

Business Life

Engineering enthusiasm

Monday interview

Paul Westbury

Chief executive, Buro Happold

The head of the UK engineering firm tells Peter Marsh that his profession should be more evangelical

Paul Westbury cannot stop his enthusiasm from spilling out. "Walk around here and you won't see any grumpy people. We're a fun bunch!" says the boyish looking head of one of the world's leading engineering consultancies.

With the river Avon flowing quietly outside and the late summer sun streaming in through the building's towering windows, the 41-year-old brings to mind a young colt straining to break free from its surroundings and try something new.

"The natural and built environments are our play pen. We're harnessing the passions and talents of some extraordinarily bright people to the cause of making life better," he enthuses.

Eyes flashing and arms and legs splayed out in a gesture of expansiveness, Mr Westbury is speaking in an airy meeting room at his business's head office – a converted 19th century mill close to the centre of Bath, the small city in south-west England known for its sumptuous Georgian architecture. "We have the ability to put together small, bespoke teams of people who can bring together an enormous range of knowledge. We employ some of the world's top experts on bats and newts, working alongside economists and people who understand everything there is to know about sewage engineering or solar power."

He lists some of the projects that Buro Happold has advised on or has had built. One of his favourites is the conversion of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. "We took an old building and used a lot of new thinking to provide fantastic facilities and an arena so close to the performance the audience can feel the actors' breath."

In Riyadh, the consultancy is working on a plan to restore Wadi Hanifah,



a 120km-long water course that passes through the city that has become polluted. It has also designed a string of sports venues, including the Olympics stadium for next summer's London games, and it is the main consultant engineer for a new Louvre Museum being built in Abu Dhabi.

Unsurprisingly, he supports the argument, popular in Britain today, that the country needs to make engineering and manufacturing a bigger part of the economy. But he admits

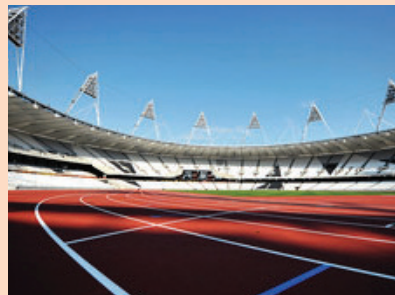
Paul Westbury's company is based in a 19th century former mill in the small English city of Bath, but many of its projects are global and highprofile, including the stadium for next year's London Olympics (left)

Gina Lundy; Getty

that the industry has hurt its own cause by not being very good at talking about what it does. "As a group, we're not very evangelical," he says.

What is satisfying about the work, Mr Westbury says, is how often the projects succeed. Asked about how many of Buro Happold's structures fail, however, and Mr Westbury looks pained. "Our buildings don't fall down; we don't have a wobbly bridge," he says – this last reference being a dig at Arup, its bigger UK engineering rival whose sleek new Thames footbridge in London suffered from teething problems after its opening in 2000.

"Everything we do is evidence-based. If someone asks us for a new structure where the energy costs are 25 per cent less than in existing buildings, it's almost certain the design will work," he says. "The only thing generally that goes wrong is if people don't use [the building] as they should."



The company is named after Sir Edmund Happold, the celebrated British architect/engineer who founded the business in 1976. When Mr Westbury joined in 1991, after graduating in engineering science from Cambridge, it had a handful of staff, with a small satellite office in London to add to the Bath headquarters.

Today the firm – which functions as a partnership, owned by 54 senior employees – has 1,490 employees in nearly 30 offices around the world including Mumbai, Boston, Beijing and Warsaw. Of its £123m in revenue last year, 39 per cent was generated by projects in the UK, while its strongest regions overseas were the US and the Middle East.

Mr Westbury took over as chief execu-

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tive in May, having been elected into the job by a ballot among the partners. In fact, the poll – which took place in February last year – was somewhat academic. Asked how many others he was standing against, he looks bashful. “I rose, swan-like. Actually I was the only candidate,” he says. “I suppose it was decided that I was the person to support.”

As for the lengthy period between him taking the job and knowing he had it, he says simply: “We like to plan. After all, we are engineers.”

The technocratic approach comes

through in how the consultancy organises itself. Virtually every desk has its own high-tech cameras and speaker systems so everyone – where-ever he or she is in the world – can link up by video. Mr Westbury says that in a normal day in his Bath office, he has “about 20” video calls with colleagues.

Yet Buro Happold’s style is pragmatic. The basic tools of its engineers are computer terminals, kitted out with the latest 3D modelling software. But the work areas of the Bath mill are cluttered with a surprisingly large number of drawings and engineering diagrams on paper. “The idea of a paperless office appals me,” says Mr Westbury. “When you need to have the feel of what a building will look like, paper can be a wonderful medium to work in.”

Mr Westbury acquired an interest in technology early on. He grew up in Birmingham in the 1970s, where his interest was fired by the emergence of personal computers. In his early teens he helped his father, a university scientist, to design and build a specialised computer for physiology experiments.

He joined Buro Happold after being inspired by a building that some of the firm’s top designers had worked on in Mannheim in Germany: a “grid-shell” design that used structural elements made from wood to support a large exhibition area. “It struck me as being extraordinarily clever. It used engineering principles to make something as cheap as chips but was different and exciting,” he says.

At Buro Happold, Mr Westbury has worked his way up the company in a number of jobs, mainly in Europe, with big sporting projects a speciality. Among the commissions was the design of Arsenal football club’s new stadium

The CV

- **Born:** November 11 1969, Birmingham
- **Education:** 1991 Bachelor of Arts in engineering science, Jesus College, Cambridge
- **Career:**
 - 1991 Joins Buro Happold
 - 2000 Becomes Buro Happold’s youngest ever principal
 - 2002 Appointed head of the group’s design and technology board, promoting new thinking
 - 2008 Becomes managing director of European business.
- **Awards:**
 - 1999 Royal Academy of Engineering MacRobert Award for Innovation for his work on the Millennium Dome
 - 2008 Made a fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering at the age of 33, the youngest ever
- **Interests:** Skiing, rugby, design and architecture

in London. “I discovered I liked being in charge of teams, which gave me the impetus to go for the chief executive’s job,” he says.

Asked about the world’s biggest challenges, Mr Westbury has a serious answer – yet he remains resolutely upbeat. “In the 20th century the number of people [in the world] living in cities grew 10 times. In cities you have all the big problems of organising transport, making the best use of energy and creating the best environment for dense concentrations of people. The encouraging thing is that we can use smart engineering and design to address virtually all the issues facing us.”