New methods were able to produce a wider variety of bacon for a broader range of consumer tastes, including, for example, the supply of leaner rashers with a much lower salt content, reflecting greater health consciousness among consumers. Direct Table was adding not only speciality cured products to its range but also lardons, smoked bacon medallions, gammon steaks and joints. The variety of packs too was expanding, with a range extending from less than 200 grams to as much as 600 grams. Premium products were becoming the fastest growing sector as overall bacon consumption began to increase once more, reaching 487,000 tonnes in 2004. In that year Direct Table recorded total sales of more than £76 million, with net profits of nearly £2.5 million, and employed nearly 400 people.

By 2004 Direct Table, backed by Tican, was already one of the UK’s major bacon processors. In a consolidating and more demanding market place, growth remained an essential objective. Yet in the space of one morning in November 2004 a devastating event put the survival of the entire business in doubt. Many businesses would have failed; Direct Table did not. The resilience of its employees, the confidence of its managers and the support of its owners, customers and suppliers all contributed not just to the survival of the company but to its renaissance.

On the morning of 3 November 2004 a fire destroyed the Lark Valley factory. The catastrophic impact of the fire and its aftermath made a deep impression on many of those who witnessed it and even on those who did not. These are a few of their recollections.
**Tony Stanton**

Tony was visiting a supplier in Spain. That morning he received two phone calls from Lenny Isaacs in quick succession, the first saying there was a small fire, the second saying the whole factory had gone up in flames. Fortunately there were no casualties, the workforce having evacuated safely outside the factory, as 25 fire appliances raced to the scene. Tony immediately flew back to the UK and hooked into the Angel Hotel in Bury St Edmunds. He found the devastation caused by the fire unbelievable; started by a faulty smoker overheating behind old polystyrene paneling, the fire was so intense that the heat had melted machines. It was not encouraging to hear the loss adjusters, arriving on the day after the fire, say that in such circumstances most companies went out of business. ‘I walked around in a daze for weeks,’ recollected Tony, ‘got no sleep and thought of nothing else – it was my worst nightmare.’

**Colin Perry**

Just as Colin was leaving home for work, he too received a call from Lenny Isaacs to say a small fire had broken out. Des Dixon, one of the engineers, had discovered a pipe glowing red hot through a wall. Lenny had rung the fire service which advised him to evacuate the factory, which was swiftly completed. Twenty minutes into his journey, instead of the usual plume of steam rising from the local sugar beet factory, Colin could see a second plume of smoke, and he realised that the fire had spread. The building was constructed of composite sandwich panels, so as the sandwich ‘filling’ conducted the fire, the panels fell apart and the roof collapsed. The fire service could adopt only a ‘watch and burn’ approach. The whole complex was burnt down with the exception of the despatch area, which escaped with smoke damage. Everyone stood watching from a nearby grass bank with many people in tears. It was the third of three fires in the area on successive Wednesdays, following on from those at the Premier Foods factory and a local leisure centre. There were suspicions of arson but at Lark Valley the cause was the faulty smoker installed just two weeks previously.

**Lenny Isaacs**

Lenny vividly remembers standing outside the factory on the day of the fire, having called Tony in Spain to tell him that he shouldn’t worry, everything would be OK, only for the fire officer to tell him they could do nothing more, and he had to call Tony five minutes later to tell him the factory had gone. ‘It was devastating.’ The same day he travelled with Gary Wright and Darren Board down to Cuffley to work out how to keep the business going. Everyone was waiting for Tony to fly back and give them some guidance.

**Darren Board**

Darren was one of the many witnesses to the destruction of the factory. ‘It was the only time I have ever cried at work. You put your heart and soul into the place and you saw all your hard work going up in smoke’.

**Gary Wright**

The factory had always been good at fire drill so the evacuation was achieved smoothly. Everyone thought they would soon be back at work when a wisp of smoke was noticed over the smoker area. Even then everyone believed the fire would soon be extinguished. But within a short space of time the site was occupied by 130 fire fighters and a turntable was being sought from outside the county. Very quickly the firefighters withdrew from the unsafe building, which was soon burning fiercely. Trucks delivering bacon were being turned away. ‘It was really surreal.’

