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## MIGHTY MOLECULES

From kites to DNA  
in 50 years at  
Cochrane's  
of Oxford  
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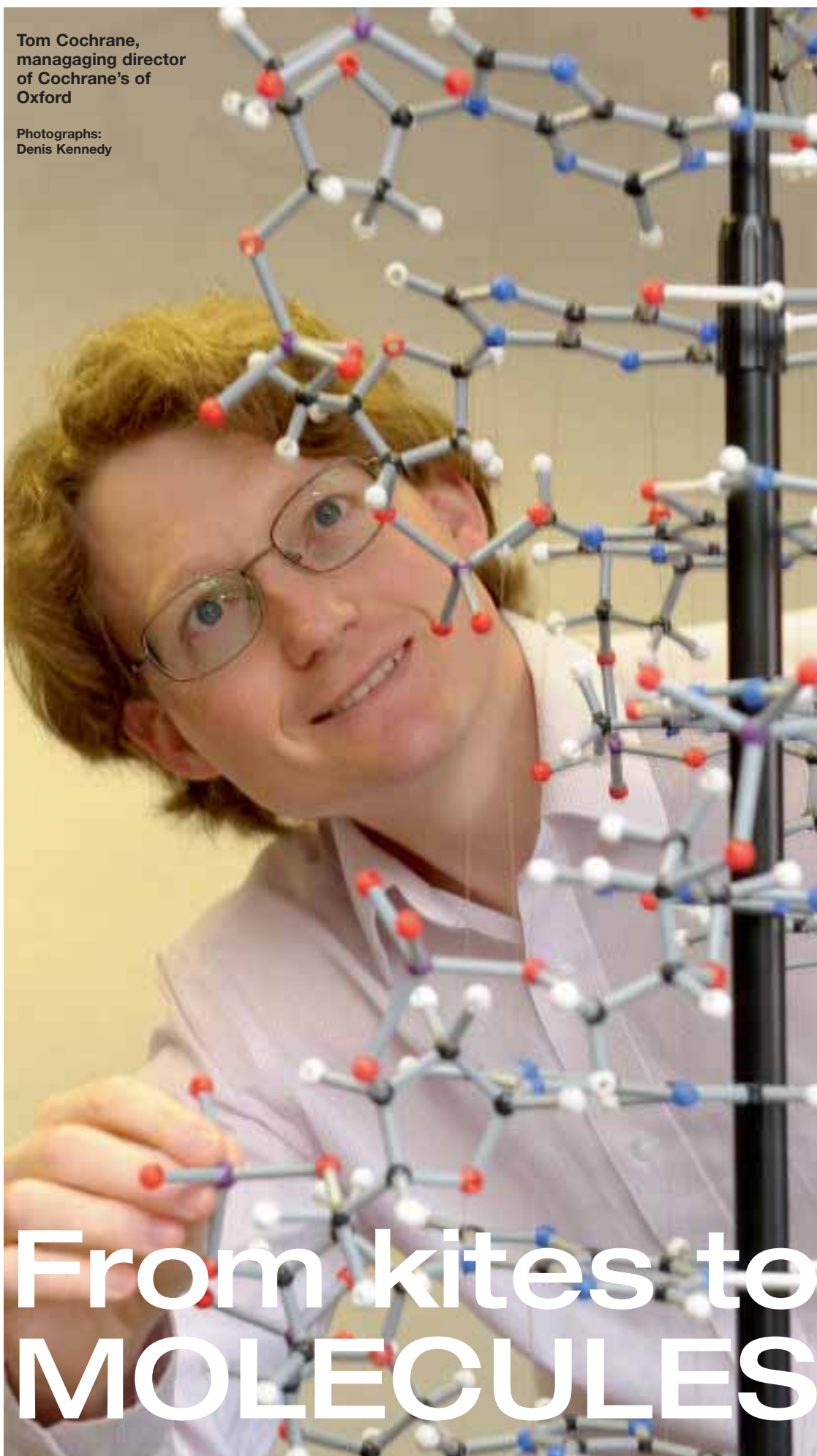
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Tom Cochrane,  
managing director  
of Cochrane's of  
Oxford

Photographs:  
Denis Kennedy



# From kites to MOLECULES

**H**alf a century ago, at the end of a long and hugely successful working life with the RAF and subsequently with Rolls Royce, a retired Air Chief Marshall came up with an idea that has kept his descendants in business ever since.

