20 YEARS AGO – APRIL 1995

In this month two decades ago, we heard the shocking news of the Oklahoma City truck bombings, killing 168 people and injuring nearly 700 others. Here at home, Dave Dobbym was Best Male Vocalist of the Year at the Vodafone Awards with Fiona McDonald taking out the Female Vocalist honours.

In sport, as celebrated just last month, 1995 was the inaugural NRL year for the Warriors and in April they had two wins and three losses, eventually finishing 10th for the season – their inaugural sponsor was DB Bitter.

The April 1995 editorial gave an overview of the Domotechina trade fair and Wares highlighted two key aspects of the show, the first of which was “a trend away from a price-point/bulk purchase mentality” and the second being a growing drive towards the saving of resources in Europe.

The oven that sits on your benchtop – Few products sold these days bear any resemblance to those sold 20 years ago. One exception is the benchtop oven. Wares’ April 1995 front cover showcased the Rotec Top Cook, the original iteration of which itself had been around since 1985. Benchtop ovens are still around today, maybe with a few more gizmos but fundamentally not far removed from those Rotecs.

Inside the magazine, Wares introduced the Robinson Industries design team responsible for the new Top Cook. Steve Voke, Geoff Morris, Glenn Johnson and Joshua Handy had focused for two years on a manufacturing system which would allow the same production line to produce a wide variety of oven sizes and features. The first new Rotec was now rolling off the line and two more were imminent.

Top Cook wasn’t just for domestic consumption. Greg Mikkelsen, Marketing Manager at the time, said: “This product will be sold in many countries under world leading brand names, still holding its unique selling feature, the removable stainless steel liner.”

To find out where the 1995 Top Cook team is 20 years on, I spoke with Steve Voke who describes those Robinson Industries days as “heady.” Today he is Senior Draughtsman for Airwork NZ, working on projects/modifications of helicopters at Ardmore and fixed wing aircraft at Auckland Airport.

Josh Handy has swapped appliances for chemicals. After time in London, New York and Sydney, he is now Vice President of Global Product Experience at Method Products Pbc in San Francisco. “I am leading a global team of product developers working in the formulation of fragrance packaging and innovation,” he tells me.

Gregg Mikkelsen is now GM Enterprise, Commercial & Trans Tasman at Gen-I.

What’s in a name? – Nilfisk Tellus, as it was called back in 1995, was promoting the Nilfisk GM200 Series of vacuums. Interestingly, there was no mention of Nilfisk to be seen, except as part of the company logo. Some research figures were quoted which clearly had the iconic Tellus brand as New Zealand’s most preferred, according to a “Domestic Vacuum Cleaner Market Study”.

An article inside had MD Flemming Torp and Sales Manager Andrew Turner explaining the link between Nilfisk and Tellus, and introducing the GM210 as the new top-of-the-range model. Wares was curious as to why there were two names and Flemming
explained that up until 1956, all Nilfisk vacs sold in English speaking countries were marketed as Tellus.

That changed in 1956 when, with the exception of New Zealand (thanks to its closed market and duty protection for local assemblers), the Nilfisk brand became universal. It was not until his arrival in 1992 that the name changed to Nilfisk and machines were imported from Denmark, fully built up.

These days, Flemming Torp is Project & Business Development Manager at Deugro, a project freight forwarding and logistics company in Denmark.

We could have been champs – 1995 was the year of the Rugby World Cup in South Africa. To mark the occasion, Philips released a new range of TVs, the 29-inch Powervision series featuring the All Blacks logo and with Ian Jones as the AB’s Philips Ambassador. John Child, Philips Visual Product Manager got it right when he said: “This year the whole of New Zealand will be glued to the television. Consumers often use this type of event as a reason for upgrading to bigger, brighter pictures which creates a surge in television sales.”

As for the result of that competition, South Africa of course came out on top but there are some who believe that Suzie was already in training for her dastardly swoop on our team on the eve of the Rugby World Cup final! More in the next issue.

Godzone does Domotechnica – April 1995’s edition of Wares contains a detailed review of Domotechnica, at which 1,504 suppliers from 51 countries were represented, including first time attendance by Argentina, Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mexico, Rumania, Syria and Tunisia. Italy had by far the biggest turnout with 338 exhibitors, followed by Great Britain with 90.

For our part, New Zealand was represented by Fisher & Paykel and PDL. F&P’s Richard Blundell told the magazine soon afterwards that Fisher & Paykel was working through in excess of 200 serious leads having taken 24 staff to Cologne, along with Aussie and Kiwi retailers and other guests.

Domotechnica was an equally big deal for PDL, with Andrew Ballagh spending no less than three months organising and co-ordinating the firm’s highly successful stand and General Manager Phil Badger reporting hundreds of enquiries from more than two dozen countries. Phil is now Chairman of electrical wholesale group Powerbase whilst Andy is a Director for Inter-Water Events Pty of Australia and is based in Harrogate.

