

Business  
Post

# Magazine

July 19 2020

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## Empire state of mind

How Robert Scanlan is taking Tipperary Crystal global





Robert Scanlan: 'Experience is making mistakes. Nothing beats making the mistakes yourself'  
MARC O'SULLIVAN

# Taking Tipperary to the world

It's the biggest importer of Irish-themed souvenirs in the country and the owner of Tipperary Crystal. Now family business Allied Imports has branched into jewellery and homeware, and has set its sights on global expansion, writes **Elaine Prendeville**

A door opens onto a brown box city. Here's 50,000 square feet of warehouse, including 5,000 pallet bays, with towers of inventory extending up to the rafters. Inside those brown boxes are pieces of jewellery, candles, handbags, tableware and crystal too, a cornucopia of stock best described as "affordable luxury", destined for hundreds of retailers. This facility is also home to an army of Irish-themed souvenirs, among them the shillelagh-waving figurines that have formed a major part of the Scanlan family business for decades now.

This is Tipperary Crystal town, and managing director Robert Scanlan is the man wearing the mayoral chains.

We're in the Dublin suburb of Ballycoolin, and at Allied House, in what is an especially sleepy business park this Friday in July. Allied House is headquarters to Allied Imports, the company that acquired and duly transformed the Tipperary Crystal brand in 2011, and whose footprint has been on Irish importation for 47 years. Allied Imports was founded by Robert's father, James Scanlan, in 1973, and it remains a family enterprise, with Robert and his brothers Stephen and Alan all involved, and Robert's wife, Karen, acting as creative director. Where other fathers chatted about football over Friday night dinner, Robert says, "my Dad would be chatting about his latest trip to the Far East, and what he found there".

Allied Imports is the most significant importer of 'impulse' souvenir purchases in the Irish market, holding a steady 25 per cent market share. It is in the last decade, however, that the business has set its sights on global distribution, with Robert Scanlan the dapper doyen of a rapidly expanding empire. "I look to LVMH," he says, "where you have a family of brands, each expertly developed, sitting under one umbrella group, with an incredible ecosystem supporting it all, and the firepower to buy a brand like Tiffany without breaking a sweat. ➡



**1988**  
founded in Carrick On Suir, Co  
Tipperary, making lead crystal

**1996**  
purchased by Paul Coulson and  
Niall Wall

**1999**  
Louise Kennedy Crystal Collection is  
launched

**2003**  
purchased by Ryanair mogul  
Tony Ryan

**2007**  
Graham Knuttel ceramic collection  
is launched

**2011**  
purchased by Allied Imports  
Group

**2015**  
Rose of Tralee lead sponsorship  
is launched

**2017**  
extension of the Tipperary Crystal  
brand into jewellery, candles, Christ-

mas decorations and tabletop  
ware

**2018**  
international brand Bailey &  
Brooke is established; it is now  
available in 14 countries

**2019**  
launch of the TC handbag and  
TC fashion brand. Birdy and  
Eoin O'Connor Ceramics ranges  
are also launched

**2020**  
reimagined, fully e-commerce  
website is launched, featuring  
jewellery, crystal homeware  
and gifts for worldwide  
shipping

## Leading by example: Robert Scanlan's tips for success

1. Think strategically
2. Be pro-active
3. Own any problems,  
and meet them  
before they meet you
4. Think win-win,  
for you, your  
employees, your  
partners in business
5. Identify your  
weaknesses and  
bring in strong  
people to help you

I want to create the same for our business, albeit in the more affordable brand space."

Tipperary Crystal is the name guiding that trajectory, Scanlan explains, and its constituent elements are a far cry from the ailing crystal maker purchased in 2011. Today, Tipperary Crystal's offering is 5 per cent crystal and 95 per cent the rest, comprising jewellery, tabletop ware, Christmas decorations, handbags, and, to be frank, anything else the in-house creative team can dream up and that, with a reasonable run at the market, turns out to "have legs", as Scanlan puts it.

Tipperary Crystal enjoys robust relationships with retailers in Ireland such as the Kilkenny Group and Blarney Woollen Mills, and with 200 retail outlets across the UK, including a particularly strong presence in Scotland, where Allied Imports maintains an office. Bailey & Brooke, the Tipperary Crystal offshoot, meanwhile, is selling with gusto in places like Panama, Scanlan explains. Then you have the other brands and partnerships: socks sold under the label Funky Feet, ceramics created with Irish artist Eoin O'Connor, and a top-performing, very charming homeware line named Tipperary Birdy. If that seems like a lot to compute, you're beginning to get the picture.

"Our advantage as a business," Scanlan says, "is that we've got the supply chain up and running, the logistics well oiled, we're well financed and the distribution network is there. And so we can constantly innovate. We bring in new products, licences and brands into that ecosystem, funnel them through and quickly find out what our customers are receptive to. It's a simple strategy, and it works. We are regularly exporting to a dozen countries around the world, with a lot more on the near horizon."

Scanlan speaks with the enthusiasm of an early stage entrepreneur, in a cadence that belies his lifetime involvement in the trade. "When Dad started the business," he says, "he bought this old, decrepit ice storage building on Hanover Quay. It was pretty rough down there at the time. I used to go in as a kid, aged 12, and work in 'containers' – a container would come in and you'd put all the boxes into storage. It was tough going, but I'd be begging him to let me come to work."

