

Security Print Solutions



Co-owners and brothers, Jim and Michael Crowther, have developed the business over the last 30+ years. Although semi-retired they share over 100 years print experience between them



Newly-appointed Managing Director, Alasdair Rodgers (2nd from right) is flanked by fellow Directors of SPS. The latter group total over 100 years service at SPS

Mention the town of Consett to anyone 40 years ago and they would have pictured a substantial steel town on the edge of the Pennines. In those days, Consett was a one-employer town with more than 3,000 people working for British Steel... until 1980. That was the year when market forces led British Steel to close down the entire site, making most of the town's workforce redundant.

FACTS ABOUT SECURITY PRINT SOLUTIONS

- » Business start up in Consett, Co Durham in 1982
- » Privately owned
- » 70 employees
- » Innovation, patents and unique security print manufacturing
- » Key objective: to protect our client from fraud and counterfeit losses

An ill wind?

Around the same time, Jim Crowther – a local young man – decided to set up a small printing unit to print computer stationery. That was me. Consett was an easy choice of location: it had a jobless local workforce and access to easily-available 'soft' finance, coupled with grants or loans from central and local government. Durham University Business School had an incredible business network which gave me access to sound professional services and advice. My new company, which later became Security Print Solutions (SPS) was launched in 1982 and was soon up and running in a small unit on a newly-built industrial estate in Consett.

One of the early visitors was Tom King, the then-Employment Secretary. At the time I was staggered by the Minister's interest and technical knowledge, until Tom confessed that he had worked in the printing trade!

Innovation

Changing market forces often causes the demand for products to come and go and, just like steel, print has been no exception. What had once been a high-skilled and union-protected 'black art' was now being replaced by technology in the home.

However, I spotted that this new home technology could also allow the public to counterfeit stationery at home – cheques, certificates, vouchers, tickets, security passes, even visas. Any important document became much more vulnerable to counterfeit. Almost overnight, Joe Public could forge at home!

Holograms on plastic cards had been around for some time. In 1990, our company took the decision to pioneer printing security holograms onto security documents. Holograms onto corporate cheques were one of the first requirements and then certificates, tickets and vouchers.

Patents

Security Print Solutions pioneered various secure printing concepts and products and these were simply copied by our much bigger competitors who were much better resourced to market their copies of our innovations. As an executive of one large competitor confided at a formal dinner, 'We like most things you invent, Jim, we just copy them and market them better!'

This forced SPS to enter the unfamiliar world of patents to protect its innovations. Not easy the first time around, but a UK patent is much sought after. Once awarded, however, it is relatively easy to apply to take out the same patent in other countries, because the UK patenting system is held in high regard.

SPS owns three patents for innovations. A fourth application for another security print innovation is about to be submitted at the time of writing this article.

Unique method of security print manufacturing

By modern printing press standards, our presses are very large. The patented innovations, holograms, security print, 'track and trace' systems, can all be



Back in 1984, Tom King (Margaret Thatcher's Minister for Employment) visited SPS. Founder, Jim Crowther (centre), explains the process which was easily understood by Tom who confessed to having some professional print experience as a young man

manufactured in one production process by just one highly-trained printer. The company has built and developed five of these security printing machines which run 24 hours a day. The concept allows us to feed white reels of paper into the press at one end and get finished, high specification, security print out of the other. This process took several years to develop and perfect, and we believe it is probably unique worldwide – allowing SPS to deliver high specification security print at an affordable cost.

