

## INSIGHT INTERVIEW

**BRETT PARKER - PROPERTY DIRECTOR &**

**MICHELLE POLLARD-SMITH - SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER**

We recently asked GAIL's to take part in our Insight Interview series digging in to how they navigate sustainability as the business grows.

Property Director, Brett Parker and Senior Project Manager, Michelle Pollard-Smith joined us to discuss what they've learnt, the opportunities they feel still await and how we can always do better when we share our experiences.

If you're not familiar with GAIL's then check them out [here](#).

Their first high street bakery was established in 2005; Michelle joining in 2015 and Brett in 2018. Under the leadership of Managing Director, Marta Pogroszewska the business has grown from opening 10 sites a year to opening 30 in 2022 alone and that brings them up to circa 110 stores with further stores underway.

So, with that in mind it felt like a good idea to kick off with understanding how has the Property team navigated this journey.

---

**The growth in the last 3-5 years for GAIL's has been exceptional— how have you seen that process play out in the business?**

*Brett:* We've learned a lot through getting bigger.

The big change happened around 6 years ago when we went from being led by the entrepreneur and founder Tom to it being driven forward with a professional retailer mindset. The team expanded with the ambition of changing it from a small business in to a medium/large term business.

How to be better, faster, add more value - that's across the board not just from a project delivery and building point of view.

Every aspect of the business is touched by the store expansion and we're constantly reviewing and improving.

**Community is evidently a really important part of the early success of GAIL's.**

*Michelle:* We have developed some elements of standardisation but they are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When those pieces of the puzzle are brought together each time they look like so vastly different. Each bakery should and does feel like it's something unique to that neighbourhood.

**How is that being affected by the growth phase and is it influencing how you approach the design and fit-out?**

Whilst the GAIL's brand and colours are consistent on the face of each bakery and that thread ties them together - the interior design concepts are developed purely in response to the local demographic, the locality, the building itself as well as always designed as a bakery at heart.

## INSIGHTS CONTINUED.

**BRETT PARKER - PROPERTY DIRECTOR &**

**MICHELLE POLLARD-SMITH - SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER**

**In that growth process, what did sustainability mean when you started in terms of building things, and where are you at now?**

*Brett:* It didn't mean a thing; let's be completely honest.

It just wasn't there - a couple of reasons why and none of them good.

When I started, sustainability was a supplier watchword, for adding premium price to a product. I used to talk about it quite openly - that there was a green tax to anything you wanted to do, it didn't matter what it was.

The other element was when we started, we were spending a lot of money directly with a single supply chain via one main contractor which limited our reach and influence.

It used to be - here's a site, go away and build it. Tell us when it's done and that's very much changed.

**It's really interesting what you've done moving away from just the single main contractor.**

*Brett:* Massive!

We started to look at how we could do things differently – how we could be more in control of the electrics, the extraction, the lighting, the flooring, the finishes.

**Do you feel like that's had a big impact?**

It did increase our admin but in turn it also reduced the supply chain mark up and it increase our influence. That got us in a good place where we could deliver sites and we could deliver them well and we weren't paying over the odds.

**And where are you seeing that impact?**

Within GAIL's, sustainability is a very big focus - we do it very well with the bakery. So firstly - as we don't like waste so this approach is a good driver for the fit-out too.

Secondly, we look at what we're taking out as well as what we were putting in. We're looking at renewing and reusing both our own materials and those we inherit.

And on top of that we are seeing more sustainable materials out there.

## INSIGHTS CONTINUED.

**BRETT PARKER - PROPERTY DIRECTOR &**

**MICHELLE POLLARD-SMITH - SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER**

**Building on this what, from your experience, what would you recommend people do to try and be more sustainable?**

*Michelle:* I think we're having to work smarter and conversations are key.

There's a continual conversations between all parties now that looks at the concept for the store and what we might actually find in situ. Contractors are starting to understand that it doesn't need to be shiny and brand new – that's not what we're about. For example - be smart, patch repair, don't put vinyl over an existing floor that's perfectly functional.

