

## Tactical moves

Kernwear, a manufacturer of specialist technical clothing and equipment for military, police and civilian use, has selected Cornwall as the site for its expansion plans.

In the cut-throat world of clothing manufacturing, it's rare to find a company willing to forego the economic advantages offered by Third-World labour markets or digital mass-production techniques. But for Dorset-based Kernwear Ltd, it's been one of the reasons for the company's success. A small but established manufacturing company, Kernwear makes specialist tactical clothing and carrying equipment, mainly for police and military use, and has won a reputation for quality and consistency that's kept it at the top of procurement officers' lists throughout the services. According to MD Kester Quinton, it couldn't be any other way. "Many of the items we manufacture will be worn by people in extreme situations. We could produce more cheaply but it would inevitably affect quality control, and sending out an inferior or sub-standard product isn't an option. Our success to date has been built on the fact that we're trusted."

The son of a Bond Street tailor and cutter, Quinton originally trained in the business and only went back to those skills after he suffered a slipped disc, lost his job as a driving instructor and, with a new wife and family, found himself without work. His wife Mary, who still works in the business, was a talented seamstress and, during one long night of soul-searching, the couple hit on the idea of making traditional fishermen's smocks. "We seam-ripped an old smock, made a pattern and put our design together," says Quinton. The next day he took the product to the owner of a local chandlery and won an order for 50 more.

So, in the late 1970s, working with an old sewing machine in their bedroom, the couple began to win orders throughout the south-west, including St Ives where the smocks were being bought by local artists as well as fishermen. They were soon being approached to make other items, such as padded shooting jackets and waistcoats. It meant buying an overlocking machine for proper seaming and hiring in more staff to help keep up with orders.

Contacts in the shooting world led Quinton to approach the UK agents for the prestigious Italian gunmaker Beretta, which just happened to be looking for a new manufacturer for its branded shooting jacket. They got the job, and other doors opened as a result. "We started to make items such as jackets and tactical vests for the police and were then asked by the big equipment supplier Niton Equipment to make several items for them." By this time, the company had also been approached by an ex-army expert in arctic warfare who had designed a high-spec combat jacket and was looking for a manufacturer. Again, Kernwear got the job.

### **Clients**

Today, Kernwear continues to supply the Beretta company and has developed other civilian lines, such as a specialist racing suit for Tabor Karting, which supplies professional kart-racing teams. Kernwear is small and flexible enough to take on small specialist jobs such as this, but its mainstay and its most-prized clients are military and police firearms groups and bomb-squad teams throughout the country, including Avon & Somerset and the Metropolitan force.