



BARKER LAUNDRY

FINITO WORLD MEETS MATTHEW BARKER,
THE MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE KING'S LINEN

For Matthew Barker, the owner of Bournemouth-based Barker Laundry & Dry Cleaning, laundering was very much in the family. “I am third generation in the industry,” he tells us. “My grandfather was a very prominent dry cleaner back in the 1960s; he eventually sold his company and a lot of his stores became Sketchley. My father set up the business I now own in 1966.”

Initially, Barker sought a career as a motorbike journalist, but though he loved that career, and even considered moving to Australia, at the crucial moment his parents asked him to take over the family business. “They said: ‘We want to retire, and you’re our answer.’” Barker recalls.

Nothing in Barker’s enthusiastic and kindly manner makes me think this was bad thing; he plainly enjoys his work. The laundry sector had long been moving away from the domestic side towards the commercial, especially hotels: “Domestic laundries were dying off because laundries found that doing hotel work was less fiddly and less labour intensive,” Barker explains.

But when Barker bought the company in 2000, he saw that this had created a gap in the market and grew his business by acquisition, always focusing on the domestic market. It was this successful growth strategy which brought him into contact with the Royal Household. “One acquisition was of a laundry based in Andover which had the Royal Warrant for the then Prince of Wales and were looking after the Highgrove Estate. So we started looking after His Royal Highness.”

I ask whether the mandate is ever stressful? It turns out that that couldn’t be further from the truth: “It’s great – not high stress,” says Barker. “The Royals are



typical of the type of client we look after: they are very good people and very easy to work for.”

Have there been any issues at all? Barker laughs at one recollection. “We had a fire in the laundry which was pretty devastating. Among the damage, £5,000 worth of His Royal Highness’ linen went up in smoke. A dry cleaner friend of mine was subsequently at a royal function, and Charles said: “Are you the chap who burned all my linen?” My friend said: “No, it was a friend of mine, Matthew Barker!” But we replaced everything and it was fine.”

Sometimes, servicing the Royal Household can have its unique side. “Many years ago, when my father had the business, we trialled with the palaces in London, and they had these table linens which had belonged to King George V. These linens were falling to bits – they were museum pieces and shouldn’t have been laundered on a weekly basis!”

Barker has always been impressed with his dealings with the Royal Household, and especially by the King’s knowledge: “The King is incredibly well-informed.

Highgrove is an intimate estate and he is highly interested in everything which goes on. So in the case of the fire, the incident would have been told first hand from the house manager and he would have been sympathetic – that’s the nature of him.”

The Coronation is an exciting time for Barker and his team. “I’m opening a new shop in our neck of the woods, and we’re putting a big Coronation emblem in one of the windows. We’re also using the occasion for charitable purposes, working to support disadvantaged children both in the community and in Africa – we’re doing all that in the name of the Coronation.”

It’s a marvellous story of excellence and giving back, and is a reminder of the good that can come out of the Warrant. Barker tells me: “Everything we do is about fabric and fabric care. You could say that there’s no monetary value to the Royal Warrant – but that’s not the way to look at it. It’s about how it makes my staff feel, how it makes my customers feel, and how it makes me feel. When we were awarded it, it absolutely elevated all three. It was a great reward for years of hard work.”