

Stone may be cold and hard, yet there is nothing that warms Steve Bristow's heart more. He started working with stone as a teenager and today, by dint of dedication to his craft and his customer, Steve Bristow Stone Masonry has become a market leader in the supply and installation of granite, stone and marble surfaces for commercial and domestic use.

"My dad was md of a masonry company, but he was more on the office side of things, whereas I had always wanted to work more with my hands," says Steve. "So I did some work experience there before leaving school and then joined the company full time." By watching the older generation in action, Steve says he honed his skills and creativity with both automated and hand tools, while developing a real enthusiasm.

In his mid-twenties, he took the plunge, and set up on his own. "I'm quite strong-minded and I wanted control of what I was doing," he explains. "I take pride in my work and I had a clear idea of how I wanted to operate."

Going it alone is never easy and Steve recalls the 'hand-to-mouth' nature of his fledgling business, working out of his garage, using borrowed equipment and even dipping into the household

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ROCK ON

A passion for product coupled with top-notch quality and personal service has seen Steve Bristow evolve from one-man band to regional leader in masonry

Words **Annabelle Grundy**

Pictures **Colin Poole**

Steve's 35 sq m Newton Abbot showroom gives clients a flavour of the selection he can offer in a variety of stones, covering kitchen, bathroom, fireplace, furniture and accessory options



finances to pay the first bills. As the business found its feet, he ploughed the profits back in and was able to sub-let a small industrial unit from a friend, giving Steve the space he needed to expand. He installed a mezzanine floor for his office, set up his workshop at ground level and invested in his first saw. "That cost about £5,000, which made me very nervous at the time," he says. "I'm considering a new piece of computerised kit for around £80,000 now though."

Ten years ago, with his business solidly established, Steve relocated to his current site in Newton Abbot, where the workshop, storage facilities, office and showroom are all under one roof. Never one to sit back, he constantly reviews and upgrades his capability, so that the company now boasts the most up-to-date, computerised cutting machinery in the region, handled by eight staff ranging from trainees to old hands, with Steve pitching in whenever needed.

"I rely on my experienced people

for their depth of knowledge and I appreciate those in training because I can teach them my methods and values," explains Steve. "I still love getting my hands dirty, though."

The exacting standards Steve demands of both himself and his team are key to his business success. The day before a delivery, Steve's factory manager will inspect all finished work, allowing time to rectify any problems before shipping. He uses only premium grade materials, most of which come from Italian importers with whom he has long-standing

or five days, compared with the 10-14 days quoted by competitors.

Steve ensures he visits Italy at least once a year to source stone and check out new products, ensuring room in his timetable to cement relationships over a round of golf with suppliers.

Having expanded gradually over a long period, Steve has no plans to retreat in the face of toughening trading conditions. By maintaining quality, investing consistently in plant and new machinery and by targeting the luxury end of the market, he hopes to be able to



Book-matched Rojo Alicante marble has been used to create panels for a stunning shower enclosure that also features a marble tray. Marble accounts for about 20% of Steve's sales



Plans are already underway to add freestanding items such as this Blue Pearl granite washstand to the selection

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relationships, built on mutual trust and respect. And ever conscious of the power of word of mouth, Steve aims to deal with every customer personally, with courtesy and patience as the hallmarks of the service. "Customers can spend as long as they wish and come back as often as they need to," he says.

This impression of unhurried calm masks a well-organised and highly efficient workflow. Stock arrives monthly by the container-load so the fastest-moving components such as black granite, rarely run low and can be replenished from local sellers if necessary. With advance planning, a kitchen or bathroom surface can be templated, cut and polished ready for delivery in four

sidestep the worst of any downturn. To take his business forward, the adjoining unit has been bought and Steve is looking for continuing improvements in productivity to maximise the extra space. The company image is being refreshed along with a drive towards a higher public profile.

A move into freestanding furniture such as tables and washstands is on the cards, and showroom capacity will increase as the portfolio widens.

But at the core of all Steve's plans will remain his unwavering dedication to crafting a quality product. "I don't want to be known as the biggest granite company," he says, "I would like to be known as the best."