There were plenty of other interested Kiwi visitors that year, including Don Morris, Robert Eng and Mark Jones of Applico Group, who were visiting the Smeg stand.

When “tranny” meant transistor – The evergreen “tranny” (to translate that’s “transistor radio” for today’s youngsters!) was still going strong 20 years ago for G&D Enterprises with 8 models ranging from $19.95 ($30.35 today) to $69.95 ($106.45). All bases were covered including the humble pocket model which would have been a regular at cricket grounds around the country, up to radios with LW/MW facility (yes back in the day AM was still worth having). It seems this company closed around 2004.

Still with the analogue world, a few pages on in the April 1995 we find the Sony Walkman, already 16 years young and still rocking the good old cassette more than a decade after the launch of CD. But there’s a
name to conjure with! I wonder how many hundreds of millions of these things were sold over its lifetime (1979-2011)? Here we saw the latest version which was capable of no less than 36 hours’ playback. It also had a “State-of-the-art synthesised digital AM stereo/FM tuner”.

took up the new position of International Business Development Manager for Sunbeam Victa focusing on group exports.

Lots of water has gone under the bridge since then at Sunbeam and we now find John Barr holding several governance roles in Christchurch as well as providing business advice as a consultant. Phil Kearney is with Otago University as Director Development and Alumni Relations, but I couldn’t find Norm.

What’s up in retail? – Over in retail land, Mark Campbell had just opened his new Mark Campbell Discount Appliances shop in the Highland Home Centre, having relocated from Howick village. He had joined the 100% YES group, had plenty of competition including neighbour Noel Leeming but was undaunted, considering that being one of ‘the little guys’ was an advantage: “The store has the guy’s name on the door and people know they can come in and talk to that person.”

Mark Campbell’s shop was 9,500ft² (880m² in today’s money) and included an area set aside for full kitchen units. Built around an opportunity for one lucky customer to win $10,000 worth of appliances, his opening promotion was a big success.

The drive for more Authorised Dick Smith Distributors continued with DSE posting before & after pictures of Central Home Appliances. Listed among the advantages of joining up were: distribution of 15+ flyers every year, inclusion in extensive advertising programmes, no fees, an exclusive operating area and an in-company credit card scheme. Interested dealers were invited to contact DSE Wholesale Manager David Good for further details.

15 years back Wares was looking towards the digital era for TV. But an industry “insider” had posed the question as to whether or not New Zealand retailers were ready for the new television technology, let alone its potential for interactivity. The implication was that the unnamed insider believed they were not.

In the same issue we read that Sanyo was winding down and closing its New Zealand branch following a loss of more than a million Dollars in the previous financial year. Rumours were rife at the time that a deal was being done with The Warehouse and of course, sometimes rumours are well founded!

Slugging it out, then as now – With Mother’s Day approaching, the usual suspects were slugging it out. Breville GM Brett O’Neill is to be found saying he believed that year’s Mother’s Day would be the most exciting so far for Breville and the industry. Breville had high profile Australian chef and television presenter Gabriel Gate on board to promote its revolutionary new appliance, the Express Cooker.

April 1995’s movers & shakers included John Barr, Phil Kearney and Norm Scott.

Sunbeam, Breville and Philips were all targeting Mother’s Day 2000 with varying degrees of insightfulness.
Meet the crew – The year 2000 marked five successful years in New Zealand for Whirlpool. Captain of what was referred to as “the New Zealand crew” was our good friend Calvin Sandford in his role of Manager and his two trusty Account Managers, Alan Dalton and Chris McKee.

Calvin believed that "The key to success is integrity and trust and our three-cornered team works together very closely to achieve targets the company has set." He added, "Chris has a great relationship with trade in the South Island and Alan brings an extensive background in retail to Whirlpool."

These days Calvin is a successful business coach (see www.growyourbusinessprofit.com) and is always looking for new clients. These days Chris is Director of Jalmac Sales & Marketing in Christchurch, the exclusive NZ sales agent for Sharp and Ariston as well as the distributor for MAP Coffee, Contour Cameras, ACQUA Appliances and BFM Barbeques.

Today Alan Dalton of course is General Manager at Electrolux Small Appliances with its floorcare focus. More recently the brand has also been shaking the tree in small appliances.

It's in the bag(less) – Neatly segueing now into floorcare, it was 15 years ago when Electrolux first entered our bagless vac market, firstly with an upright and then with a Swedish-made cylinder version, Cyclone Power, which featured a lifetime re-useable filter.

John Mahar was Divisional Manager for Electrolux Household Appliances in 2000 and he was enthusiastic: "Frankly, retailers now have a great either/or option to offer their customers purchasing in the bagless category. This new vacuum offers exceptional value when considering the style, features, performance and the overall package on offer."

