



OUR STORY SO FAR

From a back-garden shed to a
Queen's Award-winning exporter





A 15-BY-10 SHED IS WHERE OUR STORY BEGAN.

As ETI's founding father Peter Webb hands over the reins to his son, Jason, we look back on our legacy to date, a journey which started in 1983 and has been defined by determination, innovation and a dedication to British-based manufacturing.



How the ETI brand evolved with the business



PETER WEBB MBE DL

Many sleepless nights, a lot of trial and error, and Electronic Temperature Instruments (ETI) has transformed into a fully-fledged British manufacturer which proudly produces and distributes products such as Thermapen to the world.

Having started and steered the firm since 1983, Peter Webb is handing control of the business over to his three children, Claire, Lisa and Jason, the latter being directly involved in its day-to-day running and soon to be taking the managerial reins from his father.

Back to the shed. It took up around a third of Peter's garden at the time, and represented what to him was a huge gamble.

With a mechanical engineering background who had served stints at companies such as Comark Instruments (then the first and only electric thermometer producer around), he was promised a game-changing job at a breakaway firm set up by a former colleague.

But the move backfired. With the new enterprise lacking success, it soon dawned that Peter, whose wife Miriam had just given birth to their first child Claire, would need to find another way to support his family.

The crucial question was how, and Miriam's Aunt provided the answer.

After many conversations and debates back and forth, she persuaded Peter to set up shop (or shed) and apply his expertise to his own family enterprise. With Miriam assuming office duties in the front bedroom, Peter worked tirelessly creating sensors in the shed and transformed into a workaholic like his father, so much so that even the neighbours started clocking the nocturnal nature of his endeavours.

Two to three years' later the shed would be replaced by a small premises and then another garden-based workshop, before an opportunity to acquire a shop site arose.

Fitted with a large workshop at the back of the property, it was an ideal base from which the firm could grow. ETI's first office hire followed, Peter offering the role to a friend in need of a job over a gin and tonic. The team soon expanded to over half a dozen, and it was here that a financial ceiling threatened to curtail the development of the business as cashflow challenges prompted setbacks to secure a £2,000 bank loan.

EARLY YEARS OF ETI

“I was told by a bank manager, who was quite well-known locally, that they wouldn't lend me the £2,000 I needed to fund the business. He said to me ‘I don't think your business will ever stand up’. He knew my dad really well and lent money to him in the past but didn't want to know about this.”

Peter Webb

A local branch of NatWest and a resident banker came to the rescue, a friend that Peter and ETI would become indebted to for the early advice and support they provided. The advice was frank – ETI needed more than £2,000 to get to where Peter wanted to be. And after being issued a NatWest-backed loan for £5,000, the firm was finally in a position to build the foundations it needed to truly take off.



Office at Broadwater Street East c1989



First premises at Broadwater Street East

Peter was still, by his own admission, lacking in the sort of ruthless financial discipline that was required to become a successful entrepreneur, something which two influential mentor-like figures taught him, one taking on the apt title of Mrs Profit.

Indeed, the age-old business proverb ‘turnover is vanity, profit is sanity’ was a key lesson learned in the early trading years of ETI. Encouraged to not undersell his product and put a higher price tag on quality, larger profits soon enabled Peter to invest in a new factory in 1991.

How were you impacted by the recessions?

Peter: “What recession? We are fortunate enough to be in a business where demand is constant and almost recession-proof.”

Jason “I wouldn't say there has been no concern at all. As a company we had to navigate through it, much like we have with COVID-19, especially last year when we faced a couple of especially challenging months.”

CHEFS WHO ENDORSE THE THERMAPEN®

The Thermanpen is legendary among chefs as the gold standard in kitchen thermometers.



