained people in water technology not only those that work in our company but also in other private and public companies.

It is true to say that most Kenyans will regularly benefit from a Davis & Shirliff products in the course of their daily activities.

How has been the company's management changed and location grown from Westlands to the current location?

It grew with the country and in the mid-1950s the offices moved to larger new premises at the present location in the Industrial Area.

In 1970 partner Dick Shirliff retired and his shareholding was purchased by a long serving staff member, Devji Shingadia.

He and Eddie Davis then ran the company, I joined it in 1976. Eddie passed away in 1982 at the age of 79 and I then assumed his shareholding, in 1990 purchasing Shingadia's shareholding as well and became its CEO.

1993 was a significant year for both Kenya and D&S as economic liberalization occurred and this was the catalyst for the company's rapid growth since.

Describe how has been the diversification since the 70s and currently including revenue growth?

The 70's and 80's saw slow but steady growth as the country grappled with various economic and political problems, though there was a particular focus on building the pump importation business, notably Grundfos and Davey that were introduced in the mid-1960's.

In the 90s we started our solar and generator activities, which we are still doing up to date. Today, our group revenue stands at Sh7 billion per year. We now have subsidiaries in Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and South Sudan and now looking to venture into DRC Congo.

The whole group has 600 employees with 450 in Kenya with twenty eight branches all over the country. Recent branch openings include Narok, Kitui, Ongata Rongai and Mombasa Downtown.

What about the product range today?

The product range has hugely expanded with a focus on six market segments – water pumps, boreholes, swimming pools, solar equipment, water treatment and power generation. Though much equipment is imported the company is a significant manufacturer making fibre-glass products, its distinctive yellow pool filters being especially popular, as well as fabricated steel items and it also assembles a wide range of water related equipment.

What has been the secret behind the success of Davis & Shirliff for all those years?

Consistency of management through successful changes where necessary. Progressive but not over ambitious aspirations, living the values of quality, integrity and 'Altiora Peto', which translates to embracing continuous change and finally harmonious staff relations and enormous staff commitment and motivation since the company's founding.

As you retire end of May, will you hand over the management to your children or what plans do you have?

No, the new CEO David Gatende, a Kenyan, will drive this growth. I do not intend to retire from work, rather change my focus and become involved in other activities while still retaining an involvement with Davis & Shirliff. I am also the chairman of Gertrude Children Hospitals and want to look for new business opportunities for the company because as a CEO one is absorbed with the day to day routines and hence lack time for such.

Has Kenya's real estate sector been also a driver of the growth of the company's fortunes?

Of course yes, real estate is symptomatic of the economy's growth. Most homes in Nairobi have our products, either a swimming pool, water pump, generator or any other product.

Tell us abit of yourself, education, family hobbies?

I was born in Kenya in 1950 and went to St. Mary's School, Nairobi and later to UK for secondary education. I then completed an engineering degree at Loughborough University followed by an MBA at Manchester Business School returning to settle in Kenya in 1976. I am a married and the father of two sons who both work in the business. I enjoy swimming for fitness and also have an interest in classic cars.

Tell us more abit of history about your family?

My grandfather, also Alec Davis, was among the few first Europeans to settle in Kenya well before WW1. He was a journalist and owner of the Leader newspaper, which was based at the current Leader Building on Moi Avenue, Nairobi. The Leader became The East African Standard that later evolved into The Standard. He also owned the Theatre Royal, now Cameo Cinema on Kenyatta Avenue, Nairobi.

Ends.