

**THE Cambridge Brush Company** appears to be an anachronism in modern, hi-tech Cambridge. It operates from wooden workshops wedged between solid Victorian terraced houses in Searle Street, where it has been for more than 60 years.

Yet some of the country's top technology contractors rely on this old family firm. For example, the Channel Tunnel project rates dust control highly in the drilling operations.

Only the Cambridge Brush Company could supply them with the specialised brushes for this job.

The morning I visited, there was a call from a Suffolk technology firm.

"Are our brushes done? We must have them for a shipment to Russia by 4pm."

One of the two directors, who are both in their seventies, Mr Allan Thomas Chenery, assured him they would be delivered by 4pm that day.

A quick word, and his brother, Lester Robert Chenery, known as Gerry, switched jobs to work on the contract. It was delivered on time.

This is the way this traditional company is having to adjust in the face of increased cut-rate competition from the Far East.

It still produces hundreds of traditional sweeping brushes and paint brushes, all hand-made in the same way the company has been producing them for more than a century.

## Surviving

But more and more, it is having to look to one-off and specialised orders to keep the staff of about 10 busy.

The problem is, that to make a yardbrush the traditional way with a wooden block and real fibres, takes about an hour.

The wages cost is more than some imported brushes. And it is estimated Britain has been importing brushes at the rate of 20 million a year for the past eight years.

But Cambridge Brush Company brushes are rather special, and there are very few places in the country surviving where this craft is still being carried out. The nearest to Cambridge is at Norwich.

Key man in the manufacture is Gerry, who has been a brush maker all his life.

"I can tell you all there is to know about brushes" he said. "We make them of nylon polyester pvc, bristles or fibres and I can tell you where they all come from and where to get them from.

"Bristles and fibres all have different qualities and the skill is in using the right ones for the right job."

The wooden blocks are supplied ready for use, usually in beech or birch. The brush company has to drill holes in them all exactly the right depth to take bunches of "bash".

These fibres can come from warm climates — the factory imports from South America, Africa and Asia.

Standard brushes use a template on an automatic machine, but the drill still has to be guided by hand.

Special brushes are drilled by hand, usually by Gerry, and can need about 60 apertures.

## Varnished

A bunch of fibres is dipped in pitch and then tied with a thrum of thread.

It is given another dip in hot pitch and pressed into an aperture. The number of fibres has to be exactly right and tight, or some will soon work loose.

Bristles are checked, brushes are smoothed and chamfered and many of them varnished before the handles are fixed.

Paint brushes require special treatment as metal bands have to be rivetted to improve bristle retention.

The company's brushes are sold under the trademark "Don" but are not easy to find.

The firm has no salesman and prefers to sell from one outlet in each town. In Cambridge, they can usually be obtained from Simpers' Ropeworks in New Street.

More and more of their work, however, is for special projects. This little family firm is on the Ministry of Defence list, and its products are in demand for food processors, farm trades, dust control and engineering.

"When I joined the firm, there was enough work for everybody. We had to look for work for a long time but now we are always being asked to do one-off jobs as there are so very few people in the country who can make any kind of brush." said Allen.