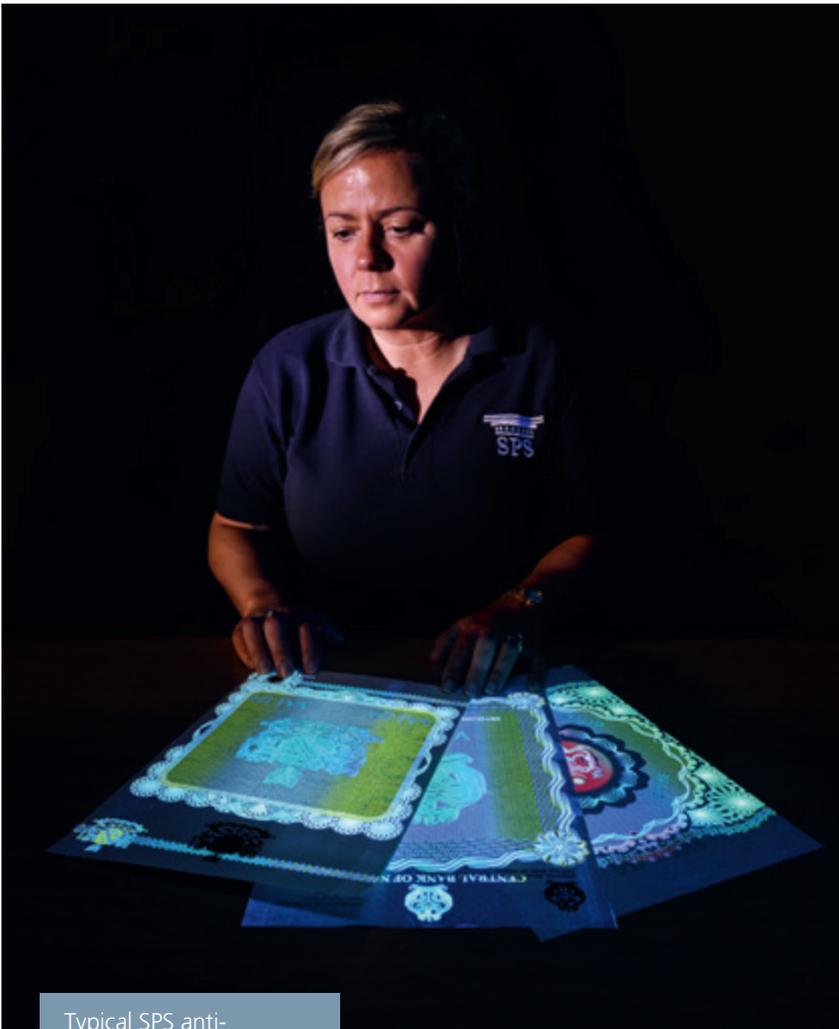
Export

A decade ago, 80% of our sales were to the domestic market and 20% were exported. Many of our traditional domestic markets for security paper were declining and switching to alternatives e.g. corporate cheques to electronic transactions, paper football tickets and vouchers to plastic cards, etc.

And then, the last straw... recession!

Until this point, we had feared exporting because of potential problems with paperwork, travel,

“Educating and training our customers to manufacture to our standards in their country presents another challenging commercial opportunity”



Typical SPS anti-counterfeiting innovation. One of the artwork design team inspecting her security graphic designs which have been printed with invisible UV security inks

“Shamefully, it took a recession to wake us up... and export”

trust, legislation, culture and payment. However, the decline of traditional UK security print markets, coupled with the recession, forced us to address and overcome the challenges of exporting.

The company output is now 80% export and just 20% within Britain... and nothing in mainland Europe! Africa, the Middle and Far East have all proved fruitful, particularly the former Commonwealth countries. The British might, historically, be disliked in some parts of the world but we are extremely well trusted and respected. Consistent quality, reasonable prices, trusted products that work properly, made by honest people: these are the principle strengths of the business.

Our people

Every successful business claims that its people are its biggest asset – well,

we are no different. However, we have considerable justification for making this claim:

1. The business employs 70 staff. Since the company was formed in 1982, the owners have made and successfully carried out an employment policy of no redundancies other than as a very last resort. Despite mixed commercial fortunes this objective has been fully achieved.
2. Since 1985, all salary increases have been maintained in real terms because annual wage increases follow the Retail Price Index (RPI) exactly.

Consequently, there can be no arguments, disappointments or time wasted on the subject of inflation versus wage devaluation.

At times during the last 30 years, this has been extremely difficult for the owners to achieve year in, year out. The benefit is self evident: virtually no labour turnover. Indeed, many of the printers' skills are unique and it naturally follows that staff retention is key to the future of this business.

Innovations and changes are implemented without fuss and immediately, due to a long history of workforce/management trust... and this, in turn, gives SPS an advantage in an international market.

The future

Countries and major clients have asked for our company's skills, access to patents, knowledge and training to help them create employment in their domestic markets. Just as the UK has generally moved from manufacturing to education, we will use our expertise to help develop these security printing techniques in our partner's countries. That means interesting opportunities for all.

REVIEW FEEDBACK

This is a fantastic publication. It is read throughout both sides of the house and it is really important to have ideas from people that are engaged in the areas that are debated

The Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith

The Parliamentary Review, in its sage and level-headed way, by not taking an editorial line, is very similar to the BBC, which is why I feel an affinity

Jeremy Vine

Congratulations to The Parliamentary Review, it's an amazing publication

Alistair Campbell

The Parliamentary Review is a brilliant publication. It is not only widely read in Westminster, but it resonates, people pay attention to what is in it

Douglas Carswell

The purpose of The Parliamentary Review is to give people a chance to explain not just what makes them tick, but how they can tick in the light of the political and economic environment

The Rt Hon David Curry

The Parliamentary Review is a really important innovation in Westminster and Whitehall that gives you the opportunity to say what you want about your school, your college, your business, your enterprise and makes sure it is spread across the nation

The Rt Hon Nick Clegg