

Fit-out firm redesigns its agenda for success

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Phil Waggett, left, and Steve Howle have attracted high-profile clients and contracts for 2010

FITTING out London's newest celebrity chef-led restaurant has been described as one of the toughest challenges to date for a Newton Abbot company.

WFC Group Interior Consultants and Contractors spent six weeks converting Selfridges' former Gallery restaurant into a champagne bar and 90-cover venue that became the third London restaurant for chef Mark Hix when it opened this month.

Dust, wood shavings and the noise of hammers and drills are usually an unavoidable consequence of large-scale building and renovation works. Yet when the project in question is being undertaken in one of the nation's top department stores – and directly above some of the most expensive franchises in the world – disruption is expected to be avoided at all costs.

Project manager Mark Moffatt said: "Logistically, it was the hardest project we have ever done. In a big shop like that there are so many rules and regulations. We were trying to create a building site within a department store with no noise and no dust, so a lot of work had to be carried out overnight."

During the six-week, £700,000 project, WFC also had to map a services layout as it installed electricity and heating cables and pipes, as no previous plans existed to pinpoint network locations.

The Newton Abbot company won the contract after being invited to tender for the job on a recommendation by Conran and Partners.

WFC had worked with design firm Conran on the development of Lutyens Grill in the old Reuters building in London's Fleet Street for Prescott and Partners in 2009.

"The scale of jobs we do is such that distance is not significant," said Phil Waggett, co-director of WFC. Indeed, although the firm has undertaken work on local projects – including the revamp of Plymouth nightclubs Oceana and Jesters – its portfolio mainly comprises jobs from well outside the region.

The company was established by Mr Waggett and business partner Steve Howle's respective fathers, Brian and Lloyd, in Torquay in 1976.

It moved to its present site on Newton's Abbot's Kingsteignton Road 20 years ago.

Phil and Steve both pursued entirely separate business careers until relocating to the Westcountry to take over WFC in the mid 1990s.

In 2004, the company completed a £6.5 million refit of the Prince of Wales Theatre in London's West End ahead of Mamma Mia opening there. It has also fitted out interiors of some of the country's most stylish drinking and members' club venues – including Kensington Roof Gardens' Babylon.

By 2008 the firm had a £20 million turnover and more than 100 Newton Abbot-based employees at its 20,000 sq ft joinery and 5,000 sq ft metalwork shop, as well as contractors based across the UK.

However, the leisure industry was hit severely by recession, Mr Waggett said, forcing the company 18 months ago to downsize its Devon workforce to 65, halving the group's turnover and focusing on adjusting its business model.

"The leisure industry market was at the sharp end of the economic downturn," Mr Waggett said. "The biggest impact for us was that the really big spends stopped and 2009 was a year of readjustment for us – we had no staff in sales and marketing at the time, to replace big clients. Most of our clients last year were new."

A relationship with fitness empires David Lloyd Leisure and Fitness First has continued to prove fruitful for WFC, with both enterprises owning large commercial estates in perpetual need of maintenance and upgrades.

Now 2010 has begun with a promising start for the firm, which aims to return to its pre-recession turnover "and beyond".

"We are much more optimistic, now," Mr Waggett said. "We've had a good start to the year and have some good projects under our belt. We've done a lot of work researching key players and getting their attention. We've been quite excited by the new tender lists."

The company is currently fitting out an exclusive private members' club in Beaufort House, Chelsea, and has also won a local authority contract to convert a leisure centre in Slough into an 18-lane bowling alley.

Work starts on site in May and in the meantime WFC will begin on site in London's Covent Garden for Canteena, the first in an American-owned Mexican-style restaurant venues to hit the UK that may well become a chain.

Further projects include a student union bar for Birmingham University and a new visitor centre at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich.

"We also have a decent-sized metalwork package with Estover School in Plymouth," Mr Waggett said. "And it would be nice to get more local jobs."

WFC's work on the Victoria and Albert Museum's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries – which opened in December – has seen the company shortlisted for a National Association of Shopfitters design partnership award.