

Tom Courts the Comeback



The Tom Courts comeback has been a tremendous boost to the Craft butcher sector in Scotland. Confidence and energy has been injected into the sector after one of their most successful recent early retirees decided to bounce back. And what a bounce back!

The shop in Burntisland was an instant success with queues that his customers have just learned to accept. Tom's father had previously run a butchers business in the town, so he was brought up there but it was probably Tom's enormous respect and far flung reputation for good quality and good service that immediately drew customers to this quiet seaside town on the north bank of the River Forth.

Having sold his very successful butchers shop in Cowdenbeath in May 2015, it was no great surprise that Tom Courts popped up some fifteen months later purchasing a butchers business in nearby Burntisland.



Clearly one who will never ever allow the grass to grow under his feet Tom deliberately went for a business that was in need of upgrading and purchased a smaller shop "to have an easy life". That of course depends upon what you call easy.

Taking over at the helm in October 2016, Tom had planned to trade through to Christmas and refit in the new year but when he got the keys and had a look around he realised how urgent the upgrading was required and immediately accelerated his plans.

A back to bare walls restoration was completed within two weeks at the beginning of November 2016. The shop is not large it is only x feet wide and the white walls create a feeling of space. Every tray in both the raw and ready to eat counters and in the refrigerated back drop are continually refilled all day every day.

Turnover has seen a six fold increase. Burntisland is a town of 7000 people, close enough to Edinburgh to be a commuter town for professionals and a town where disposable income has always been good.



Tom Courts business in Cowdenbeath had been in an excellent position adjacent to Morrisons but that came with a sizeable rent. His budget for power and advertising pushed up his overheads. The appeal in starting again was fuelled by lower overheads and an ingenious scheme where his pension fund bought the premises and he pays rent to himself.

Advertising in newspapers used to cost him £16,000 per year but that is a thing of the past. Tom has found Facebook a much better and effective method of getting his message across to both customers and potential customers.

"I do one Facebook post per week and I do an incentive that I call the 'Weekend Wonga' that hands the winner £40 of vouchers to spend in store. I usually get 1000 shares per week and it reaches around 70,000 people.



Tom does discreet advertising supporting local organisations for functions, free of charge or half price. "I do not ask for recognition but I know that word of mouth is best, it always happens."

Years of experience of selling Copas Turkeys had created a loyalty that Tom could not go past. In his first year the new venture topped 200 sales. He is a firm believer in selling quality turkeys and he markets Copas as the "best turkeys you have ever tasted". He stresses "the most important meal of the year deserves a quality bird. At the end of the day the Copas turkeys yield much more flesh than those they are often compared against."



Tom was an apprentice for his father between 1986 and 1992. As his father moved to open in Cowdenbeath, Tom returned to higher education via Lauder College to the University of Abertay.

Having graduated with a degree in accountancy, Tom entered the police. After his probationary period Tom was moved into the fraud squad but after eight years there he was moved to become a uniformed sergeant in Glenrothes.



John Day, Lorna Blake, Tom Courts and Matthew Falconer

That was in May 2003 but just six weeks later he left the police to join up again in his father's business in Cowdenbeath. Not everyone shared Tom's belief in the future of the meat industry. Tom recalled the comment that never leaves him:-

"When I left the police my DCI told me that I was a fool for leaving a great career to go back to a dying trade. It wasn't very long before I was earning more than him."

If ever Tom requires a spur in business, that comment is the one that he always returns to.

"I have always tried to pitch my business at the quality end of the market. There is no point in doing cheap and cheerful here, there are far too many people out there who do that better. There are plenty people who will spend good money on quality and good service.

"Some butchers will say that the most important part of their business is their customers, I firmly believe that the most important part of my business is my staff. If you look after your staff they will look after your business and the customers on your behalf.

"I can evidence that in the fact that over the last year I have had no complaints about any of my staff. I have had no staff turnover and I have no staff sick days whatsoever.

"I remunerate above the industry average, they are fed and watered at work and I am very sympathetic to their needs if something crops up. I have always looked after my staff and always had faith in them."



Raw meat accounts for 85% of the total turnover. Beef and lamb comes from Scotbeef, Inverurie and Michael Malone, Edinburgh. Tom has dealt with both wholesalers since taking the business from his father in July 2003. Pork and bacon comes from Robertson's Fine Foods in Ayrshire. Pastries and pies are all made on the premises and the raw puff pastry comes from a local supplier.

Range includes award winning products - steak pies, haggis, bridies, and top awards including best in Scotland speciality burgers, two times Scottish Champion pork sausage, runner up in the World Scotch Pie championships and two times winner for sausage rolls.

The busiest days are Fridays and Saturdays but Tom claims:- "You never move forward by standing still."

Because of the need to satisfy customers he has already plans to extend his premises. Christmas trade was good in 2016 but Tom does not want to let down any of his constantly swelling customer base at Christmas.

"The last thing that I want is a good customer coming in on 20th December to order a turkey and I have to turn them down because I either have none left or nowhere to store it."

There is an unused store in the land behind the shop that he intends to line, hygiene clad it and install one chill and then temperature control the rest of the area so that it all can be used as a chill at Christmas.

Tom has surrounded himself with five full time and two part time staff that he can trust. Matthew is the shop manager, Matthew's father, Andy lends a hand, John Day was nominated for UK Young Butcher of the Year when he was an apprentice in Cowdenbeath and he has returned to work for his old boss.

Lorna Blake, Tom's sister has given up a 19 year old career as a bank manager to make pies in the shop and run the deli side. Nephew Calum helps out. Formerly a Saturday boy Calum has taken a year out of university and more recently Tom's daughter Ellen has started on a part time basis.

That all helps to contribute to Tom's 'easy life' he continued:-

"I work half the hours that I used to do - a four day week, four and a half at the most. I have a more disciplined life."

Discipline is certainly what will be required because just listening to some of Tom's ambitious plans is an exhausting pastime. He will never "stand still" and in no time whatsoever Tom Courts has got his Burntisland Butchers shop really bouncing.

