

Face To Face

The Ebb & Flow

The only card retailers who came on Glebe Cottage Publishing's stand the first time the Devon-based publisher exhibited at the NEC back in 1997 were those who had got lost - "our stand was shoved right at the back of the dress-up and partyware hall!" recalls Sue Morrish, who owns and runs the company with her husband Scott. However, with its stand at next month's Autumn Fair in a prime spot in Hall 4 (C20), heaving with new ranges and promotions in celebration of Glebe Cottage's 20th anniversary – and a Henries 2013 nomination to boot for its innovative Billy Showell collection - there will be no missing it!

PG tracks the last two decades of this pioneering publisher that has forged the way on the environmental front without losing sight of the need to publish cards that people want to buy.

Twenty years ago Scott Morrish was an art college student who had a hunch of setting up a business that would support his passion for photography. It was a hunch that was worth backing; as that company, Glebe Cottage Publishing, over the last two decades has not only blossomed with an ever widening portfolio of photographic, art, licensed and charity greeting cards, but has become a true beacon in environmental greeting card publishing.

Despite the fact that his initial business plan, by his own admission "would barely have scraped a 'D' in A-level Business Studies," back in 1993 Scott managed to secure a small bank loan that was sufficient to set up an 'office' aka his bedroom in his parents' house (the original Glebe Cottage) and a darkroom in the garden shed.

With the additional support of the Prince's Youth Business Trust, the first four Glebe Cottage cards were published,

Top: Scott Morrish's photography is still prominent in Glebe's portfolio - a new range, Ebb & Flo, will debut at Autumn Fair to help mark the company's 20th anniversary.

Right: Sue and son Ben with Glebe Cottage's first cornstarch bags back in 2006. The company worked with packaging company Surepak to adopt a product which Sue believes is not only environmentally friendly, but offers better clarity than more harmful polypropylene options.

Inset: Like father like son? A shot of Scott Morrish at work, taken by his son Ben - who is only 8 years-old now.



based on Scott's photographs of wild Dartmoor scenes, a local flavour that is still evident in the range today. In fact, Ebb & Flo, one of the major new launches at next month's Autumn Fair, is based on photographs Scott has taken around the Devon coastline.

As for the 'ebb and flow' of those early years of Glebe Cottage, when Scott wasn't in his shed (the darkroom), or wandering the moors with his large format camera, he was driving around rural Devon selling his cards out of a banana box in the back of his rusty Datsun Sunny car.

But help soon came on the scene. His then girlfriend (now wife and business partner) Sue joined the business in 1996 after leaving university with a degree in English and anthropology. "I knew nothing about running a card business or selling whatsoever, but I covered the South-West area, going from shop to shop selling our cards. I was possibly the worst salesperson ever as I was so shy and my initial approach usually saw me skulking back out of a shop as quickly as possible," admits Sue. "But I persevered, and while I don't



miss the long hours on the road I still really relish the personal contact I have with retailers at the trade shows - many of whom we have been supplying for years and years."

However, polar opposite to Sue's early sales technique, there has been nothing timid about the Morrish's mutual passion for the environment; a personal conviction that is integral to their business' makeup. It has set the benchmark, not only within the UK greeting card industry, but in the business world at large - and has the awards to prove it (see right).

Sue recalls Glebe Cottage's first environmental commitment - to only use recycled envelopes with its cards.

"It sounds very simple, but at the time our volumes were only big enough to order stock items and often when I asked envelope suppliers for a recycled option they would look at me as if I was from another planet!"

recalled Sue. "We really wanted to understand the environmental impact of how we published our products, so we spent a long time researching everything from the types of inks we used, to the bags we packed the cards in. It was understanding the issues that prompted us to create the list

of 'eco-commitments' that still determines how we create our products today."

It was through challenging historic practices, such as working with suppliers to develop more environmentally friendly cellobags (it was the first company in the industry to use cornstarch bags) and boards (it had its own FSC chain of custody certification back in 2006 and continues to trail-blaze with 100% recycled options) that has broadened the choice for other publishers too.

Far from seeing its green credentials as something it wants to selfishly safeguard, Sue and Scott would like to think that their learnings and holistic approach to how they run their business and publish their products will too be adopted by other publishers and retailers - something that came out loud and clear when Sue addressed publishers at a GCA AGM a couple of years ago.

"In some ways it is easier to get hold of more environmentally friendly components these days - FSC board is widely available and there is a lot more recycled content options." However, the recession has not been kind to the environment. "There are

Setting Standards

One of the highlights of Glebe Cottage's history, Sue admits, would have to be winning the prestigious Business Commitment to the Environment (BCE) Environmental Leadership Awards back in 2010 for Glebe's inspirational commitment to eco-publishing.

Commenting on the importance of the accolade, Sue said: "Winning the award really helped to highlight our long-held belief that absolutely everybody has the power to make the world greener, businesses and individuals alike: it is just a matter of the choices we make. Winning this award felt like a real 'David and Goliath' achievement, particularly when you consider that the previous year's winner of the award was Sainsbury's that employs over 150,000 people: there were only six of us!"

- Glebe Cottage has also won the Gold Award in the Green Apple Awards in 2008.
- Back in 2007 it was the first greeting card company to go CarbonNeutral.



Above: Sue and Scott Morrish with the prestigious BCE Environmental Leadership Award Glebe Cottage Publishing received in 2010.



Above left: One of the images from Billy Showell from the range that has reached the finals in The Henries Best Art Range 2013. This range was the first to be published on a new board made in the Lake District from 100% recycled board.

Above right: A local scene from acclaimed artist Mike Bernard RI, a range of his work will be launched at Autumn Fair.

Below: The Wildlife Trusts range that the company publishes remains true to the founders' beliefs.

more options out there for publishers to be more environmentally conscious, but due to what they see as cost pressures they have chosen not to make those decisions," says Sue.

However passionate she is about the company's environmental credentials, Sue is also totally aware of the crucial element which makes Glebe Cottage possible. "People have to want to buy our cards! If we have the best environmental credentials possible, but our card designs were rubbish, then we would have completely failed. Imagery is what sells



cards - finding out how they were produced is an added benefit to the purchaser and recipient. As a card publisher you can never lose sight of that."

As for the hopes and dreams for the next chapter in the company's history, Sue would of course like to see a greater adoption of more environmentally friendly options, but also would like to see a more positive flow towards independent retailers.

As a company Glebe has taken the decision not to supply supermarkets or participate in brokerage schemes.

If Sue really could control the ebb and flow, she is in no doubt what she would use it

for: "I really would stem the decline of independent retailers, many of whom have provided a real service to their local communities and society at large. I really hope that the economic tide turns for them, for the better."

"Reaching our 20th anniversary milestone has given us time to reflect. It has been great to flick back through the pages of PG over the years and realise what we have achieved and how far Glebe Cottage has come from those early days - yet it has remained true to the beliefs that Scott and I had right at the beginning."