

The wholesaler connection

Salisbury Health Foods started life 26 years ago but since last year has been under the ownership of Robin Holiday, who also owns CLF Distribution. **Rachel Symonds** heard from the team about the exciting future ahead.

When a store has been well established for more than 20 years, there is bound to be a challenge when a new owner comes on board.

On one hand, if a store has been doing well then why rock the boat with its established customer base? But on the other, a new owner will bring with them new ideas and ambitions they have for the business.

Last year, Salisbury Health Foods was sold by the founders, Sandra and Richard Mistlin, to Robin Holiday, who created and is Managing Director of the wholesaler and EpoS specialist CLF Distribution.

While some changes have already taken place at the store, the team has remained the same, led by Lesley Betts, who has been manager for 16 years. But what's clear when talking with the team is there's much excitement for the future, in particular a refit that will see the store renamed Well Natural.

The store traditionally has done very well on the food side, and still boasts a very thriving vegetarian takeaway counter, attracting local workers each day. There is also much in the way of free-from foods – gluten, dairy and sugar – as well as plenty of honeys, preserves and snacks. There is a good selection of frozen and chilled products, with Redwood cheeses, sheep's yoghurts and Aconbury Sprouts all doing well in this area. Local company Wilton Wholefoods supplies its popular range of herbs and spices, while there is



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also a vast selection of The Health Store prepacks on offer.

The supplement side is growing, but dominant in the offering is Solgar, Lamberts, and Viridian. However, every taste and budget is catered for with smaller ranges from most of the leading suppliers.

The beauty and bodycare side also carries a wide range, with choice from brands such as Naturtint and Tints of Nature, along with Jason, Faith in Nature, Green People and Weleda. And while some stores are just venturing into cosmetics, Salisbury Health Foods offers make-up from not one but three suppliers – Beauty Without Cruelty, Lavera and, most recently, Inika.

Most recently, brands Lesley has taken on include the skincare range Buds for Babies, the sea buckthorn-based Sibū and food brand Tiana.

“We take on lots of new products and do lots of sampling to make a feature of new brands. We do in-store events and we try and do some sort of tasting every day,” Lesley said.

In terms of demographics, Salisbury is an affluent area, but still attracts different groups of people.

“Our customers are a complete mixture. We have a lot of regular customers that have been very loyal to us over the years and we also have a 10 per cent day off every week for senior citizens, so that is often our busiest day,” Lesley explained.

“People still like to shop in a place where they can get advice, help and engagement and the staff here are great with that.”

Taking over

Richard and Sandra opened the store in Salisbury town centre 26 years ago,



deciding to sell last year with retirement in mind.

Explaining the reasons behind deciding to take on the store, Robin said: “We bought the shop to really understand the retail challenges so that we could become a better wholesaler. It had not really been in the plan to buy a store but it is local to where we are based and it came from a conversation with Richard – he asked when I would be buying his store, I asked if it was for sale and he talked about wanting to retire. And that was it.

“We have learnt a lot as a wholesaler in terms of what we do well and where we could do things better, and also where we are ahead on things. I have learnt that life as a retailer is harder than I thought it was. And I've also seen how it can be quite confusing for the retailer as suppliers all work in a different way.”

The store was sold last February, and the last year has been a success.

Robin added: “It's been a good year for us, we are about five per cent up on last year and that's down to adding more sports nutrition, which is really increasing and has certainly made a difference to turnover.

“This has been a really excellent experience for us and very well worth it. We have learnt enormously and I think it has helped us grow this year as a wholesaler as we now understand the retailers we are serving and better understand their needs.”

The store places a big emphasis on training, and the rule is that only those who

have completed the Health Food Institute course can offer advice on supplements.

“Our ethos is that we want to provide the best customer service that we can and offer the best advice that we can. This means that no one can give advice on the supplements section unless they have completed the HFI certificate, and that will take them 12 months to do,” Lesley explained.

“We are also constantly doing different training courses with suppliers, for example some staff have just done the Viridian herb course and quite a few have done the Bioforce course.”

Changes ahead

So, what changes have taken place at the store since the acquisition?

Making a real change to the running of the store has been the implementation of a new EpoS system. This is an area which CLF's technological arm, Emporio, specialises in, but as well as being a till system, because it is linked with ordering from CLF it has streamlined the working day.

