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When Johnny met Kevin

EXCLUSIVE: What happens if someone who designs expensive kitchens meets someone who thinks kitchens aren't worth investing in? Find out on page 14



A place in the Sun for Bathstore?

Dolphin parent company named as new sale rumours emerge

Sun European Partners, the private equity firm that owns the Homeform group, is the latest name rumoured to be eyeing up Bathstore.

The Homeform Group is the parent of Dolphin, Sharps and Moben and national press reports have said Sun European wants to add to its UK retail portfolio. Other private equity firms are also said to be in talks with Catalyst Corporate Finance, the broker appointed by Bathstore owner Wolseley.

Bathstore founder Patrick Riley has also been rumoured to be interested in reacquiring the business, however some reports now suggest he has backed off. Travis Perkins, owner of Wickes, was also part of the speculation but it has categorically denied this to kbbreview.

Wolseley refused to comment on what it calls 'speculation'.

Based in Watford, Bathstore claims to be the UK's largest bathroom retailer with more than 160

stores across the UK.

Founded in 1990 by Riley and Nico De Beer, Bathstore was bought by Wolseley back in 1993 and now employs more than 1,000 people across its store network. The company says it has pioneered a rigorous training regime for its in-store bathroom sales staff, focused on product knowledge and customer service.

Specialist

Bathstore was nominated and short-listed for the Retail Week Awards as the Best Specialist Retailer in 2007 and 2008. It boasts a nationwide distribution network and deliveries are handled by its own staff and vehicles.

A full in-store design, supply and fit service is provided to customers as well as a range of finance offers. Installation is carried out by Tradesmen Solutions, a separate arm of the business.

Wolseley, which also owns BCG,



Plumb Center and other building-related brands, released figures last month for the first quarter of its financial year ending October 31. Revenue increased by 2% to £3.5

billion and trading profit of £159m was £45m higher than last year.

In the UK, however, revenue decreased by 4% but trading profit was up by 30% to £30m.

Chief executive Ian Meakins said: "Most markets continued to grow in the first quarter and the group's trading performance was slightly ahead of management expectations. While demand has improved in most countries, pricing competition has remained intense. We continue to focus on improving customer service, growing market share, driving efficiencies and generating cash flow.

The company recently identified 19 of its businesses that could be sold unless their finances showed marked improvements. It did not release the names of these businesses, but Bathstore is clearly one and it has already sold tool and equipment hire outfit Brandon Hire for £43m. **kbb**

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Bulthaup, 37 Wigmore Street



Bulthaup claims to be the original Wigmore Street resident. The showroom was bright and warm despite the dreary winter weather and Susan was equally welcoming.

SERVICE: 5 SHOWROOM: 4 TOTAL: 9/10

Susan gave a master class in understated salesmanship

I admired a stainless steel worktop with integrated sink. "This is part of our working kitchen," she explained. "We use it every day." She then showed me a coffee station concealed in a roll-front unit and a deep drawer filled with groceries. "If this was your kitchen, we would design it to suit you. It will look good, but it has to function too."

Susan went on to explain that Bulthaup employed all its fitters: "Our teams don't rush, so they can go and finish a job for somebody else. We only consider the kitchen to be complete when it is finished to our high standard." She then showed me a ring binder I would get on completion, with all the plans, appliance manuals and numbers I'd need.

Nicholas Anthony, 44-48 Wigmore Street



Adele called "hello" as I entered this sizeable showroom and left me to wander round.

The many displays - including white and black gloss and a variety of wood finishes - were

SERVICE: 3 SHOWROOM: 4 TOTAL: 8/10

The service was as crisp and glossy as the showroom

sparkling and enhanced by a good selection of props, including attractively packaged groceries. Music and warm lighting added to the ambience.

I sought out Adele to ask about a handle-less black gloss kitchen with a four-metre-long island unit with woodblock worktop, part of the Primeline range. "If you like that, we are planning to sell the display prior to refurbishment," she said and disappeared to print a full specification. She would sell me the lot, including Gaggenau appliances, for £21,846, reduced from £37,185.

"Alternatively, bring in your plans and we can work out something else. The kitchens are all made in Germany and there is plenty of choice."

Wigmore Kitchens, 118 Wigmore Street



At the top of the street, the compact Wigmore Kitchens is home to Poggenpohl.

In the window, a glossy all-white kitchen featured an island unit topped with a white Corian worktop with integrated sink. This was finished off with the sculptural Triflow tap by Zaha Hadid. In the other window, a sleek wood kitchen had a creamy composite top.

I described my rather awkward-shaped room to Neil, who in turn asked several questions regarding the style of property and my budget, giving him a good idea of what I was hoping to achieve. "It's not a problem. We like a challenge," he said. "We can design and fit the kitchen, but we also work with a small construction company if there is any extra work you need doing. Although you would pay them separately, we would project manage to ensure everything runs smoothly."

Neil asked me to start compiling a scrapbook of images. "Not just kitchens, but colours and details you particularly like too, it all helps us to build a picture. Then we will sit down for a couple of hours to discuss your requirements. After that, give us a week or so, and we will come up with some ideas."

SERVICE: 4 SHOWROOM: 3

TOTAL: 7/10

Relaxed, professional service

WINNER'S PROFILE

Bulthaup

Founded in Germany in 1949 by Martin Bulthaup, the company opened the Wigmore Street showroom on a prime corner site in 1987.

It is now recognised as one of the most successful retail outlets for Bulthaup in the world. A second showroom was subsequently opened in London's fashionable Clerkenwell.

From the start, the kitchen designs were based on form and function with all unnecessary decoration avoided. This

pared-down approach has resulted in streamlined kitchens designed for people who like to cook. The company prides itself on its attention to detail in terms of design, plus enviable customer service and installation.

Susan Last says: "We're control freaks really. We like the job to be done properly, so we employ our own fitters to meet our exacting standards. We find that once customers deal with us they tend to return."



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