

# From humble radiator to hot work of art

Bisque began a design trend and developed as a national distribution network, says Caroline Phillips. Now it has its own range – and rivals

In 1982, the late Geoffrey Ward had a plumbing installation company. Camden Council insisted that he could not run his business from retail premises – without a window display, he could no longer be classified as a shop and would have to close.

Mr Ward had a zany designer radiator that he had imported for fun. He put it into the window of his Kilburn premises. People started asking to buy it – those were the days of the ubiquitous white panel radiator – so Mr Ward decided to change jobs. He started to import sculptural radiators.

The first British company to market designer radiators, Bisque now sells them in 30,000 shapes and sizes and has in effect created a domestic market for designer radiators currently worth £60m a year.

When Peter Peirse-Duncombe, a former minor and London Business School MBA, joined the company in 1990, it was design-led and its directors lacked business experience.

"They had wonderful prod-

ucts and images but no stock, no financial management and no proper pricing structure. We were losing money," he says. "In 1989, our sales to showrooms were £36,000.

"We built the company slowly and frugally, achieving growth without debt. It took seven years to grow to

**'Bisque's export business is worth £500,000 a year. I see no reason why we can't grow it to £10m turnover in five years'**

less than £1m. From 1997 when I became managing director, I took Bisque from £1.7m to £11m in five years – with annual growth of 70 per cent in 1998."

The company turned over about £13m in its latest full year and has increased profits every year since 1996.

Now Mr Peirse-Duncombe, 48, is chief executive and

responsible for strategy, finance and marketing. "I've grown with the job. When we get bigger, I'll split the roles," he says.

The foundation of Bisque's business is its longstanding relationship with Arbonia of Switzerland. Bisque began as Arbonia's distributor in the UK in 1989 and about 70 per cent of its range still comes from its Swiss partner. The rest is accounted for by its own radiator designs, which are mostly manufactured outside the UK and imported.

When Mr Peirse-Duncombe joined, his brief was to build a distribution business for Bisque – Arbonia was pressing the small company to become a leading importer of contemporary design.

"I had to make the transition from small plumbing outlet to national network," says Mr Peirse-Duncombe, a man with an emphatic voice and a passion for radiators. "Bisque had a fantastic product which nobody outside central London knew about."

Mr Peirse-Duncombe found that conservative plumbers merchants were not interested in designer radiators and they claimed there was no demand. "So I went round bathroom and kitchen showrooms with sales agents, cajoling people and personally delivering display stands from Aberdeen to Cornwall," he booms genially.

"I took risks. I employed sales teams, opened accounts with companies and built a large stock for quick delivery. The strategy worked, albeit slowly, especially going into recession in the early 1990s."

Gradually, innovative showrooms began to see the advantage of an add-on range of radiators. Customers who bought one started buying them for the rest of their house. An increase in the value of property and the amount spent on the home, the public's growing awareness of design and the nascence of property makeover programmes on television contributed to growth.

The company also started to use its relationship with Arbonia as a springboard for growth by bringing out its own designs.

"Given the size of the company, we're limited to one or two new designs a year," says Mr Peirse-Duncombe. "It's an awful lot easier and cheaper if someone comes to us with a fully designed and developed product."

For example, developing and launching the Hot Spring radiator, by the British designer, Paul Priestman, "was our biggest risk. It required an investment of £30,000, which was more than we had in 1995." Now the Hot Spring is Bisque's main product, with annual sales of £1m.

Mr Peirse-Duncombe has been developing designs in-house, working closely with Paul Draper, Bisque's showroom and literature designer and main shareholder. Mr Peirse-Duncombe

has even designed a couple of radiators himself.

He works continually to extend the product range and wants to develop the manufacturing side. "I'd like to sell 70 per cent of our own designs. I don't want to sell less Arbonia – just more Bisque designs."

In 2000, he decided to expand Bisque into a different area. The company had already done a little commercial work – Sir Norman Foster, the architect, had specified Bisque radiators for Stansted Airport – and Arbonia wanted its partner to sell into the commercial market.

Mr Peirse-Duncombe brought in Brian Herbert

from rival Zehnder UK as managing director and established Bisque Commercial, a separate company, to meet the larger contractors' demands and work with architects and engineers.

"We had no idea whether the name would translate into the commercial market," Mr Peirse-Duncombe says. "Most companies are in either retail or commercial. They're completely different businesses. You need to tackle the markets differently."

