

Associated Dental Labs Ltd

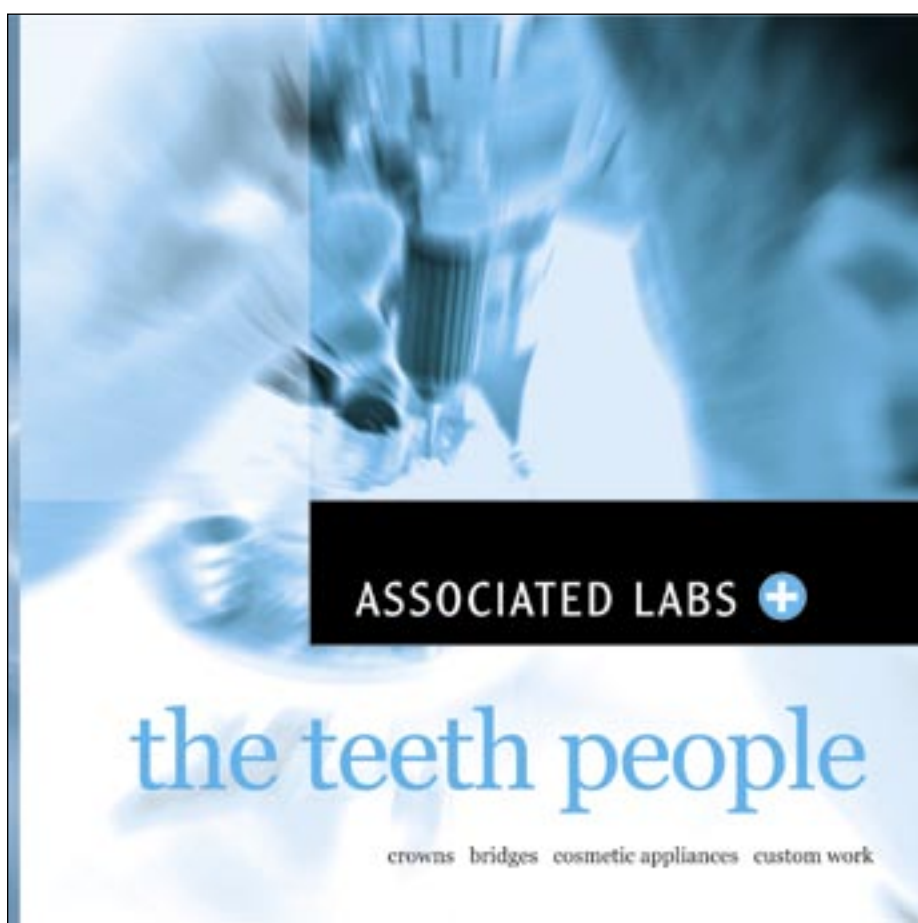
Those of a certain vintage will remember the Talking Heads song 'Once in a lifetime'. Throughout the song, David Byrne lists possessions and achievements, then asks the question 'How did I get here?' I may not have the beautiful house, the beautiful wife or the beautiful car mentioned in the song, but I do have a medium-sized dental laboratory and the question is still 'How did I get here?' By Peter Wagon

It all started in December 1975 when I left school without a clue as to what I wanted to do. The local careers officer didn't seem to have much of a clue either but did eventually suggest trying to be a dental technician at Regent Dental, a local lab that had a vacancy for a trainee. My research into my prospective career consisted of a quick scout around the car park – a Jag, two Reliant Scimitars and a Triumph TR6 – and that seemed promising! The interview was almost as perfunctory as my research, ending with Ken Miles, the owner, saying, 'Let's have a look at your hands. Good, they're small. Come back with them clean in January'.

Ken didn't really believe in college, so I spent five happy years learning to be a ceramist in the lab. I left in 1981 to take a position with Dentatech in Luxembourg, moving on to the small lab connected to Dr Theo Hanley's surgery in Dublin in 1983. By 1985 the Irish economy had beaten me down so I moved to London and Advance Ceramics, where I stayed for 18 months.

I felt that the experience I had picked up on my travels had given me a pretty well rounded knowledge of ceramics, so my itchy feet and a desire to try to learn some management skills took me to PWS in Cumbria and a position as the manager of the ceramics room. I stayed in the frozen north for two years before moving back to London to work as a freelance ceramist. This seemed to suit my restless nature and I worked in dozens of labs over next five years, some for just a couple of weeks to cover holidays, others for months.

This did tend to lead to a feast or famine income stream; I would have as much work as I could handle for months on end, then suddenly find myself with



The front cover of Associated Dental Labs' brochure

weeks without any, so gradually I ended up splitting my week between M R Bixley, a one-man lab in Surbiton, and South London Ceramics (SLC) in Thornton Heath. It was Jeremy at SLC who gave me my first clients; he wished to downsize to a purely private lab, so if I wished to continue working with him I would have to rent bench space from him and take on some of his NHS clients as my own.