Our growth enables us to look at when we take stuff out, can we use things somewhere else or can we just leave them alone?

Some of the light features that are in Finsbury Park actually came from another client that one of our designers was working with - they said they were throwing them away so we took them and we refurbished them giving us beautiful feature lights.

**It's great to hear how you are looking favourably on what you inherit.**

*Brett:* Definitely – it's not just end of life; a lot of what we are doing – we need to know that in five years we can remove it or we can maintain it.

**In our work, looking at life span and designing for end of life is important.**

If we know that a counter has a timber carcass and a tile cladding then when the tile comes to the end of its life, we know they will just come off and a new cladding can be applied.

**Is what you'll leave behind affecting how you fit out your stores?**

What we inherit if we can't use it now, we store it, can we use it somewhere else? Is the material still good? Can we give it to someone else to refurbish?

*Michelle:* Having a resourceful mindset does affect what we do - we've got a tile store and a blanket rule that nobody is allowed to do a project without using something from the store.

*Brett:* We also work with a great social enterprise called RAW in Oxford – so with them we're not only saving on wasting kit because we're recycling, and also, we're helping somebody else while we're doing it so we're winning twice.

## INSIGHTS CONTINUED.

**BRETT PARKER - PROPERTY DIRECTOR &**

**MICHELLE POLLARD-SMITH - SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER**

**Do you feel that as property professionals there's a premium, a green tax, to this way of thinking?**

*Brett:* Within GAIL's the property team - it's very small. The way we work is different but once you've tied it in and everybody's aware. Everybody knows.

**Does one need additional resources to be green or can it be culturally embedded?**

It's in all the relationships we have.

And once you get that with the designers as well in that mindset; it just becomes part of the process.

**Within the commercial interiors industry, certification is increasingly playing a role in assessing sustainability on products. It's a really expensive process and there's also a lot of different certifications available.**

*Michelle:* I don't think we're there yet but I think that's where we're starting to go.

**In the hospitality sector - there's not the same level of conversation around supply chain or carbon footprint on furniture.**

We can see we're doing all these great things and we're not perfect. Now we're striving to work - how do we quantify what we've done?

And again, because we've got these direct relationships with our supply chain we're able to have these conversations directly.

**Do you see this on the horizon?**

Plus - how can we share our experiences, our learnings and then how can we learn more.

**Influencing consumers on sustainability is really valuable because we need the average person on the high street to come on that journey with us.**

*Brett:* A lot of time people just aren't aware.

**Do you see that interest and engagement from your customers?**

*Michelle:* We get people writing into customer services all the time and say they really love a certain material or product, where did you get that from? And we're okay with telling people about our products, our suppliers, our resources.

The teams that we've worked with are awesome and they deserve that recognition.

*Brett:* My whole property life has been built on that. I want to know the people who have been working with me. I want them to know who I am and to have that relationship with me, because then they feel invested and then made feel part of every single field.

Everyone becomes invested.

## INSIGHTS CONTINUED.

**BRETT PARKER - PROPERTY DIRECTOR &**

**MICHELLE POLLARD-SMITH - SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER**

**Greenwash is a problem. Do you think it's possible to have a genuine voice within that?**

*Brett:* I think there's also a lot of people who will greenwash and find ways to navigate around it without being truly responsible - paying someone else to take the problem away.

We need to be beating bad information with good information - until there's a wider understanding of that greenwash then it won't happen.

We're working on bigger and better ways to tell those stories.

*Michelle:* The whole sustainability approach has to be honest - we have to say when we're not doing it all right.

Recently we thought we'd found a vinyl alternative that was meant to be sustainable and then we did a bit more digging and actually we hadn't and we had to say - we made a mistake.

People are sharing and that's the only way it will eventually have that whole spiral effect. If we say we're doing it all perfectly it's not helpful and we're not we.

**And what a great note to end on - the more we can say when we've not got it right the more quickly, we'll find out how we can, collectively, do better.**