

Sea guidebooks help Witherby catch big revenues

By ERIKKA ASKELAND
Published on **28/04/2013**

AT A time when many publishers are struggling to survive in the digital age, one firm is proving it can still rack up big sales of its specialist guidebooks 270 years after they were first printed.

Witherby Publishing Group has just issued the fourth edition of its guide for marine navigators in the Far East which has already become a best-seller.

The Livingston firm has sold more than 3,000 copies of the Passage Planning Guide – Malacca And Singapore Straits in Canada, Greece, Japan, Southeast Asia and the UK.



Iain Macneil, MD of Witherby Publishing Group. Picture: Ian Rutherford

The book, an essential guide to seamen navigating the notoriously difficult passage connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is a historic landmark for the group. It retails for £125 and sales so far are just under £400,000.

Iain Macneil, the company's managing director, said: "The Malacca and Singapore straits is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. We did a second edition in a different style, and a third edition. In the last two years it has made us revenues of up to £700,000. It is a bible for any large ship going through the strait."

Witherby, led by Macneil and his wife, Kat Heathcote, was formed in 2008 when his digital publishing business merged with its much older joint venture partner, Witherbys Publishing. The duo bought out the older company's owner, Alan Witherby, who is a seventh generation direct descendant of the original business founder.

The company produces more than 600 specialist titles in seamanship, bulk liquid chemical handling, marine regulation and insurance. More than 85 per cent of its publications – books as well as digital titles – sell overseas, which garnered the firm a Queen’s Award for export in 2007.

The company’s digital research and publication business means the company is “future proof”, Heathcote said. She added the company expects to turnover close to reach £5 million this year.

The company publishes a number of its titles on behalf of industry bodies, including the International Maritime Organisation, the marine arm of the United Nations which is responsible for improving maritime safety and preventing pollution from ships. “We are their digital publisher. We manage the publications they produce,” said Heathcote.

“We are the oldest independent publisher in the English speaking world. I wouldn’t want to be a publisher of novels, but the niche business we have is really essential stuff.”

Last year, the company’s second edition of *The Response to Marine Oil Spills* sold thousands of copies on its first day in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon tragedy.

Another industry guide, on ship to ship transfer of liquefied gas, became of particular interest after campaigners attempted to limit operations in the Firth of Forth. Its next edition of the tome “will do £2m of sales on day one”, she added.

A further technical publication that will be delivered to the company’s warehouse this week is the 78th of edition of *Marine Insurance Clauses*, which has been continuously published by Witherby’s since the 18th century.

“In 1740 young Mr Witherby was sat in his coffee shop with the guys from Lloyds Register writing *Marine Insurance Clauses* – that is how the company started,” said Heathcote.

Macneil is an ex-mariner who set up his firm *Seamanship International* to design and develop training and reference materials for the shipping industry.

He launched the company in 1998 while studying for his officer qualifications and realised the materials could be improved upon.

Heathcote has a corporate background in the energy business, including roles at Ernst & Young, BP and energy research giant Wood Mackenzie. She said Macneil had approached her to become chairman of his venture, which she initially refused. Eventually they married.

The company employs 32 people at its Livingston headquarters as well as ten in India, who design graphics and correct proofs.