

A vibrant photograph of a group of school children and adults in blue uniforms playing with water outdoors. The children are reaching out with their hands, creating a large splash of water in the foreground. The adults are smiling and watching the children. The background shows a school building and trees.

BUSINESS INDUSTRY ENTERTAINMENT TRAVEL STRATEGY INITIATIVE

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Remaining successful and relevant after 70 years proves that a business has more than just good old-fashioned experience behind it; it can adapt. We spoke with Davis and Shirtliff, an East African provider of water-related equipment: for this well-established company, innovation and continuous improvement are watchwords that is clear to see in its expansion and success. We spoke with Group Chairman Alec Davis, son of the company's co-founder, to learn more about its ongoing journey.

Written by
Alice Instone-Brewer

Davis and Shirtliff was founded back in 1946, following the end of World War II by Eddie Davis who had served in the military in Nairobi who upon leaving purchased a small, independent local plumbing and water engineering firm. Through a partnership with his friend Dick Shirtliff, the two men took this company - RH Paige & Co - and grew it into what seeded the successful and wide-ranging Group that stands today.

From this small start, the Davis and Shirtliff Group now owns a network of nearly 70 branches in eight regional countries: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Rwanda, S Sudan, Ethiopia and the DRC. It also exports to many other regional countries including Malawi, Somalia, Somaliland, Zimbabwe and several countries in West Africa. This wide network of locations distributes a range of related products that provide comprehensive water and energy solutions that covers water pumps, boreholes, water treatment, swimming pools, generators, solar equipment and irrigation. As Alec Davis told us:

“We have a great advantage and strength from our branch network. We also have a very wide product range at various levels, from volume products for the mass market

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to more specialised industrial products in all these different fields. We're also adding new branches and products all the time, so it does keep us ahead of the game."

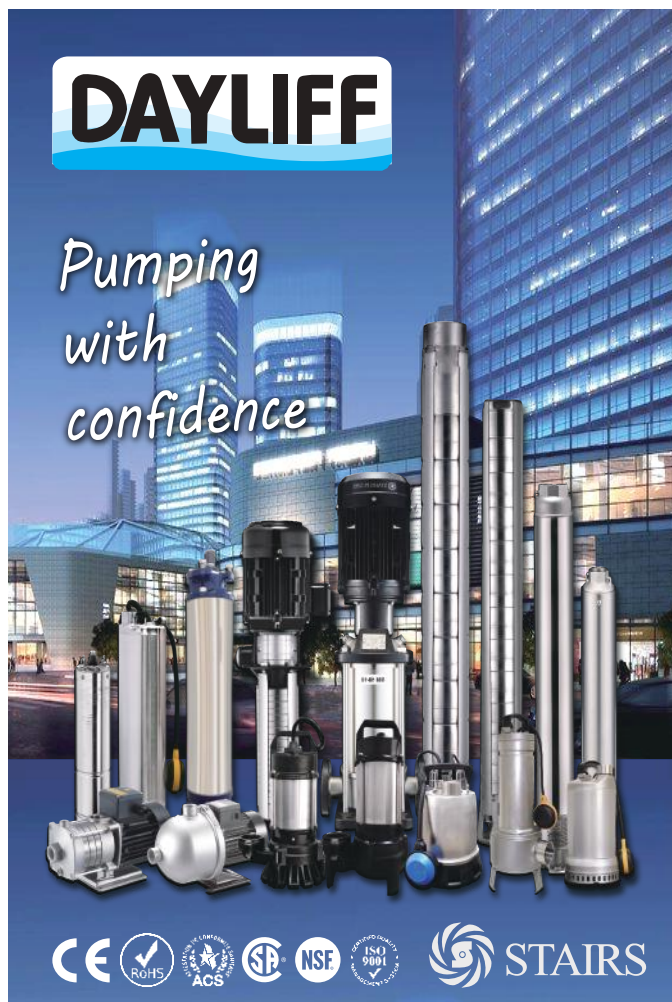
Early operations of the company largely involved work with the agricultural sector and local water supplies - areas that then had growing demand. From here, the company moved on to expand into water pump supply, and this has remained a key area of the Group's operations ever since. As Alec told us, "We offer a wide range of pumps for any application you can possibly imagine, and that is the core part of our business." This range of pumps includes those suitable for everything from drinking water to swimming pools supplied from three principal sources including Grundfos, one of the world's largest pump industry players, Pedrollo, an Italian manufacturer of quality domestic and commercial pumps, and also a wide range of its own pumps under the "Dayliff" brand. These supplier relationships have been long and

consistent; the company has stocked Grundfos for over 50 years, and Pedrollo for over 25.

