



Neil Henry, economic and community development manager at Babergh District Council.

## Hadleigh Maid

Hadleigh Maid is a great example of a local company that has shown impressive growth to achieve presence on a national scale, all from its base in a Suffolk market town. Its manufacturing base is located on a new extension to the Lady Lane Industrial Estate that has attracted a number of growing and new businesses seeking a good location and range of high quality premises at an affordable price.

Many local companies looking to expand are determined to remain in or close to our main towns of Hadleigh and Sudbury. This is due to the strength of the local economy, the need to retain their local skilled workforce, and in some cases for their brand attachment to local places – such as Hadleigh Maid.

Babergh District Council works hard to help local companies achieve their ambitions through its business support services, including advice, funding and information; its managed workspace centres in Sudbury and Hadleigh where many successful local firms have taken their first steps; and in its planning policies to ensure a supply of land and premises is available for firms to grow. We also work with our partners, including Suffolk Development Agency to develop the right economic environment for businesses to flourish.

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# Hand made in Hadleigh

Chocolate lovers will agree that you have to go a long way to beat the delicious hand made creations being produced by a family firm in a Suffolk market town. But if you think Hadleigh Maid is a small cottage industry, think again. This year it will produce more than 20 tonnes of chocolate with projected sales next year reaching unprecedented heights. **Sheline Clarke** spoke to managing director **Donny Briggs**.

**D**ONNY Briggs is passionate about chocolate. The managing director of Hadleigh Maid Ltd admits that on a busy day he keeps going on a diet of chocolate and coffee and the excitement of making the finest quality chocolate for his loyal, and rapidly expanding, band of customers.

Anyone who has ever tasted Hadleigh Maid chocolates will agree that they are rather special. The selection boxes are pure indulgence, the classic cream coloured box, embellished with an elegant hand-tied ribbon, encasing a sophisticated choice of chocolates inside: truffles, pralines and traditional fruit cream all thickly coated in the finest quality dark, white or milk chocolate. Each one is hand finished and decorated by Donny himself.

The selection boxes are offered alongside smaller stick boxes, aimed at the impromptu present and corporate gift market, chocolate bars and a Woodland Folk range, perfectly formed mice, frogs and owls, high quality chocolate for kids. Christmas and Easter are exceptionally busy times for Hadleigh Maid when production includes a delightful array of snowmen, Santas and Easter bunnies respectively, alongside the traditional range.

A family firm set up 32 years ago by Donny's parents-in-law Mike and Avril Briggs, with a marble slab to temper the chocolate and a make-shift bain marie, the company made a quantum leap in 2004 when it moved production from the back room at its shop in the town's



Donny Briggs, managing director of Hadleigh Maid, in action.

George Street to three brand new units at the town's recently expanded Lady Lane Industrial Estate. At the same time it became a limited company and Donny and his wife Angela bought out her

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parents, although they still remain firmly at the heart of the whole operation. They retained the George Street premises as a retail outlet in the town centre.

Donny says that the move was a gamble which has paid off in terms of both the volume of orders the company can now handle and in improved efficiency throughout the business. In the

smaller premises ingredients and stock had to be moved many times by hand, as there was no room for machinery, and economies of scale simply couldn't be achieved. They were delighted to find what they were looking for in Hadleigh.

"We couldn't carry on down there," says Donny, reflecting on the George Street operation. "Apart from anything we were hand packing the lorries and causing all sorts of traffic problems.

"We wanted to stay in Hadleigh because of the name but also because this place is perfect for us; we are right on the by-pass and that leads straight to the A14 and A12.

"Our turnover is now three times what it was in George Street because we can be much more productive and efficient. It also means I can take Sundays off," he smiles, adding that to unwind he like nothing more than a family horse ride, even if he does have to wear a Bluetooth headset in case of urgent calls from customers.

As well as producing the hand made Hadleigh Maid chocolates we all know and



The Hadleigh Maid shop in George Street.



The Hadleigh Maid team, from left, Beverley Mayes with Abigail, Henrietta, Donny, Amabella, Angela, Mike and Avril Briggs.

love, the company also supplies some of the largest household name retailers in the UK.

