

## On top of the chain gang: how Scottoiler's fortunes turned

By Valerie Darroch

**On first** impressions, Fiona Scott Thomson does not fit the archetypal image of a biker. She opens her office door with a wide smile, one hand outstretched in welcome, the other frantically trying to control an excitable puppy.

But the fresh-faced managing director of Scottoiler, a family-owned company which makes the Scottoiler, a patented bike chain lubrication system, has been immersed in the gritty world of motorbikes ever since she could walk.

The daughter of the company's founder, 72-year-old bike-mad Glaswegian inventor Fraser Scott, Scott Thomson exudes enthusiasm for the business she took over in 1997.

She found the prospect daunting, as she had only been doing the company's accounts part-time while she raised her own daughters.

"My Dad wanted to concentrate on research and development but the general manager left in 1997 and Dad went into a tailspin. I really had to take over," she says. "The idea that you could take your father's dream and bankrupt it is quite distressing. I knew it'd take more than keeping the bank balance in check. I promised myself I would not do any damage and I'd see if I could take the company forward," she says.

Her approach was to plunge into training with Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire to broaden her skills, widen the range of products to reduce reliance on the flagship Scottoiler chain and enter new export markets.

Nine years later (and with a slew of awards under her belt for exports, innovation and business excellence), Scott Thomson has grown turnover from less than £300,000 in 1996 to in excess of £1 million this year.

She has retained the skills of her 23-strong staff; invested heavily in research and development; extended into lubrications systems for pushbike chains and skis and broken into markets such as the United States.

Cracking the US market is a recent development. More than 50% of bikes in the US are Harley Davidsons, which are shaft-driven so do not need a Scottoiler chain. "But we sell protectors for that bike and for chain-driven bikes the numbers are still very big in the US," Scott Thomson says. Does she enjoy her job now? The answer is a resounding "yes". "Running this business is a load of fun. The people here are full of enthusiasm," she says. She sees her father daily as he remains a key player in the company in the important role of research and development director.

"For a small company we spend a large amount of money on R&D. It's very important to our future," she says.

Scott Thomson got her first bike licence at 19 and spent a year as a courier in Glasgow, but her love affair with biking began much earlier, heavily influenced by her father, a lifelong biker.

"I was riding bikes at 12. As soon as my feet could touch the ground I got a Honda TL125. I'd go out with my Dad when he went scrambling and I'd ride round a muddy field," she says.

One of the messiest and most time-consuming jobs for a biker is cleaning and changing a bike chain which regularly gets clogged with dirt.

Fraser Scott, who used to regularly bike between Glasgow and Manchester to see a girlfriend, grew frustrated at having to strip down and clean his bike chain every 600 miles.

He threw his energy and engineering abilities into inventing an automatic chain-oiler, perfecting his design over five years and producing the prototype 25 years ago, calling it the Scottoiler.

He struggled in the early years, selling just 50 kits at a bike show in Birmingham in 1983. He was close to a deal with Kawasaki which foundered at the last minute, as did another potential manufacturing deal with Coats Paton. A third deal ended when the manufacturer TML decided to make bits for cars instead so Scott bought the project back and decided to go it alone. It was a hard slog, selling via classified ads.

But, says Scott Thomson, the technical advantages of the product began to spread by word-of-mouth in the biking community and the business took off.

To date more than 250,000 Scottoiler kits have been sold worldwide, with Germany the biggest export market.

For non-bikers, the simplest explanation of how Scottoiler works is in the latest edition of trade magazine Ride, which ranked it number one of 100 best deals. It says: "Powered by engine vacuum, this brilliant gadget delivers teeny drips of oil to your chain to keep it smooth and extend its life massively. Saves time adjusting chains and saves money replacing them."

In an age of built-in obsolescence, Scott Thomson says she is proud that a Scottish company has garnered a reputation for building something that lasts.

"One in 10 chain-driven bikes in the UK use Scottoilers. It ain't the sexiest sell in the world but it's a performance issue ... it does exactly what it says on the tin," says Scott Thomson.

With a limited budget, Scott Thomson has had to be canny with endorsements and has raised Scottoiler's profile through sponsorship of the Phase One Endurance Team, with the three-times world champion using Scottoiler product.

Another fan is Nick Sanders, who has twice clinched the world record for circumnavigating the globe on his bike – most recently completing a journey of more than 19,000 miles in just 19 days..

Having ridden for more than 1000 miles a day across desert plains and pot-holed mountain tracks, Sanders says the Scottoiler extended the life of his bike's chain by more than 6.6 times.

"The term Scottoiler has become a generic term. We're the Hoover of the bike world," says Scott Thomson.

Taking a family business to the next development stage can be difficult. Scott Thomson says that for the past few years she was fixated on driving turnover over £1m, a feat which she will pull off this year.

"My dad asked me: And then what?" says Scott Thomson. Now in her early 40s, she has attended workshops at the Centre for Family Enterprise with other family business owners seeking advice. "We split into age groups. The young ones were firing on all cylinders with huge energy and enthusiasm ... the middle-aged ones were exhausted and a pretty miserable bunch and the 55s and up were having a ball," she laughs.

Definitely not in the same camp as the middle-aged misery guts, Scott Thomson appears blessed with natural good humour and energy. A night owl, she often works into the wee small hours.

She sports a black shirt with the company logo and yellow embroidery which reads, Release the Power. It seems that is what her dad did in 1997 when he put her in pole position.

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