"Commercial is a very long-term commitment – a project discussed today may not happen for three years. In retail, people buy one or two radiators. But we sold

2,500 units for our largest commercial project."

Bisque Retail staff are creative people. Bisque Commercial employs people with a background in radiator specification or engineering. Bisque Commercial now turns over £2m a year.

A year ago Mr Peirse-Duncombe started exporting Bisque's own designs, mainly to continental Europe.

"It happened by accident. We were getting so much press coverage and enquiries from everywhere. We'd been developing Bisque products, so we had something to export," he says.

"Bisque's export business is worth £500,000 a year. I see no reason why we can't grow it to a £10m turnover in five years."

Bisque remains the leader of the market for designer radiators that it virtually created in the UK, but there is competition aplenty. Companies including MHS, Vogue, Vasco and Radiating Style have joined the thriving market, which Mr Peirse-Duncombe estimates is growing by 10-20 per cent a year.

Designer radiators are much more expensive than panels. Although designer radiators account for 19 per cent of the market by value – sales are £60m out of a total of £320m – it is probably only 9 per cent by volume. The rest of the market is dominated by the everyday pressed-steel radiator.

"It's a cheap product but you have to sell an awful lot of them to make money. We want to continue to chip away there," – he clenches his fist – "to quash the dominance of the pressed-steel panel."

## MAKING A NAME WITH AN UNUSUAL PRODUCT

For most people, Bisque chief executive Peter Peirse-Duncombe admits, "central heating, boilers and copper pipes are boring". But Bisque presents its radiators as works of art to be admired, not hidden behind a sofa. Its brochures are aspirational, its showrooms like art galleries.

Its approach has helped it to become by far the best-known name in the market for upmarket designer radiators:

- The company initially grew slowly as it worked to create a distribution network for its unusual products in a market that was not used to them. With distribution in place, it then sought to expand along with the market.
- Bisque built on the basis of its relationship with Arbonia, which makes 70 per cent of the designs it sells, by expanding its niche. It added its own designs to those of Arbonia, and moved into commercial sales to complement its retail operations.
- Bisque has taken encyclopaedic tomes of complicated literature and made them user-friendly, allowing customers to specify and

purchase a radiator on their own, without calling a plumber.

- The company aims to be as flexible as possible. It is not committed to production lines manufacturing millions of radiators and therefore aims to respond rapidly to what customers want.
- It has developed the broadest range of any radiator company to enable it to deliver a wide array of sizes and finishes quickly. "Our accountants complain, but not our customers," says Mr Peirse-Duncombe.
- It fosters a culture of teamwork, creativity and friendliness among staff. Everyone is encouraged to come up with ideas to improve the business and it relies heavily on the instincts of its staff – if they like something, Bisque reckons enough other people will share their taste.

Mr Peirse-Duncombe expounds the Bisque credo: "We don't save money on production at the cost of our design integrity. We've succeeded by educating potential stockists and creating demand. We're flexible and listen to what our customers want."



Man of designs: Peter Peirse-Duncombe says that since he joined Bisque in 1990, the company has been built 'slowly and frugally, achieving growth without debt'

Cristian Barnett

## MORE ENTERPRISE ON FT.COM

Read Fiona Harvey's Worth Watching Column every Tuesday at [www.ft.com/worthwatching](http://www.ft.com/worthwatching)

This week:

- A new filter to combat air pollution has been developed in the UK to offer an alternative to full-face masks that can become damp and uncomfortable.
- The first silicon-based high-frequency optical modulator has been created in the US. The device is expected to provide an important new component for photonics.
- A new material that could lead to non-metallic magnets is under development, opening the prospect of magnets that are lighter and cheaper.

Go to [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com) for a free 15-day trial



## The blue chip in your portfolio of homes

Sumptuous apartments from £495,000

Five to seven bedroom townhouses from £4.99 million

Call 020 7229 0808  
[www.wycombesquare.co.uk](http://www.wycombesquare.co.uk)

ST JAMES  
RESIDENCES

Wycombe Square  
Kensington W8

## THEO FENNELL



### OUTLINE

HEART PENDANTS FROM £295

169 FULHAM ROAD 020 7591 5000

CITY ROYAL EXCHANGE 020 7623 4360

SELFRIDGES 020 7318 3060

HARRODS 020 7730 1234

HARVEY NICHOLS MANCHESTER 0161 828 8646

[WWW.THEOFENNELL.COM](http://WWW.THEOFENNELL.COM)