Last year, for example, it provided three tonnes of chocolate chards to adorn the top of a cheesecake which was the subject of a very high profile television campaign for a leading food retailer. It also provides chocolate for retailers to market under their own brand, and a good deal of work is done through PR companies wanting to offer gifts with their customers' logo on the front, including Dolce Vita which wanted square chocolates in their own livery to promote a new line of square watches.

Being able to respond quickly to unexpected orders has been an important part in building a loyal customer base, that along with the uncompromising quality of the product. In order to do this Hadleigh Maid not only produces its own chocolates, but also retains the whole packaging operation in-house. Recognising the need for the boxes to be as appealing as their contents, Donny has invested in equipment such as digital printers, a block foiler, guillotine and vacuum formers.

"One Friday night we got a call and someone wanted 1,500 chocolate fish," he says, "well, because we can do it all here they were able to pick it up 6am Monday morning."

It was a similar story when an airline that the company supplied rang to say they had run out and wanted several thousand extra boxes.

"We took the call and I looked at Mike and said, 'we'd better get the machines running then', and we did."

Innovation in the product range is a mixture of push and pull. The company is often

approached by customers who want something specific, while tinkering with recipes and developing new products is part of the art of being a chocolatier. Recently it started to work with a polyphenol-rich chocolate called Acticoa, which is being heralded as a new healthy chocolate, thanks to its being packed with antioxidants.

"Our Hadleigh Maid branded business is growing, and remains the bedrock of the business as that is where we started 30-odd years ago," he said. "Last year that accounted for 20% of our turnover, but this year is approaching 40%, so there's real growth there."

"Sometimes new ideas come out of idle curiosity. Wondering if we can incorporate strawberry into a champagne truffle, for example, and just seeing what it tastes like. Some ideas people bring to us are not physically possible or commercially viable, but we listen to the customers, and you have to see what the market is doing. That's how we first started using Acticoa, which is getting a lot of publicity at the moment, but we are the only ones coating cranberries and cherries with it, and they are proving really popular."

"I tend to do all the polishing and finishing, it's quite a complicated business with lots of different processes, and it's important to get it absolutely right. Quality is very important and that's something that we won't let drop, whether we are making chocolates for the shop or for a big wholesale order."

The changing make-up of Donny's sales can, he believes, be partly explained by the whole food miles issue, which makes his chocolates a hit with local shoppers, but also thanks to

more people staying at home for the holidays this year.

"I think people are looking for locally produced food, and we buy as much of our ingredients as we can locally too, though sadly you can't grow cocoa in this country, so that we have to bring in."

"We are also seeing a different trend this year; other people are saying that times are hard but our orders are up and I think that has a lot to do with people not going abroad for their holidays but staying in the UK

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and looking for something to take home to say where they have been.

"The summertime is traditionally a real low point for us; you may as well forget it. We use the time to do our maintenance and really just stay open for a service, but this year it has gone silly, and we have seen 50% growth in what is usually our worst quarter, which is lovely. Keep it coming!"

And while he is making hay while the sun shines, Donny is well aware that he needs to manage the company's growth in order to maintain levels of service and his highly valued reputation.

"When you go from a tiny place in George Street to three units on an industrial estate you start getting much bigger orders, the likes of which we used to get once a year we are

now being asked to quote very week. I had one enquiry that I had to turn away and told them to go and talk to Nestle, they were talking hundreds of tonnes a year and you would need a much bigger warehouse and distribution system to deal with that and it would have changed the whole character of the business. A lot of the bits and pieces we are doing now would have had to stop, so I wasn't prepared to do that. There are people out there with machines that can knock out bars of chocolate like peas out of a pod, but that's not us.

"Anything that happens to this business affects us as a family and affects our livelihoods. The move here was a big turning point for us. Productivity has gone up and our profits have gone up and that's what you want to take it onto the next generation. I am not trying to create something that will conquer the world. What's important to me is that I am creating a lifestyle so that I can provide for my family and part of providing for my family is providing for our customers, whether they are coming into the shop and spending a pound or placing a £50,000 wholesale order. They are all important to us.

"Mike and Avril started the business, it was their baby; we've got the stropky teenager and we'll pass it onto our children as something that is a little bit more mature. We have taken it through the growing pains and it is really nice to have a business that is multi-generational within the family. We look after each other as a family, and to be quite honest, I think that is why this business works."

[www.hadleighmaid.com](http://www.hadleighmaid.com)