Whilst strengthening existing activities the company is always looking for new opportunities. "We have three values," Alec explained. "One is quality, one is integrity, and the other is my old school motto: 'I seek higher things'. Basically, it's a focus on continuous improvement, innovation and creativity, which we're all very focused on. It's important that we keep moving forwards every year. We are, within the region, an industry giant, and this value is what has taken us to where we are."

Looking for new opportunities, some years ago the company expanded their business by branching out into water treatment. This is now a major activity that continues to be a growth focus: "We're now moving into high-tech water treatment such as ultra-filtration and reverse osmosis," says Alec. Water treatment is just one area of technology focus, and these initiatives do more than increase business volumes, they also add considerable value for their customers. Davis and Shirtliff serves a wide customer base of private sector, NGO and government institutions across all industries and sectors, all of whom depend on the company for their essential water supplies.

"I've been in the business for so long, the market has changed beyond all recognition. However, we've always been in water, we've always worked with the public sector and we take pride in the number of projects we've done that provide water to deprived communities. It's a part of our history." One of the most important technological advances for Davis and Shirtliff has been its move into solar technology specifically to power solutions in water heating, power generation and solar pumping. These technologies have been widely applied including hundreds of solar pump installations in remote arid sites that transforms the lives of the local communities. "We have completed some significant projects for various agencies across the region including UNICEF, World Vision, Kenya Red Cross and the Ministries of Water in several countries including Uganda, Somalia, Ethiopia and the DRC.



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Artist's impression of the new
Davis & Shirtliff Distribution Centre



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"We recently completed five large-scale solar pumping installations in north-western Uganda that included pumping systems, distribution piping and storage tanks for the Danish Refugee Council. Before, it was an undeveloped area with little water availability. Now, these water supply systems have really improved these communities' lives, most of whom are refugees." The other recent major project of this nature was in Kenya, where the Group carried out 100 small-scale solar installations for one of the counties that benefited schools, health centres, community centres and government institutions. "This has made a huge contribution, as many of these sites didn't have water beforehand."

This new technology provides reliable water supplies in areas that were previously unable to access the power to support such infrastructure, and it is this sort of innovation that continues to place Davis and Shirtliff at the front of the industry in their region. The Group also utilises

its decades of experience to combine the old with the new and bring clients the best of both worlds. One of their earliest and still most important activities is the supply of a wide range of borehole equipment: "We are the leading supplier in the region, boreholes being one of East Africa's most important sources of water; there isn't much surface water and there isn't much rain, but there is ground water, and our equipment is used in many thousands of sites that capitalizes on this important resource."

70-plus years in the industry has seen Davis and Shirtliff develop an enviable reputation, including for being a technology-leading organization. Thanks to this, the Group is frequently approached by various suppliers with new products and ideas that are rigorously reviewed by a Product Committee that selects and introduces those with potential and keeps a regular flow of new product initiatives. Another innovation has been the in-house development of a series of Apps, including one

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called D&S FLO that is freely available on line that details all products with their specifications and performance and enables digital selection. "It's quite advanced – even our European suppliers have nothing like it, so it does give us a great advantage in the marketplace."

Davis and Shirliff's growth has been steady, the result of consistent quality and the tireless pursuit of self-improvement. Alec joined the family business 43 years ago, was CEO for 25 years and is now the Chairman. "We've grown organically. Obviously, when I joined, it was a much smaller company: the number of pumps we sell has increased 100-fold since the late 70s. We haven't grown by acquisition – it's been consistent growth each year driven by the region's huge economic development that has helped create these opportunities."

Asked why the Group has managed to be so consistently successful and become such a major regional force Alec identifies two factors, "The first has been an incredibly loyal

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and dedicated workforce, many of whom have served for over 25 years. We now have nearly 800 staff and the combination of progressive employment policies and interesting careers makes the company a good place to work. For example the Executive team led by CEO David Gatende, have several hundred years of service between them and this experience has been a huge asset. The other reason is a focus on systems where the company has invested in world-class IT solutions that have been developed in-house. This provides the controls and processes that enables efficient operation of such a diffused and complex organization”.

The company continues to grow. In a clear example, it is currently constructing a new \$5 million distribution centre as its operations have outgrown its current facilities. The border procedures between Africa’s many countries make the logistics of shipping around the region extremely complex, which is why stock on the ground in key locations is so essential. As well

as investing in this, the company continues the process of establishing new branches, recently in Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania, as well as introducing a new range of irrigation products and the expansion of their industrial chemicals range.

After 70 years of dedication to innovation, it seems unlikely that Davis and Shirliff will slow down any time soon. Water and energy solutions remain critical resources throughout Africa, and wherever there is need Davis and Shirliff is confident that it will continue to make an important and growing contribution in the region.



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