John still has a relationship with the industry as GM Sales & Marketing of Maxim Housewares, based in Tullamarine Victoria, across the ditch.

Akai bounces back, again – Akai is a well-known brand in audio visual products. Founded in Tokyo in 1929, it was made popular as a flagship range for the old Pye company before being dumped in favour of home-branded products when Philips took Pye over.

It then made a comeback as Akai NZ, set up by Akai Australia in 1988 with Pat Maroulis, ex Philips, recruited in 1989 to head up the sales operation. Pat left in 1996 before the parent company pulled it out of New Zealand a couple of years later.

Against that background, back again it bounced and in the April 2000 issue of Wares, we read, perhaps with surprise that Uniden New Zealand had been appointed New Zealand Distributors.

“We are not trying to reinvent the wheel, so to speak,” said Gerrard Merrick, Uniden GM at the time. “It is our goal to rebuild the brand within New Zealand. Based on quality, affordability and reliability, we foresee huge opportunities for Akai within the marketplace.”

The plan was to relaunch the brand with complete, packaged home entertainment centres, so customers could purchase a complete entry level system “without having to know the ins and outs of home theatre.”

I chatted with Gerrard recently and a bit ruefully, he told me they never actually released any Akai AV products and the agency lapsed. Around three years ago, Tony Kingston of The Warehouse Group was instrumental in setting up an exclusive arrangement and today the group markets a selection of Akai AV products.

Uniden had plans to bring Akai back into the NZ market in April 2000. “We are not trying to reinvent the wheel, so to speak,” said Gerrard Merrick, GM at the time and today MD of Switch EV Global.

Millennial movers & shakers – Kim Naylor was one key mover & shaker 15 years ago, having joined Fujitsu General as New Zealand Manager. The company intended to expand its share of the home air conditioning market with its largest ever advertising campaign on radio and TV, in magazines and at point of sale.

Kim stated: “As brand leader, we see total market expansion as part of our activity and to this end we will be giving substantial support to dealers and retailers throughout the year.” He became a Director and Managing Director of the New Zealand operation in 2006 and retired at the end of last month (see our February 2015 issue).

An international mover & shaker was snapped visiting our shores. Frans van Houten, Philips’ Singapore-based Managing
Dust and debris toward the $99.95 Westinghouse SweepEZE, its sensors detecting said debris and automatically initiating a timed vacuum cycle.

Paul Holdsworth was GM at Salton at the time and remembers the product well: “It didn’t take off, here or in Australia, and was pulled after about 12 months,” he says candidly. Paul is now Sales Manager at Speed Queen laundry systems out of the US.

Holding out for Mother’s Day? – Mother’s Day madness happened again with several suppliers looking to the annual spend fest to bolster their order books. Groupe Seb was offering a $250 (worth $355 today) cashback on its Krups Orchestro coffee makers and $100 ($142) on Moulinex Odaco food processors.

A bonus set of Tefal bathroom scales went with selected Tefal irons and steam generators. Homedics pushed its massage cushion while HWI majored on Breville with a bit of Kambrook and Philips on the side, including a free dressing gown with the Philips Moi Ladyshave.

Contrast ratio wars – The flat panel TV debate continued in a feature story around the relative merits of Plasma and LCD. Morning Star was the New Zealand authorised distributor for the AOC brand (“AOC” was originally “Admiral out of Chicago”), and was advertising plasmas which boasted 60,000 hours of panel life, 3000:1 contrast ratio and multiple inputs for home theatre and computing.

AOC’s range included 42-inch plasma at $3,995 ($5,700 in today’s money), a 50-inch at $7,995 ($11,400) and a soon-to-arrive 42-inch at $4,995 ($7,100).

In the LCD camp was LG who urged us to “Discover the future of LCD”. Here, contrast ratio ranged from 500:1 to 1200:1. Five models were on offer, from 23-inch to 42-inch but no RRPs were published.

Contrast ratio is described by cnet.com as “the most important, least understood and endlessly aggrendized metric of a television’s performance”. It is the difference between the brightest image a TV can create and the darkest or in another way, white ÷ black = contrast ratio. With shades of the old audio power output wrangles, there is no official standard as to how to measure contrast ratio.

Morning Star Trading was founded in 1996 by Austin Chen and Wilbur Tarn and went into receivership in 2010. Austin is now a Product Manager at JC Matthew NZ. AOC’s local website shows monitors as the company’s main current activity.
Ultra Silencer Pet
Solves the allergy problems. Fur sure.

Hard floor nozzle
The AeroPro hard floor nozzle features soft bristles, and is suitable on all hard floor surfaces.

Silent Air Technology
Aerodynamic design from nozzle to exhaust, floating motor, rubber seals and absorbent foam.

Excellent Dust Pick up and Filtration
Rated 5-star by independent test institute SLG in Germany.