“Thermanpens are crucial to my cooking both at home and at my restaurant, so I’m delighted to be working on some new recipes to showcase what they can really do”

Kenny Tutt MasterChef winner 2018 & owner of Pitch Restaurant

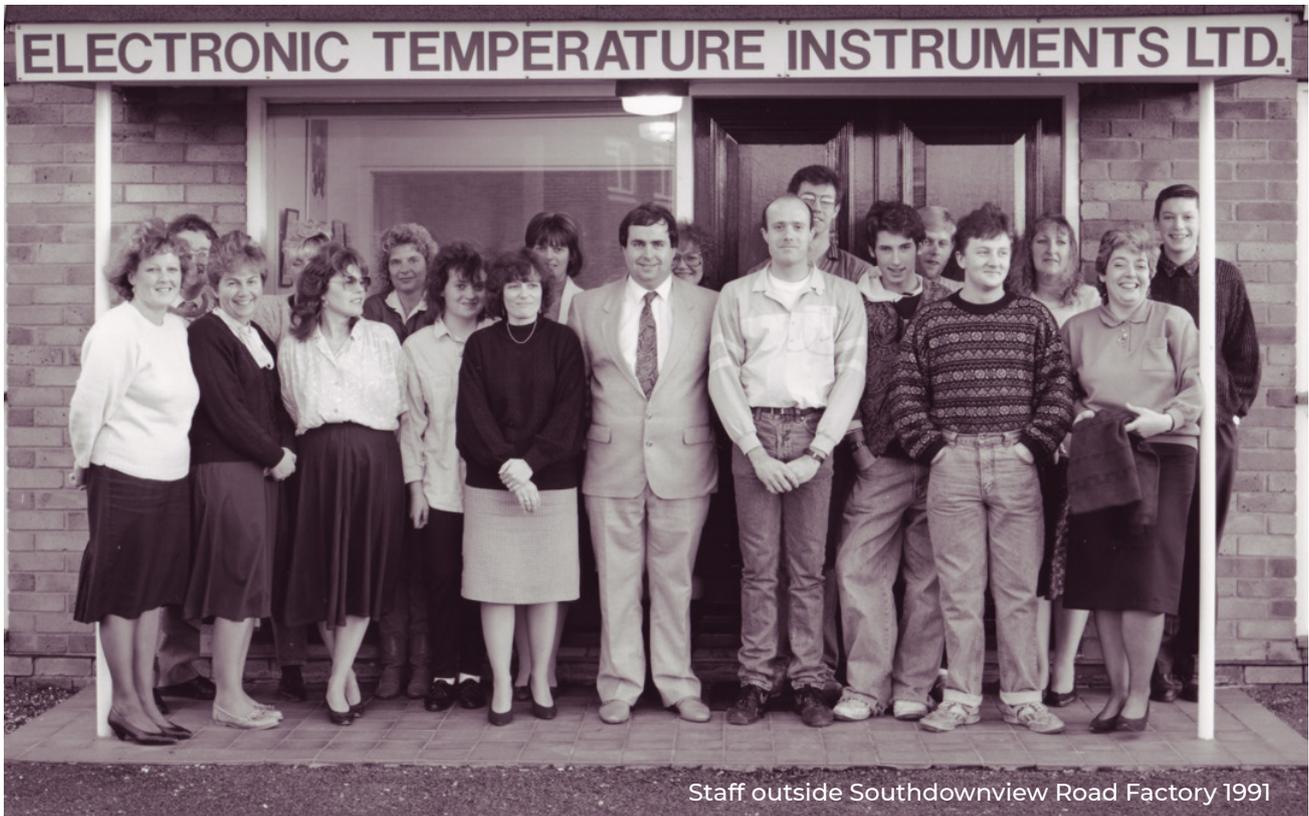
“A Thermanpen allows me to cook with more confidence. The health and safety of my clients and family is paramount, and it’s simple to reassure myself by always checking the temperature of my food with my Thermanpen”

Laura Tulloch Plenty Catering



“I’m Elky, also known as the Smokin’ Elk. I absolutely love cooking food over fire and the Thermanpen helps me up my game by cooking to the perfect temperature, every time. It’s the one BBQ tool I wouldn’t be without!”

The Smokin’ Elk



BUILT ON A PIONEERING SPIRIT

By this point, Jason had turned four and the company was beginning to take its innovations to buyers outside of the UK.

Focus had also turned to producing electronic thermometers for food-based applications



Factory floor

“It was around that time that Edwina Currie went on TV and said that every egg has got salmonella in it. Suddenly, everyone was taking the temperature of their food to ensure there wasn’t any danger from salmonella, so we couldn’t have asked for a better PR exercise or demonstration that food thermometers were our business.”

