INNOVATORS: DAVID PARKES

David Parkes says he came into the textile industry by chance in the 1960s, but he took the opportunity to build up skills in sales, product development and marketing and brought them to the emerging outdoor industry at just the right time, providing a bridge between textile developers and finished product brands, as he still does to this day.

Bridge builder

In a strange way, the founder of New Jersey-based textile resource and garment production specialist Concept III, David Parkes, owes the opportunity he carved out for himself in the outdoor apparel industry to whooping cough. He suffered a bout of whooping cough during his final year in school and the illness had enough of an effect on his performance in the exams at the end of that year to cost him a university education. He had been offered a place, subject to success in the exams, at the University of Birmingham in his native UK, but when that fell through he chose to find a job and "get on with life" rather than wait a year and try again.

A North American textile firm, Borg Fabrics, which is best remembered today for its high-pile fake fur materials, was about to open an office in the UK and it was here, towards the end of 1962, that David Parkes went to work. He had applied to a number of companies and chose to accept an offer from Borg partly because its new offices were close to his home in Kent. "The company grew quickly," he explains, "and in the space of ten years, I ended up with the responsibility for developing the company's product lines and for merchandising them."

Tap on the shoulder

His work brought him to the attention of the company president during a visit to Europe and this led to "a tap on the shoulder" and an invitation to go to company headquarters in the US to work on a two-year assignment. Two years became four and, as the assignment was coming to its conclusion in 1976, a famous name in performance textiles, Malden Mills (later Polartec), asked him to go and work there. The temporary move to the US that he had made with his wife and young family became a permanent one and, in this new role, he began to focus enthusiastically on the emerging outdoor textiles market; David Parkes had found his home in more ways than one.



David Parkes, founder of Concept III.

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A sophisticated colour-testing machine at Taiwanese manufacturer Kingwhale.

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Emerging outdoor market

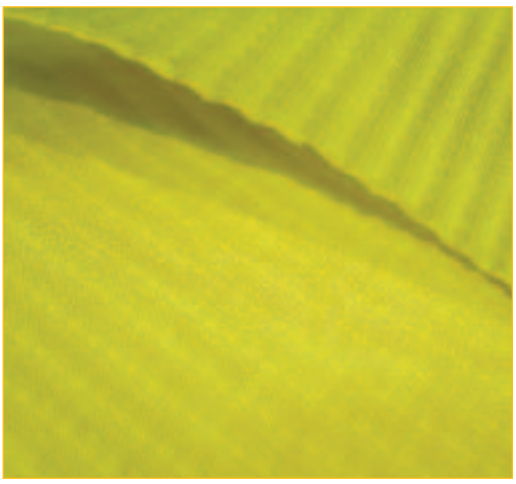
"There has always been a large outdoor community in the US and there are lots of aspects of the lifestyle here that lend themselves to the outdoors," he explains. "But it was only really in the mid-1970s that brands such as Patagonia, The North Face, Sierra Designs, Slalom, Aspen and so on began to emerge. They knew about climbing and the outdoors, but Yvon Chouinard [the founder of Patagonia] would be the first to admit that he didn't know much about textiles when he started out. He just loved climbing and the first products he focused on were crampons, because he wanted to get even better at climbing. This meant there was a lot of opportunity for companies that did have deep knowledge of textiles."

Mr Parkes was part of the team at Malden Mills that developed and brought to market the first fleece fabric in 1982, a contribution he is proud of. However, a year later he left Malden Mills and set up Concept III. He says the new specialist outdoor textiles industry provided him with a perfect opportunity to become more entrepreneurial. The expensive prospect of putting his children through college in the US was a pragmatic part of his motivation, he recalls. Mixed in with this was a determination to make the permanent move to the US work for his family and himself. "We had taken the decision to stay in the US," he recalls, "and that meant leaving behind family, friends, a career and everything. Naturally, I wanted to make a success of the transition, to make a success of a new career and a new life, to show that we had made the right call."