This didn't really change things too

much at first. I thought up a silly name for the lab with friends in the pub – Thornton Teeth – got the docketts printed and a phone line installed, and started dealing with the dentists myself. During this period I started working closely with two friends, Mark Daniels and Brian Flood, who both had their own one-man labs. We would help each other out in many ways, so when we heard a large room was available for rent locally it seemed logical

to rent it together and share expenses as a kind of loose co-operative.

The laboratory

The new laboratory consisted of one large room with a smaller room off to one side. We decided on an open plan set up with roughly designated areas: plaster/metal casting area, ceramic/metal area and an office area.

As money was fairly tight we had the classic 'my first dental lab' look of B&Q kitchen units and worktops making up the benches. Mark built the box for the Buffalo centrifugal casting machine. A plumber friend set up the sink and traps for the model trimmer, and a cheap but very noisy Clarke compressor was set up with the sandblaster in the side room. Second-hand desks made up the office and we were off and running for a couple of grand.

As each section of the co-operative slowly grew, the margins between them became blurred and more complicated. We were doing work for each other and buying some materials together and loaning some to each other, so it made sense to merge the three labs with each of us as equal partners, under the name Thornton Teeth.

Over the following years Thornton Teeth gradually grew and we took on a model maker and used several friends as freelance technicians. We would probably have continued along this path if Associated Dental Practices hadn't approached us to manage South London Ceramics, which they had bought a couple of years before.

In late 1999 Associated Dental Practices bought a share of Thornton Teeth and took Mark, Brian and myself on as joint managers of South London Ceramics, with the two labs running in tandem. Brian seemed to have a skill for financial management, Mark, who had trained at King's, was very strong when it came to technical issues and I ... er... um... did something!

We settled into our roles running a laboratory of 17 staff and over the next four years South London Ceramics and Thornton Teeth ran smoothly, turning a regular if unspectacular profit. Meanwhile the entire management of Associated Dental Practices changed and seemed to



Brian Flood (left) and Peter Wagon manning Associated Lab's stand



Showcasing the laboratory's services

How I did it

be a little unsure why they owned a dental laboratory.

In 2003 Associated Dental Practices decided to sell South London Ceramics and the Thornton Heath premises to concentrate on the core dental practice business, and offered us the chance to buy our laboratory business back from them.

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Over the summer of 2004 we started kitting out new premises in Bensham House in Thornton Heath. We had a suite of six rooms that had formerly been used for the production of contact lenses. Again we didn't have a bottomless pit of money to draw upon so custom-built dental workstations weren't an option. We decided on Ikea adjustable desks, which gave us a large work space with a shelf above for extra boxes, porcelain furnaces, etc. They didn't have drawers but we have bought several small free-standing drawer units for technicians' tools and personal possessions. We have connected dust extraction units to the underside of these workstations.

For the plaster room we bought free-standing stainless steel units for casting models from Nesbits catalogue. These are easy to clean and can be bought in sizes to suit the available space. We still use some B&Q kitchen units for storage, which, while not as robust as dental units, are cheap and a standard size so easy to replace.

Most of the equipment that we needed came with the laboratory but we had to buy some additional furnaces and we settled upon Skillbond, which we have found to be good value for money and stand up well to the constant use in a busy laboratory. For the other equipment we needed, our first port of call was Milnes Brothers of Croydon, which sells reconditioned second-hand equipment; Milnes Brothers also sees to most of our servicing and repair requirements.

In November 2004 we moved into the new premises. The next 18 months were very busy but we knew we were making

hay as the sun shone, as we had the spectre of the new NHS contracts looming over us. We were faced with a choice: reinvest the profits in the lab or Mercedes all round. We chose the former. We bought two new all-porcelain systems, the Authentic pressable system from Skillbond and the Cerec inLab CAD/CAM system from Panadent. We are very happy with both of these systems and they have given us a platform to move further into the private sector and make up for the drop in the NHS work.

Mark took responsibility for our compliance with the Medical Devices Directive (MDD). A clear manual and a good computer booking in/out system (Labtrac) meant that we passed the MDD inspection with flying colours in September 2006. We are well on our way to having all of our technicians registered with the General Dental Council by the end of the year. The younger me would have seen all this regulation as pointless, that if it 'ain't bust don't fix it', but now it is all in place I see that it all adds up to making an efficient, well-run operation.

Now that we felt we had a good product we had to tell the world about it, so we approached Out Of House, a graphic design company based in Cambridge, to help us with promotional material. They worked with us to produce a brochure, a website, all our stationary and an exhibition stand. We have exhibited at a couple of shows, including Dental Showcase 2006, with some success.

T S Elliot described April as the cruellest month and April 2006 proved just that for many laboratories with new NHS contracts. The Dental Laboratories Association estimates that NHS laboratory work is down by 57%, but the investment we have put in, the hard work of our staff and directors seem to be paying off. We have not needed to make anyone redundant, although the staff has shrunk by natural wastage and turnover has almost grown back to pre-contract levels. Maybe one day we'll get the beautiful house, wife and car that Talking Heads sang about in the 1970s.



One of the pages from the website



Peter's workbench



The gold workers' benches



The CAD/CAM machine

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