

The Columbus Dispatch

If it's Brillo, it's from London

New owner has big marketing plans for old standby, which is good news for Madison County factory

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BY DAN GEARINO

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LONDON, Ohio - This Madison County city has no sign declaring itself the source of all the world's Brillo.

To find the connection to the iconic brand, you need to go to a nondescript factory a few blocks from Main Street. Inside is the assembly line where the scouring pads are made, boxed and shipped far and wide.

A close-knit group of about 50 employees works in three shifts to produce the soap-infused steel wool, using a mix of new machines and some that date to the 1950s or earlier.

"Every day is something different," said R. Neil Parrish, the plant manager. "In a manufacturing facility, everything is an adventure."

The owner is Armaly Brands, based in Walled Lake, Mich., not far from Detroit. The company took over last year and sees untapped opportunities for growth, especially in international sales. The company is working to reverse the brand's recent drop in sales and market share.

Last year, Brillo had \$9.7million in sales, down 11percent from the previous year, said SymphonyIRI Group, a Chicago-based market-research firm. The figures include sales from grocery stores, convenience stores and drugstores, outlets that had \$101 million in scouring-pad sales across all brands.

Brillo's performance made it the country's third-most popular scouring pad behind the Clorox Co.'s S.O.S, \$22.1million, and 3M's Scotch-Brite, \$16million.



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Piper White, of London, laughs with a co-worker as she labors at the counting and weighing station in the packaging department of the Brillo factory in London. White has worked there for 34 years and said, "I've done every job in here."

Parrish started at the plant 18 years ago and worked his way up to the top job. On the factory floor, he tends to listen much more than he talks, a quiet counterpoint to the clang and churn of the big machines.

He oversees a work force with an average tenure of more than 30 years and several second-generation employees.

"It makes life good," he said. "You're not having to go out and reinvent the wheel. People know how to operate the equipment safely."

Almost everyone lives in or around London, a county seat with about 9,600 residents.

"It's like a family down here," said Piper White, 54, who started at the plant when she was in her early 20s. She works the first shift, from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., in the room where the Brillo packages are boxed into cases.

On the other side of the factory, the process begins with long coils of wire. The metal is fed into a long machine whose blades cut it into strands of steel wool. From there, the many strands enter a device about the size of a van, filled with gears and blades that cut the product and compress it into individual pads.

Those first two machines have been there longer than any of the current workers. If something breaks down, the in-house shop does the repairs because no outside company has the needed parts or knowledge, Parrish said.

The old machines sit alongside newer ones, such as a magnetized conveyor belt that allows the pads to rise at a 90-degree angle to circumvent any obstacles.

Brooklyn-born

The brand started in 1913 in Brooklyn, N.Y., founded by a cookware peddler, his brother-in-law and their attorney, according to the company's official history.

The initial product, with a name that appears to be derived from *brillante*, the Spanish word for *bright*, was a pad of steel wool sold with a small cake of soap. It arrived at a time when consumers had begun to use lightweight, inexpensive aluminum cookware but had a difficult time cleaning it.



An old advertisement sells the scrubbing power of Brillo soap pads.



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A handout shows old products found on eBay. A box passes by on a conveyor belt in the plant Armaly Brands bought Brillo last year.



A handout shows old products found on eBay.

The London factory started in 1921 under the ownership of the Williams Co., a competing maker of steel wool. Brillo Manufacturing Co. bought the plant in 1955 and made it the country's sole producer of the popular pads.

Since then, several companies have bought and sold the Brillo brand and the factory. From 1997 to 2010, the brand was part of Church & Dwight, making it a very small part of the multibillion-dollar company behind Arm & Hammer baking soda, Aim toothpaste and Trojan condoms.

Meanwhile, automation has contributed to a gradual decrease in the work force, from about 150 in the mid-1990s to the current 50.

One of Brillo's greatest assets is the name, which has become synonymous with scouring pads in the way Kleenex is synonymous with facial tissues. Company leaders cite studies that show more than 90percent of customers are familiar with the brand.

Much of that can be attributed to Andy Warhol. In the 1960s, the artist used screen-printing techniques to make *Brillo Boxes*, a series of oversize replicas of Brillo containers made out of wood and other materials. The work joined his paintings of Campbell's Soup cans as iconic examples of pop art.

"He was at the forefront of thinking of art as a commodity like any other," said Christopher Bedford, chief curator of exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts. "At that moment, Warhol was able to propose that art could be absolutely anything."

While *Brillo Boxes* is well-known, it resists easy interpretation.

"Warhol was someone who kind of liked to throw hand grenades and run," Bedford said.

The shelves of Parrish's office are like a Brillo museum, only his *Brillo Boxes* are the real thing, stacked in a manner that looks like life imitating art.

He has an example of almost every generation of the product, from a pre-World War II box with the slogan, "Brillo makes aluminum utensils new," to the 1950s and '60s versions made famous by Warhol, to the present-day versions.

A fresh start

Armaly Brands jumped at the opportunity to buy Brillo, said John Armaly, company president and grandson of the founder. The privately held company primarily makes sponges, and last year's acquisition was the largest in its history. Financial terms were not disclosed.



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A box passes by on a conveyor belt in the plant



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Armaly Brands bought Brillo last year.



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Armaly saw Brillo as an underutilized asset, one that had gotten lost in the shuffle at Church & Dwight. The brand's sluggish sales in recent years had "nothing to do with the product," he said. "It has more to do with the way the brand was managed."

Brillo accounts for about half of Armaly's employees and sales, which means the company has much more riding on the brand's success than previous owners did. With the proper nurturing, Armaly thinks, the brand can dramatically expand its presence in international markets, which now account for only about 15 percent of sales.

"There's a lot of room to grow," he said.

If the growth materializes, that is good news for the workers at the plant, who have watched a succession of owners come and go and now have high hopes for the new one.

Armaly said he is committed to keeping the plant in its current home.

"Manufacturing in the United States is what Armaly does," he said.

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"Made Here" is a series about central Ohio manufacturers whose products are part of our lives. The subjects of this feature can be big companies or small ones, established names or virtual unknowns. If you know of a business that you would like to see in this space, contact Business Editor Ron Carter at rcarter@dispatch.com.

Video

- [Brillo factory](#)

About the company

Armaly Brands' Brillo factory

Location: W. 1st Street, in London

Employees: About 50

Annual sales: Not disclosed

Year opened: 1921, when it was owned

by Williams Co.

Plant manager: R. Neil Parrish

Parent company: Armaly Brands of Walled Lake, Mich.

Products: The factory manufactures Brillo brand scouring pads, which consist of steel wool

infused with soap, and a version with no soap.

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