**Julian Newman**

At the time of the fire Julian was seeking new business in Ireland and he had just had a positive call at his hotel from the customer concerned. He phoned back to the UK full of excitement. ‘It’s great news!’ he began, which prompted the instant response, ‘it’s not really great news, is it?’ Hearing about the fire, he had no alternative but to ring his customer back and put the order on hold.
Diane Zabroski

Diane found it difficult getting to work that morning. Although news of the fire came over the car radio, she had no idea how bad it was. When she did reach the factory, people were being evacuated. Many were coming up to her and asking, ‘Miss Diane, what are we going to do?’ A meeting was quickly arranged in the boardroom provided by a nearby business over the road by which time the fire was getting a grip. DZ recalled ‘It was a rainy, drizzly, horrible cold day, the most horrendous day ever’. Unsurprisingly people wanted to get home but their car keys were still in their lockers in the building. Diane, knowing the layout of the lockers, was the obvious candidate to go in. A fireman escorted her through the building to her office to get the master key for the lockers and then down along the corridor to the locker room. Everything was pitch black and the entrance of the factory was melting before her eyes. ‘The sheer devastation of it you just can’t begin to explain, words could never portray shock at that level, it was scary, it was dark!’ Firemen were smashing holes everywhere while Diane was opening lockers and grabbing things out so they could be thrown through the broken windows onto the grass outside. She remembered walking out of the building in shock, assailed by workers asking questions about their jobs and pay for which she had no answers, while people from the estate were gathering to watch. She had to take five minutes to collect her thoughts, the main one being, ‘We’ve lost it now, it’s all gone’. Travelling back home, she found herself stuck in traffic, listening again to news reports about the fire, just desperately wanting to get home. When she woke up the next morning, and the local news was again about the fire, her reaction was, ‘It’s happened, it’s real, what do we do now?’

What do we do now?

That was the question everyone wanted an answer to even before the final flames had been extinguished. No time was lost in taking action. Everyone was determined that the business would survive. The doom-laden words of the loss adjusters reinforced this determination. Three working groups were set up, dealing with the insurance claim, day to day operations and the way forward.

On the second day after the fire, Diane Zabroski met with Tony Stanton and Colin Perry to discuss plans for a night shift at Cuffley to keep production going. On the day after the fire, standing on a chair in the middle of the carpark, Tony spoke to the workforce, asking for volunteers for the new night shift at Gorretti Soares. They cut out the names of workers from office lists, dividing them between day, night and departmental shifts and then trying to organise bus transport for all those employees who were prepared to travel to Cuffley. To this day, Direct Table timesheets are still known as bus sheets. The initial aim was to find work for as many people as possible so Diane and Margaret oversaw three bus-loads of staff travelling to Cuffley at various times of the day and night. This proved too difficult to maintain and eventually there was no alternative but to make job cuts and redundancies.

Cuffley needed only bacon packers but the aim was to secure work for as many people as possible whose skills would be needed in all departments when the new factory opened. The hygiene team were found jobs in security at the old site, despatch workers were sent to a distribution unit in Peterborough and members of the curing team were dispersed between departments. As there was no appropriate line at Cuffley, a small team, led by Tania Correia, spent time at Bearfields’ factory in London, overseeing the slicing and packing of Sainsbury’s gammon steaks ensuring continuity of supply to a key customer Gary Wright became responsible for monitoring the quality of the bacon held in the Peterborough cold store and also flew out to Denmark to check the specialist cures being carried out for Direct Table by Tican.

As well as co-ordinating the workforce, Diane and Margaret were also responsible for payroll. They faced a nightmare as all documents including time sheets, holiday and overtime records had been lost in the fire but despite the obstacles they faced everyone’s pay went through just one day late.

The logistics were complex and the effort involved was not always appreciated. It was a time when people as individuals were often antagonistic, anxious about their own futures, and yet collectively wholly committed to seeing the business through to a new beginning in a new factory. As Diane Zabroski put it, ‘you cannot describe the strength of the support and the level of commitment we got from the workers yet, although it sounds contradictory, everyone was fighting with each other even as they pulled together. We were ordinary people who had turned our lives upside down for a year to safeguard our jobs and the future of the company’.

‘Cuffley was our savour, otherwise we would not have a job now,’ reflected Gary Wright. Workers there had heard about the fire on the afternoon of the blaze and they too were anxious about whether they would still have jobs if customers moved away. Instead, Cuffley was pressed into action to sustain production. ‘We all pulled together as a team,’ remembered Fred Cudjoe. Useable equipment, some of it wet, much of it smelling pungently of smoke, was sent down to Cuffley from Lark Valley and Cuffley staff helped their colleagues from Lark Valley to get used to Cuffley’s routines and machinery. Very soon Cuffley was beating all production records, to the extent that Lenny Isaacs refused to believe the reported volume of boxes processed on one shift and insisted on coming down to check for himself. Before the fire, Lark Valley had produced 60 per cent of the company’s combined output of 650 tonnes a week. Working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Cuffley raised production to 450 tonnes a week, securing supplies for key customers. The company enjoyed the support of many suppliers and customers, such as Sainsbury’s, Bearfields and John Walker of New Century Foods. As a result, only one major account was lost and Direct Table retained 80 per cent of its business.