AeroPro 3 in 1 Accessory Tool
Features a dusting brush, crevice nozzle and upholstery tool, all in one.

AeroPro Upholstery Turbo Nozzle
Air driven animal turbo brush.

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Your personal digital assistant — A decade ago, Palm was announcing the New Zealand release of its Treo 650 smartphone, building on the award-winning Treo 600 design by upping the ante with a host of new features. Treo 600 was one of the very first smartphones – then called Personal Digital Assistants or PDAs – and Palm itself would wend its way through various forms, acquisitions, IPOs etc until its apparent demise as a brand making products in 2011.

Bond & Bond goes blue — Under the new ownership of Gresham Equity, Bond & Bond was in for change. Nick Lowe, Chief Executive of NLG at the time, told Wares that, whilst the Noel Leeming chain was “pretty much where we need to be”, Bond & Bond’s positioning was still being redefined.

The Bond identity was having a makeover to a lighter and brighter look and there would be a move away from shopping strips to malls and main streets. Queen Street in Auckland and Moorhouse Avenue in Christchurch were to be the first to debut the new, blue colour scheme.

Nick Lowe was obviously delighted that the Noel Leeming stores would soon be selling Fisher & Paykel and Whirlpool appliances as part of the whitegoods manufacturer’s EDA. “Now Noel Leeming Group customers would have access to the broadest range of appliances and electronics in New Zealand,” he said.

Other big NLG news was its customers getting Fly Buys points on F&P products at Noel Leeming. Of course, Bond & Bond remained multi-brand forwarehouse, which caused a bit of fuss at the time, because it was said NLG customers had choices not available elsewhere.

Wrecked it Ralph! — Ralph Roberts is certainly no stranger to Wares or indeed the wider appliance industry but his shop featured in the April 2005 issue for the wrong reason – it had been attacked by arsonists. The warehouse and service department were destroyed in the fire as was two thirds of the total stock.

Other Takapuna retailers and fellow appliance dealers rallied around with support and Ralph was busy drawing up plans to restore the business. A year or so later he would close down, following a second arson.

April 2005’s JVC Retailer of the Month was Mercury Bay 100%YES. Ian and Enid Hogg had purchased the Whitianga business just a year previously and a huge effort, including 17-hour days, had gone into converting a tired old shop which was overpopulated with giftware, into a vibrant, successful appliance outlet. The Hogs are still owner-operators, trading as 100% Whitianga Appliances.

Mega movers & shakers — There were no less than 11 movers & shakers in Wares this month 10 years ago and, as usual, I set out on an intrepid journey to track them down.

Peter Bonisch had joined Fujifilm as Electronic Imaging Market Manager. Caz Arthur was the new Southern Region Account Manager for Nilfisk-Advance and Salton Australia had announced that Paul Hill would be the new CEO.

Peter is still at Fujifilm as National Sales & Marketing Manager, Caz is an Account Manager with BSH Bosch Home Appliances based in Melbourne, but Paul could not be located following the Salton takeover by Spectrum Brands.

A decade ago, Alan Dalton had just made the move from Whirlpool to Electrolux in the role of Strategic Business Manager. Now he’s GM of Electrolux Small Appliances.

HWI had Jon Gibson joining as a Key Account Manager with Natalie Stevens being promoted to Customer Services Team Leader. Today Jon and his wife Anita, have their own electrical contracting business in South Auckland, called Liven Up Electrical and Natalie is an HR Advisor at Holmes Consulting Group.

Back in 2005 BenQ opened a Kiwi office with Rick Jansen at the helm as Country Manager, Dale Summerfield was appointed Sales & Training Representative at Salton NZ, Panasonic recruited Bryce McIntyre as South Island Account Manager and Michael Smith became National Marketing Manager at Brother.

Rick is now Northern Regional Manager at IT wholesale distributor Dove Electronics, Dale is a Territory Manager at Spectrum Brands, Bryce works with ANZ Bank in Blenheim as an Agri Business Manager and Mike works in Government communications and PR on his own account, as well as being a Director of Travel & Accident International.

10 years ago, Radiola was moving and shaking too, with Jean-Philippe Diel in the role of Head of Marketing Operations as the then Samsung distributor stepped up the promotion of the brand for which it was the exclusive importer and distributor. Jean-Philippe’s first two sponsorship deals were the Black Caps and champion rowers, the Evers Swindell twins. By 2009, Jean-Philippe would found the Auckland-based boutique marketing agency The Ripple Hub.

Rolling forward briefly to the next edition of “Rolling back the Years” in our June issue you can expect to see how Graeme Wingate’s business was progressing under the Betta Electrical banner, we’ll find out who came out on top at the inaugural industry Apex Awards and track down another raft of movers & shakers from back in the day. Oh yes, we’ll see what the All Blacks were up to as well... 🏉