

GRAND
DESIGN
BLINDS



Family affair: Claire, Jonathan, and Nick

Daring to be different, family team relishes every challenge

Openings editor Aidan Goldstraw travels to Oxfordshire to meet the Pelly-Frys - the driving force behind award-winning Grand Design Blinds.

It's not very often you come across a company whose profile is so singular you're forced to change the name of an editorial series in which it features.

Factory Watch? Nope, they're not a major manufacturer. Shop Watch? Sorry, no showroom. Heck, Grand Design Blinds doesn't even have a salesforce!

"One of our things is that we try not to be pushy," says director Claire Pelly-Fry. "In fact," adds her dad Jonathan, the company's founder, "people tell us we're not pushy enough!"

"We've hardly ever done any traditional marketing. On the whole, people don't like being told what they want to buy - they like to decide for themselves. So our business has just grown organically, and continues to do so."

Jonathan's entry into the world of shading was equally unconventional.

"I was dragged into the industry in 1989 by dint of buying a house with quite a big and complicated conservatory. This conservatory - as

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they all are - was fine in the spring and the autumn, and completely hopeless in the summer and winter.

"I struggled to get anybody to come and fit blinds to it, but in the end I found somebody - and I liked him so much I bought half of his business. So I was involved in a different blind business for quite a long time."

Some time after that company was sold, Jonathan was strolling on a beach in Cornwall when he experienced what he describes as an 'epiphany'.

"There was one particular house that had been done up quite well but which had terrible window coverings. I thought: 'Goodness me - even I could do better than that!' Then I thought: 'Maybe we should do that!'"

So it was that in 2011, Jonathan set

Private residence, Dalston, London



“ Nick said: “We were approached by the clients when they were still in the planning stage, enabling us to work with the window manufacturer and the builder to design fixing points and conceal pockets for the blinds on the shaped window and sloping skylight. The criteria was a solution that was as minimal as possible when not in use, yet allowed the room to be darkened at the touch of a button. We supplied motorised Duette cellular blinds in a room darkening fabric, cut to match the shape of the triangular skylight and hidden behind a false wall for the vertical glass to preserve the unique shape of the window. We won the 2022 BBSA Excellence Award for best internal blinds installation for this project” ”

up Grand Design Blinds with ‘a very small amount of money, a laptop and a mobile phone - that was basically it’.

Grand Design Blinds became a truly family affair two years later, when Jonathan picked up a call from his son Nick. “He said: ‘I’m just wondering if I should come and join you in the business.’”

Nick had been pursuing a career in property management, working closely with builders and architects, when he was suddenly made redundant.

“I remember Dad’s story rather differently,” says Nick with a smile, “as I think it was him who called me and asked: ‘Do you want to do blinds?’ Whichever way it was, that father-son chat ended up with Nick also becoming a director of Grand Design Blinds.

He recalls: “Dad’s instruction to me was just: ‘Can you make the phone ring?’ (‘That was his job description!’ Jonathan chips in). So I set up a website, with other marketing things, and basically made the business digital.”

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A few years later, along came Claire - but of course, this being Grand Design Blinds, her introduction to the company was also unconventional - because she was on the other side of the world.

Claire explains: “I’d been living in New Zealand. Before that, I’d had a landscaping company, in which I did all the same sorts of ‘office-y’ stuff I now do here. I needed some work, Grand Design Blinds had a gap in what they needed and so it all worked out

very well.

“The time difference made us a 24-hour company for a while, although I must say it’s rather easier running a company when you’re on the same time zone as everyone else. It was quite good for Nick, though, because he would go to bed with a full inbox and by the time he woke up in the morning it was all emptied!”

Behind all the unconventionality, there is solid reasoning behind the business decisions made by Grand Design Blinds.

Jonathan says: “We don’t have a salesforce largely because of our geographic spread. If we only ever operated in a radius of around 30 or 40 miles, which is what most people do, then we’d be different.

“But our next job could be in Dorchester or Aberdeen, or even Paris. So we ask people to send in photographs, drawings and other information as best they can - which varies from excellent to terrible!

“From that information, we’re able

ON THE GROUND

Eurostar Business Premier Lounge, Gare du Nord, Paris

“ Nick said: “Softroom Architecture & Design specified our bespoke arched roller blinds for the large Victorian windows in the iconic 1860s Gare du Nord. We were able to offer electric roller blinds in Mermet screen fabric, with stiffening battens in the arched blinds, mounted within a timber box for a discreet appearance. The lower blinds were also mounted in this box, providing shade for the room - essential for these south-facing windows. The contractors, Ateliers Normand, collaborated on the installation, providing mains power to the location. We also provided rectangular blinds for the bar area, hidden behind a downstand for a neat finish.” ”



to come up with a costed proposal, or sometimes several options, and if they want to take that further, fine. If they don't want to take it further, also fine.”

Flexibility is at the heart of the company's philosophy. “Most blind suppliers tend to have one favoured solution, and they will offer you that one solution, and sometimes will tell you that no other solutions are possible - which is often not true.

“Whereas we will be able to offer several different solutions to the client. Some of them may not be very neat, so we will ourselves often have a favoured solution, but others may work.”

The company is particularly partial to doing the kind of jobs many others find impossible or difficult to deal with.

“To an extent, we pick up the bits and pieces that other people don't do, and it's surprising the amount of work we

get from other companies in the blind industry.

“You would think that people would want to gather in all the business they can, and I'm sure that's true, but there are some areas of window treatments that are too much grief for quite a lot of companies, and so they kindly refer people to us.”

Nick adds: “Often we just get the one window in the entire house, which is fine with us, and they can do the rest. We pay them a referral commission for anyone they send our way, so everyone's happy.”

The company also enjoys a good relationship with its suppliers, although like Grand Design Blinds, this is also a small and select bunch.

“It's mostly just the one, with whom we've built up a relationship to the point where they'll make things for us they probably wouldn't make for other

people - because sometimes we really do push the boundaries. But we do work with other suppliers for specific needs.”

Jonathan, it should be noted, is officially retired. “Nearly everyone asked me how I was going to manage, since the blinds industry has been my 'big baby' for 30 or 40 years, but I've found it remarkably easy to step back.”

At which pronouncement, Nick and Claire make a few 'dubious' noises!

“You took a little while!” Claire eventually replies diplomatically. “There was a little bump when you were not wanting to let go, and Nick and I were going: 'It's fine!'”

Jonathan smiles and responds: “You guys have been very good at telling me to let go, actually - and you're right. But I've made myself comfortable with it and I'm happy with it now, because these two are doing a great job.”

Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre, Worcester College, Oxford

“ Nick said: “Niall McLaughlin Architects contacted us when no other blind companies were able to solve the issues presented by the design of the pair of windows either side of the stage in the Tuanku Bainun Auditorium in the Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre at Worcester College, Oxford University. The sloping heads of the windows, plus their sheer size, and the requirement for darkness to allow projections led to us developing a new blinds system by ourselves. Duette 64mm blackout pleated fabric was used, in combination with powerful remote-control 240v electric motors, to accommodate the 4.5m height. The blinds retract smoothly and silently into custom-made recesses designed into the ceiling structure to ensure the clean lines and precise detailing of the architecture of the building is not compromised. The building was shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize 2018.” ”