A contemporary kitchen display with an unusual, stone-clad end panel shows off the good looks and versatility of White Pearl granite



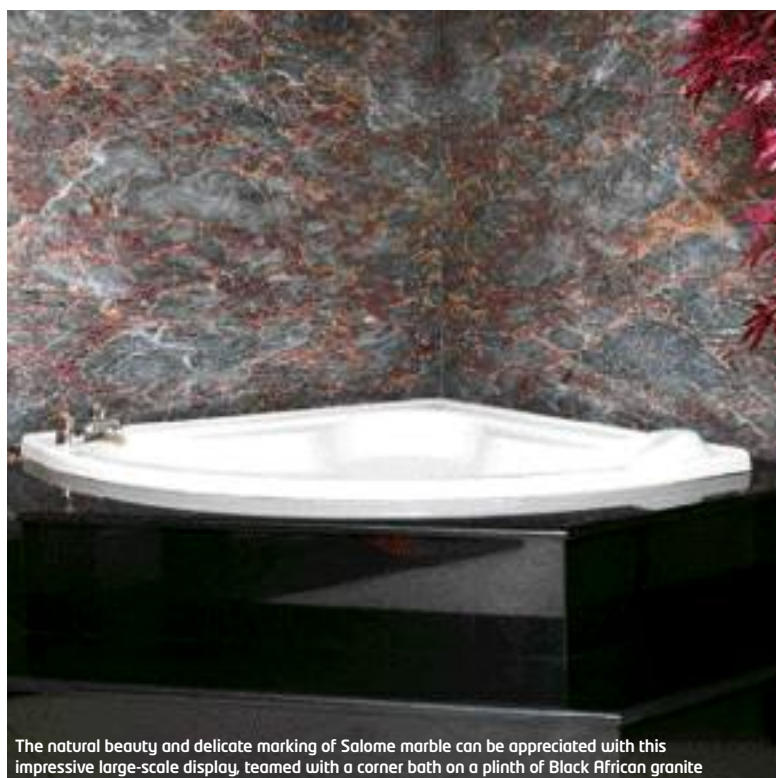
One of only a few man-made products on offer is Silestone, a stone composite in a broad spectrum of bold colours



Limestone flooring samples in the showroom demonstrate the wide range of options Steve can offer



White Pearl granite originates in Brazil and at around £500 per sq m, is one of the premium products



The natural beauty and delicate marking of Salome marble can be appreciated with this impressive large-scale display, teamed with a corner bath on a plinth of Black African granite



business profile

Steve Bristow Stone Masonry

Who are we? Steve Bristow, md

Where are we? Unit 2, Heywood Estate, Pottery Road, Kingsteignton, Newton Abbot, Devon TQ12 3RS. Tel: 01626 330 337. www.stevebristow.co.uk

What we do Leading suppliers of granite, marble, stone and composites, based in the south west, working with a range of clients from kitchen and bathroom installers and interior designers, through to domestic customers

Business history Steve launched his business in 1986, as a one-man operation based in his garage. From the outset he aimed to establish a strong reputation for quality and service, which has enabled his company to expand steadily. The business moved to its present home about 10 years ago and now aims to offer up-to-the-minute technology, coupled with unrivalled product selection and levels of customer care

Staffing levels Steve employs 14 staff, including eight workshop staff, four fitters, an office manager and an office assistant

Sales stats Around 1,500 contracts a year, of which about 70% are for commercial customers and 30% for private clients. Granite accounts for 75% of sales, and the average spend on a domestic kitchen is around £2,000

Favourite customer "The person who strives to afford what we can offer because he or she really appreciates the natural materials we use and the work that goes into creating each individual piece"

Least favourite customer "Probably the blasé ones, who see a slab of granite or marble as nothing more than a functional component of a kitchen or bathroom"

Strange but true The average age of a piece of granite is 590 million years



Precision sections of Calacatta Oro marble, sourced from Italy, are glued together to make a curved bath panel for a high-spec bathroom



In experienced hands, the two top-of-the-range cutting saws are kept busy throughout the day at Steve Bristow's factory



This new, state-of-the-art Computer Numerical Control system can be programmed with a template which then cuts the stone automatically



Granite slabs are off-loaded and stacked in the yard. Under-cover storage will soon be increased at the Newton Abbot base so that more marble stocks can be held