Peter Webb

The infamous announcement in 1988 prompted an upsurge in media and societal attention around being careful with food, a trend which opened up a massive market for ETI’s temperature probes among commercial kitchens and caterers. Michelin-starred chefs were among our buyers, the traction helping to more than double sales to more than £3 million in rapid time.

Not only did this create a need to increase production capacity, but it also underscored the importance of making relevant enhancements to keep the company a step ahead of any competition picking up the scent.

In the early 1990s, ETI were producing handheld thermometers with separate probes. While functional and effective, a Eureka moment arrived when the decision was made to combine the components into a single unit – this is where Dave Parsons, Peter’s brother-in-law, proposed the idea of creating a fold-in penknife-style solution.

The duo spent a year experimenting with different designs based on wooden models, prototypes that would become the foundation for five generations of Thermapen.

LIFE OF THE THERMAPEN

“I remember spending forever looking at all angles of this piece of balsa wood, wondering how on earth are we going to make this. Technically speaking we’re on generation five of the Thermapen, but if I’m being truthful, it is more like 10. Even the first generation had some modifications made to it at various stages. But back then I could grasp all the technical elements and evolutions – today the refinements are so advanced a lot of it goes over my head!”

Peter Webb



The Thermapen ONE

Over the years several key refinements have been made. Sleeker designs, removal of food traps for easier cleaning, and use of anti-bacterial silver in the plastic to prevent bacteria from multiplying – these are just some of the R&D improvements that have been implemented since the first model came off the production line.

A major challenge has involved incorporating electronic components into very tight spaces. Today, ETI uses a microprocessor and embedded software in the Thermapen, a far cry from the internal setup that the first-generation device contained. However, as technology opens up the possibility to embed more features, space once again becomes a premium.

Thermapen ONE is ETI’s newest model. Reading temperatures in just one second, it is arguably the fastest and most accurate of its kind on the market.

It represents the latest in a range that has proven incredibly popular both at home and abroad – 2020 proved to be a record year in terms of revenue, despite the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, by the time summer arrived, shifting habits towards home cooking and barbecuing prompted a surge in sales of temperature probes, the Thermapen very much consolidating its status as a commercial product that has also found its place in the consumer market



Thermapen through the years

Why has the consumer market become so important to ETI?

Jason “People are seeing the tools used by top chefs in professional kitchens and want to pay the same attention to detail with their own food – this trend we’ve seen over the past five years or so has certainly helped us sell more Thermapens to the consumer market.”

Peter: “In the early days of Thermapen it was a bit like Henry Ford when the only car available was in grey. We were only producing small amounts per month so there was no need. As the numbers went up and we did more business in America, the need for different styles and colours grew.”

A PROUDLY BRITISH EXPORT

In fact, the inspiration for making the Thermapen more consumable can at least partially be attributed to a loyal partner in the United States.

When Randy Owen came over to the UK to meet Peter in the mid-1990s, he was looking for new products for his part-time business, ThermoWorks. The two immediately saw eye to eye, and so began the ETI-ThermoWorks partnership which to this day stands as our company's single greatest source of revenue.

The first five years of doing business only saw modest volumes being exported. It was when Randy dedicated 100% of his time into the ThermoWorks business that the collaboration ramped up to the next level. Indeed, the US business today works out of an enormous 80,000 sq ft factory and is still growing.

Our partnership with Randy is grounded on trust. We share information, accommodate each other's distribution needs where possible and are not afraid to be transparent about disagreements.

"A lot of people come into my office and ask where we sell to, and I tell them that around 50% of our business is from ThermoWorks. They look at me slightly perplexed and ask whether I have a contract with them. We don't. Our business is done by the shake of a hand – I've worked with Randy for over 25 years, and I've never had a reason to doubt what he says. We don't always agree, but we always speak our minds, and that is so important."

Peter Webb



Randy Owen of ThermoWorks Inc

The relationship also spurs innovation, and this is where we return to the inspiration behind making Thermapen a more consumable product.

In Randy's eyes, the product initially lacked aesthetic appeal. To him, it needed to become less square and more colourful if American home cooks were going to place it among their kitchen gadgets.

We listened, and today you will find Thermapen in ten standard colours with a design far sleeker than its commercially focused, no-nonsense predecessors.