Lesley explained: “It's working really well as our system is linked to ordering. With CLF we have a daily delivery and the delivery comes in at the end of the day ready to be dealt with the next morning. And it orders automatically, so we don't have to spend time manually ordering and can spend more time with the customers.

“A lot of my time was taken up with ordering but now that has been really simplified.”

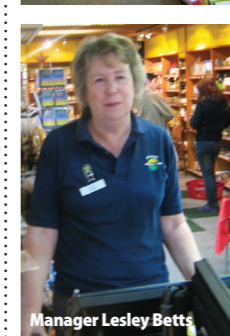
Because they are able to have daily deliveries, it also means the store does not need to hold excess stock, enabling them to create a bigger staff area and office.

Implementing the Emporio system has also been helpful for CLF.

“We can see the ordering from a store perspective and the time it can take a retailer to order,” Robin explained. “By putting in the Emporio EPOS system, they have been able to see real savings in terms of the time it takes to order.”

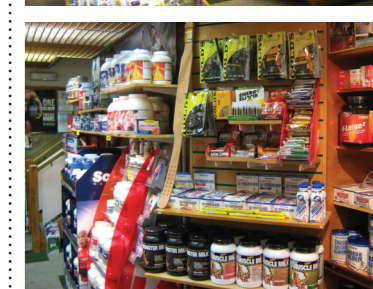
Marketing of the store has taken on more of a focus now there is the support of CLF, with the company's Marketing Manager Karen Wilson helping.

“We now have the back-up of CLF and their new ideas and that's been good. So for example, with Karen helping us with the marketing, we have a plan for the window displays for the next six months,” Lesley said.



AT A GLANCE

- Stores:** One
- Location:** Salisbury, Wiltshire
- Retailer:** Robin Holiday
- Size:** 1,000 sq ft
- Years in business:** 26, one under current ownership
- Staff:** 12, full and part-time
- Best sellers:** Natures Aid, Viridian, Solgar, Lamberts, Faith in Nature, Jason, takeaway food, Maximuscle and Dymatize
- Training:** The majority of staff has undergone various HFI courses, with many studying or having completed the Diploma



Given that CLF Distribution specialises in sports nutrition, it's understandable that an increasing number of products in this sector are being stocked. But to back this up in store, sports nutrition expert Adam Hindle has been recruited to give technical advice to customers.

“Adam came in a few months ago because Robin is very interested in sports nutrition but felt we needed someone in-store who could offer advice,” Lesley explained. “To have someone on board who is qualified in the area is great.”

Robin added: “Adam is really knowledgeable in the sector and feels confident to talk to customers, which is great as he is familiar with the products and can give really good advice.”

In addition, the team also benefits from CLF's training manager, James Baker, who will spend time with them in store. As well as further expanding the sports nutrition offering, Lesley also plans to grow the skincare ranges.

“Sports nutrition seems to be growing enormously and because it is one of CLF's key things, it makes sense to expand that. And skincare is also building – at the beginning we found it difficult to move but I have noticed it's really selling now as people have become more aware of what they put on their skin.”

There are their exciting plans ahead for the store, with the main change being the re-branding from Salisbury Health Foods to Well Natural, with a strapline reading ‘nutrition, health and lifestyle’. This will be done by the winter.

“The store is going to be a showcase of the brands CLF carry. When I bought the shop and told my friends I was buying a health food store, they asked why because they had this hippie image in their mind,” Robin explained.

“We won't define it as a health food

store because it is more than that. In the same way as bodybuilding products have now become known as sports nutrition, we need to change how these stores are seen. It's our job to explain and educate that these stores are not just about fruit, nuts and seeds anymore.”

There are also plans to develop Well Natural with a deli bar, so people can come in, sit and have a range of products refilled.

“We want to encourage refills and recycling and so will start offering purified water in branded Bottles for Life, so customers can come in for their refills and wait at the bar while they are being done, in the same way they can with the Ecover refills.” Robin said.

So, what does the team see ahead, both for the store and the trade?

Lesley commented: “I think health stores are moving away from the sandal cliché it's been perceived as, and Robin is trying to move the industry on from that. We have to look at ways of moving forward and modernising. The industry is changing and we have to change if we want to keep up with it.

“Here, we are feeling very enthusiastic about the future, it is a really exciting time. There are going to be changes in the future and we are all looking forward to it.” **hfb**