The company had always taken out insurance to cover business interruption as a result of a catastrophic event such as a fire. The renewal of the policy had taken place only weeks before the fire and the company had not yet received the insurance documents. It turned out that the brokers, instead of renewing cover for 24 months as previously, had only covered the company for 12 months. The brokers refused to accept responsibility, forcing the company to take court action, which was handled by Tican as the parent company through the Danish court of arbitration. It was a mishap the company could have done without. When the case finally reached the court, it was heard by three judges, who decided by two to one in favour of Tican. The brokers, however, refused to pay up, leading to yet
another court action. In 2009, five years after the fire, the same judges agreed unanimously in favour of Tican, adding interest to the original settlement.

At the same time an ultimately successful case was being pursued against the installers of the faulty smoker. Ironically this had been the first time that an outside contractor had been employed to install plant and machinery. The case dragged on and on before it was finally resolved, adding to the pressures on those directly involved. It troubled Andy Flack, the company’s engineering manager, who slept badly for six months. ‘But,’ he reflected, ‘we got over it and we’re all a lot stronger for it.’

Meanwhile, the Lark Valley site was being cleared. The working group set up to agree the way forward was chaired by Ove Thejl, with Tony Stanton and others also taking part. They discussed all possible alternatives but soon decided the best option was to build a new factory. Tony Stanton saw this as a great chance to boost Direct Table’s position in the UK market. He and his team also wanted production to remain in Suffolk which was where all the company’s added-value products had been made and which had supplied such an excellent workforce. An extensive search was made for a new location until, partly thanks to Tony’s brother-in-law, David Scott, a London estate agent, a greenfield site was acquired from the Claas Pension Fund at the Saxham Business Park just outside Bury St Edmunds. Originally Claas wanted to build and own the factory but instead agreed to a higher price for the land to permit Direct Table to do so instead. The land purchase was completed on 3 June 2005. As a memo to employees stated, ‘We chose the Saxham site for its convenient locality for our staff, ease of access for our suppliers and customers and because it was ideal for the development of the specific type of food premises required to supply the UK multiples with quality bacon that meets the high standards demanded.’

The local council was supportive in helping to process planning consent, granted in May 2005 with the minimum of delay. But developing a greenfield site was a much more complex project than the company had ever handled. Once again David Scott was helpful and the company appointed two outstanding project managers, Mike Fitzgerald and David Poole. Lenny Isaacs recalled how he had been part of a group including Tony Stanton and Andy Flack who had gathered in the Angel Hotel soon after the fire to cut up plans of the old factory and put the pieces together to work out a floor plan for a new one, adding extra space here and there. Tony and Andy in particular, Lenny remembered, were ‘like kids in a sweet shop, Andy loved it’. Mike and David turned these early ideas into plans for a modern purpose-built processing plant, one which flowed, intake to despatch, without the compromise of doubling back as in Lamdin Road. First class services, from floors to drainage and refrigeration, were installed, accompanied by brand new machinery, mainly supplied from Germany. There were heat pumps, special heat-retaining glare-free light-maximising glass, grey water recovery, and remotely controlled temperature, storage and refrigeration. Andy also designed the services so they could be adapted for an extension at a later date. He kept a photographic record of the £30 million scheme from the week construction began on a muddy field in July 2005 until the factory was finished in April 2006. He also wrote every specification sheet for the building, 24,000 of them, stored in boxes in his home.

Tony Stanton visited the site at least once a week. During the last six months, as machinery was installed, visits were also arranged for the workforce, who went around open-mouthed at all the space. David Bull remembered how, once the new factory was underway, ‘there was a massive buzz around the place’. Darren Board, who helped Andy Flack with requirements for the new despatch area, saw progress being made on the factory every night on his way back from Peterborough. ‘It was a bit of
light at the end of the tunnel.’ Gary Wright experienced an almost identical reaction. ‘You could see it rising up from the ground so you knew there was light at the end of the tunnel and that you’d soon be back in a new factory.’ Gary too was asked by Andy Flack how he envisaged the curing and bacon intake area and it was laid out exactly as he wanted, ‘creating a lovely flow’. Andy’s outstanding contribution was noted by Tony, who reported to the directors that Andy had given ‘more than would be expected of an employee during the duration of the build and the start up of the factory’.

The result was the most modern factory of its kind in the UK, efficient, easy to operate and an attractive working environment. Capable of processing 600 tonnes of bacon every week, it was so impressive that Justin King, the chief executive of Sainsbury’s, Direct Table’s most important customer, was more than happy to fly in to perform the official opening on July 2006. The company had persuaded Sainsbury’s to take an active interest in the planning of the factory, encouraging them to share in the development of Direct Table’s future. A week before the ceremony, people could be found manning cleaning machines, going round and round, sucking up the dust, buffing the floors, keeping them clean before the opening, and among them was Tony Stanton.