This has helped push the range into other export markets. Three of our oldest distributors (in Spain, Cyprus and South Africa) still do business with ETI today, with Scandinavia second only to North America in terms of our most significant exporting destinations. Oceania and South Africa also represent lucrative markets for us.

How do you feel about passing/receiving the baton?

Peter: "It does make me proud to pass on the responsibility to Jason. He's doing a fantastic job so far – I must admit I don't know all the ins and outs of the digital innovations, but so long as the return on investment is there, I am happy."

Jason: "I'm not sure you can replicate the passion that a family member has for their own business. I have such enormous respect for the blood, sweat and tears they have put in; the countless late and sleepless nights, to get the business to a point where I can take it forwards. My drive is to build on those foundations."

FOUR QUEEN'S AWARDS FOR ENTERPRISE



We stand as a proud British exporter, and the success of Thermapen has led us to win three Queen's Awards in Enterprise for International Trade during the last decade. We have also been fortunate enough to win a Queen's Award for Enterprise for Innovation in 2018, as well as numerous local and national accolades over the years.

What this tells us is that British quality sells. While some see the fact that we manufacture here in the UK as a potential stumbling block to being competitive on price, our focus remains and always has been on quality. The controls we have in place, we believe, cannot be replicated abroad and even go far beyond some of the defined standards set in this country.

2012

2014

2017

2018



And British-made can also be efficiently made. Since starting production of the Thermapen, we have been able to streamline processes and cut production time per unit from around ten minutes to under three.



Proud winners in 2017 for International Trade

“Too many accountants look at manufacturing purely from a financial point of view, and don't realise how much you can spend on QA when products arrive from overseas. I would much rather know we are getting it right 100% of the time, first time, than have to check every single item in a shipment to see if it's up to the mark.”

Peter Webb

This is not to suggest we remain closed to doing business with international suppliers. The difference is we take the time to develop core foundations of trust, and ensure these partners share our passion for quality.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

As he prepares to step back from overseeing the day-to-day running of ETI, Peter's message to both Jason and the British manufacturing sector is to maintain this passion.

When fully focussed, products made on UK shores can compete with anywhere in the world, and this will be an important mindset if the industry is to succeed in the global post-COVID economy.



Father and Son – Peter and Jason Webb

AND WHAT OF THE FUTURE OF ETI?

As Jason prepares to take over his father's responsibilities, Peter is conscious of not overloading his successor with too much too soon. The process will be a transition, one which allows Jason to fully exploit the new dimensions he brings to the business, not least in the areas of digitisation and social media.

Meanwhile, Peter will be able to enjoy a well-deserved retirement, time which will be spent travelling and enjoying the company of his family.

“If there is one lesson I can pass onto Jason from my early years of being immersed in the business, it is to make time to spend time with your family, because it is time you will never be able to get back. Yes, it has been necessary to get money in the bank, but that is my one regret that I'd like Jason to learn from.”

Peter Webb

And the foundations for Jason have well and truly been laid. Today, ETI operates from four factories in the Worthing area and produces a large range of temperature measurement instruments, sensors and accessories.

We have over 200 employees led by ten specialised managers, and continue to work to a yearly objective of introducing at least three new products, increasing turnover by 5%.

Food is a futureproofed business, and consumers are more aware than ever about where their food comes from and how it is produced, not least that it is safe to eat.



Peter and Miriam Webb

“Why can’t we continue to grow and keep producing thermometers in the UK for as long as possible into the future? ETI has a tremendous heritage, one that I want to continue as a profitable company in 20 years’ time. I’ve got big boots to fill, but like Dad I have a competitive edge which means I like to beat records.”

Jason Webb

Little did we know how big a role ETI would play in today’s food hygiene arena when Peter bought the 10-by-15 shed in 1983. As it turns out, it was arguably the greatest investment he ever made.

ETI in brief

Electronic Temperature Instruments Ltd (ETI) is a private limited company founded in 1983 by Miriam and Peter Webb. Over the ensuing years, ETI has developed a worldwide reputation as a manufacturer and supplier of quality instrumentation and temperature sensors, including Thermapen.

Based in Worthing, UK, the company operates from four factories with around 210 staff, exporting products around the world to the likes of the USA, Australia, South Africa and Scandinavia.



British Manufacturer

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