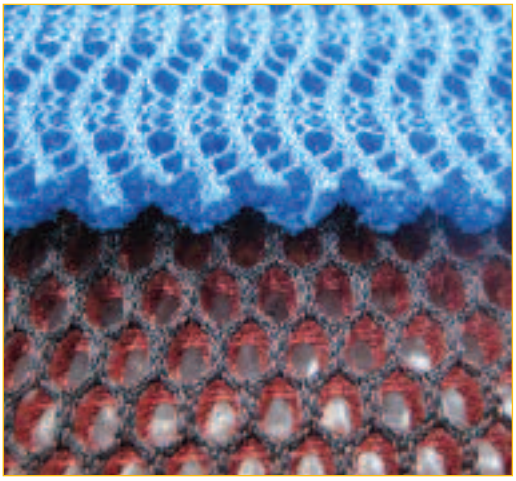
The pull of the industry itself and the appeal of being able to help outdoor brands raise their profile and grow their businesses through textile innovation was, arguably, the most important factor of all. "It's an industry that has grown year after year," he says, "and it's now widely known that the outdoor industry is where much of textile innovation is going to come from. But it really was a new market in the 1970s and 1980s. It's true that I had fallen into the textile business almost by chance, but I had been able to build up a lot of knowledge, as well as develop skills in sales and marketing. I had studied marketing in the 1960s, when it was very new, too, so I had that academic background. I would say now that this helped

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A wide array of performance fabrics is available from Concept III.

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me understand the advantages of adding value and understand that innovation and added value can drive a product, drive a business and drive a market. I had worked in sales too and knew how to turn an opportunity into an advantage. I certainly had no fear of presenting new ideas and products to customers. Borg Fabrics brought out new products every year, and I don't just mean tweaks to something that had gone before; I mean genuine innovation, brand new textiles, which it then drove forward through good marketing. That was my background and that's what I was able to bring to the emerging outdoor market."

One-stop shop

At the start, Concept III was a one-stop shop aiming to meet just about all the textile needs of the outdoor industry, bringing to the industry new fabric developments that it felt could work well in that market. It has continued to be a bridge between innovators upstream in the textile supply chain and finished product brands that are constantly on the look-out for new ways to incorporate technical textile development into the garments they offer consumers.

The seeds of this were sown with that first Malden Mills fleece fabric, which Mr Parkes describes as being the catalyst that allowed the outdoor clothing industry to set itself apart. "It allowed outdoor apparel to differentiate itself from streetwear," he says. "When we brought it out, the focus was all on ski and outdoor. We didn't give any thought to the possibility that one day people might wear it in the city or on the high street."

Flow of ideas

His work over more than three decades at Concept III has allowed him to have a hand in a number of significant developments, with other ideas still in the pipeline. These include efforts to help insulation and fabric developer PrimaLoft expand its business into Europe, although in a sales rather than a product-development capacity. Helping Taiwanese textile developer Kingwhale bring its ideas for new fabrics and for lowering a garment's environmental impact into baselayer, fleece and laminate products for the outdoor market is also among the Concept III highlights, as is its work with Swedish odour-control technology provider Polygiene. Mr Parkes says these projects have been "undoubted success stories".

More recently, he has been greatly enthused by a project with PIL Membranes, a company based in the east of England that is using renewable energy to develop new, highly

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breathable membrane systems for softshells, other garments, footwear and accessories; it's a company with what Mr Parkes describes as "a fantastic environmental story". The same applies to Coolcore, a New Hampshire-based company that is using a particular combination of blended yarns and a special textile construction to offer what it claims, with the backing of testing and research body the Hohenstein Institute, is the first knit fabric that provides chemical-free cooling.

David Parkes admits that there are other things, outside work, that he would like to find more time for now. And he is happy to have placed the day-to-day running of Concept III in the hands of his son, Chris. "I suppose what keeps bringing me into work is the opportunity to develop new and interesting products that can make a difference to our industry," he explains. "I also like working with old friends on new ideas that can help keep this industry vital."

He wants the flow of new ideas to continue and spends time talking to young people in schools and universities about their future. He is fond of telling them that, if they have an interest in clothes, they should go to university, complete a degree in textile engineering or textile design and then start work. "There are lots of jobs these young people can do in our industry in all parts of the world," he says, "and if they have an idea of their own that has merit and that could make a difference, I tell them never to give up on it, never to stop knocking down doors until they find the support they need."

This can take time. He himself has still to find a way to bring to the outdoor market an idea he first conceived in 1986. Conversations with mills and with chemical companies are ongoing, he says, although he prefers to keep the details close to his chest for now. He is not giving up.



Concept III booth at Outdoor Retailer: always a popular meeting place.
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