Sir Ralph Cochrane, the man who during World War Two organised the bouncing dambuster bombs that destroyed the Möhne and Eder dams in 1943, was apparently unable to forget the world of aerodynamics engineering.

He retired as joint managing director of Rolls Royce in 1961. But instead of putting on his slippers and sitting by the fire at his Cotswold home he flew a kite.

He established Cochrane's of Oxford in 1962 which, among other things, developed the Dunford Flying Machine — a kite with two strings which, unlike other kites, the operator can manoeuvre about in the air.

Now the managing director of the company, which today employs ten people at the Shipton under Wyckwood premises — into which Sir Ralph moved the business in 1975 — is the founder's grandson, Tom Cochrane. Its chairman is Sir Ralph's son, John.

Tom Cochrane said: "We still sell kites but our biggest sellers are the molecular models."

These are educational aids used by teachers in the dozens of countries to which Cochrane's export products. They can be very small models of very large things (the universe, no less, in one case) or hugely enlarged models of very small things — such as DNA structures designed to help children understand the chemistry that controls life of earth. Then there are the Construct-o-Straws.

These are tough plastic straws and joiners which many people will remember from school days.

They were the top stock-in-trade at the very start of Sir Ralph's business and are still going strong since children love them — and they are inexpensive to buy and light to export all over the world.

The very young are attracted by the bright colours and easy method of joining pieces together. Older children are intrigued by making more complex models.

The system imposes very few restrictions on a child's imagination allowing freedom of expression in a three dimensional medium to build models with straight and curved edges and increase hand to eye co-ordination.

But John Cochrane obviously has a soft spot for the company's early kite-flying escapades.

He explained how his father got into the business after seeing a piece on television about Don Dunford, a retired RAF engineering officer who invented the famous Dunford Flying Machine, often known as the first two-line stunt kite — with which Mr Dunford was able to remove his wife's hat from 50 metres away.



From left,  
Malcolm Cochrane,  
Mary Cochrane,  
Tom Cochrane,  
John Cochrane  
Inset, founder of  
the company, Sir  
Ralph Cochrane

## Chris Koenig discovers a family firm still finding a ready global market for its traditional products

Mr Cochrane said: "Don was making his kites in Oxford, not far from us. We thought we could help and were keen to grow our fledgling business in toys and kites. We approached him to help with manufacturing and distribution and so began our long term relationship with Don and with kites in general.

"This led us to many interesting places and associations — from the use of delta kites in aerial photographic surveys of penguins in the Antarctic, to demonstrating six red Flying Machines in a replica formation of the Red Arrows at Fleet Airshow.

"In 1977, a team of our delta kites flew for the Queen's Silver Jubilee at Greenwich.

"A request for a kite to simulate a hovering hawk and capable of flying day and night led to the development of the Twin Keeled Delta and our interest in bird scaring techniques. We are still developing new kites for this market."

He also reminisced on the start of the business in 1962:

"After an inauspicious start which saw us launch our inaugural product, a razor blade sharpener, in the same month that Wilkinson launched a new stainless steel razor blade that our sharpener wrecked, we turned our minds to the education market.

"Shortly afterwards we obtained the licence to manufacture Construct-o-Straws — a fun construction toy with excellent educational qualities which was later developed further into our maths sets.

"Construct-o-Straws remain one of our best selling products and can be found in kindergartens and primary schools around the world.

"A little later we received a letter from a research biochemist at University College London looking to make a model of DNA

transcription. Could we help?"

The rest, as they say, is history. But how is trade going in the low-tech end of the educational teaching aids business? After all, thanks to Government cuts, the high-tech computerised end of the market has suffered in recent years.

Tom Cochrane said: "At the start of the recession we saw sales halve in the USA, our biggest market after the UK — which was worrying. But now we are back with sales similar to pre-2007 levels and we are planning to grow the company by increasing the product range."

His grandfather started the business in a bid to boost the nation's exports by manufacturing goods in a way that allowed local people to work locally.

That idea has proved an outstanding success, so here is wishing the family business the best of luck for the next 50 years.