The Scanlan family home was Bray, which felt "close to town back then," Robert says, seeing as "the traffic along the Rock Road was nothing like it is today". Over those Friday evening family dinners, he recalls, his parents would recount working trips staying at hotels like Raffles and the Peninsula in Shanghai, instilling a taste for adventure, and an enduring passion for the orient, in their children. Indeed, no sooner had Robert qualified from a marketing course at DIT, than he set off to pursue a postgrad at a Chinese university in Hong Kong, where the youngest Scanlan son, Alan, now lives. What came next was decidedly less to-plan. "Dad had a heart attack," Robert explains, "so it was a case of 'can you come home, please, and help out?' I was 23, maybe 24, when I returned."

While his father rallied, Scanlan admits to taking some time to adjust to life on the quays. "I absolutely hated it at first," he smiles. "Hated it! I'd have rip-roaring rows with my dad, because I couldn't hack the whole fax machines culture. I mean, he actually had a telex . . . imagine, a telex!"



Robert Scanlan with his wife  
Karen: 'She's a super cook,  
meaning we tend to eat very  
well at home'  
MARC O'SULLIVAN



### New concepts

Old-fangled gadgets notwithstanding, it was the "micro-management" that stuck in the young Robert Scanlan's craw. "Every aspect of the business was based on tight controls, whereas I was all young, free and easy, though of course I had a lot to learn," he says. "And that's been the interesting thing. My brother Stephen is very like my Dad, in that he is very controlled and very managed in everything he does. That's why he and I have such a great working relationship. I'll devise new concepts and brand extensions, and then he'll parse those ideas through his lens. He says I go out and make the trouble, and then he cleans it up afterwards. I prefer to say I go out and create!"

The business comprised seven people back in those early days on Hanover Quay, including "Mrs Monaghan and Mrs Kelly, the typists". At 28, Robbie became managing director. "And I said, right, it's time to get more professional," he says. "That started with the printing of brochures, something we had never done before, and while we stuck to the tourism products we got better and better at it."

The company acquired a small crop of sympathetic businesses, including a postcard company called Insight, and a figurine maker named Blarney Stone Enterprises. An important shift followed, as the business moved to a B2B model, from importation to retailer direct, with no wholesaler in between. "Then the big step up came in 2011, when we purchased Tipperary Crystal," Scanlan says. "That's when I really found my feet."

Allied Imports now employs 52 people, and has managed to retain them all throughout the Covid-19 crisis. As he guides the Business Post around the company headquarters, those few staff who are required to be on site greet Scanlan with the kind of easy familiarity that can't be contrived. This may in part be a response to the boss's apparent contentment, an impressive attitude given the havoc recent months have wrought on the Irish retail landscape. "I'm great when I'm leading," he says. "I struggle when there's people ahead of me that are maybe clipping my wings, or not coming up with ideas while telling me what's wrong with my ideas . . . that has never worked for me."

This self-awareness may also be linked to Scanlan's bookshelf, and his interest in the field of emotional intelligence. He believes that empathetic listening is a powerful tool in business, and that everyone is capable of raising their emotional IQ. "You can't increase your IQ," he says, "and you can't really change your personality, but your emotional intelligence is something you can practice, adapt and improve. It's about properly listening to what someone is saying, and then replying in a considered way. My wife is very good at it, but I might be biased."

Robert's wife, Karen, is responsible for the creative direction of the Tipperary Crystal collections, and she has spent considerable time developing the jewellery and handbag ranges in particular. "The thing we learned very early on about Tipperary Crystal," Scanlan explains, "is that while it has super brand recognition here in Ireland, you bring the name to a trade show in

Britain or beyond, and they just don't get it. They think you're Waterford Crystal, and when you say you're not, they get confused. That's why creating jewellery and other accessories has actually made perfect sense for us in terms of growth."

Robert and Karen make an exceptionally elegant pair, and, with four kids, theirs is, Robert says, a necessarily active and health-conscious lifestyle. "Karen is incredibly healthy," he says, "and a super cook, meaning we tend to eat very well at home. She likes to run, while I would tend to go to the gym around three times a week. I've been missing that during lockdown."

The couple's 15-year-old son, Bailey, has already contributed to the Tipperary Crystal business, if at a cute remove. "We needed a name for Tipperary Crystal products destined for export markets," Scanlan says. "My son Bailey, who was 11 at the time, had a pal called Brooke, and I thought, what a deadly name: Bailey & Brooke. So we rebranded the collection; it's the same product as Tipperary Crystal, but it goes into a Bailey & Brooke box. My brother Alan brings the brand to the trade shows in the Far East, and from that we supply into Australia, New Zealand, Romania . . . we have three customers in Italy, and we bring it directly into Britain ourselves. Bailey & Brooke is not a huge business yet, but it's very much growing."

As we walk, more cases full of good-looking, Scandanavian-inspired jewellery glisten under the Tipperary Crystal banner, with Karen's good taste making a clear impression on the TC handbag range. This will be a good Christmas for Tipperary Crystal, the MD says, and will likely to net them 60-70 per cent of their annual sales. As for 2021? That's about bigger, faster, better, and more.

"We have three strands to the business," Scanlan says. "Our own brands, the brands we work with, and then the acquisitions we intend to make. It's that latter part that I'm now very keen to focus on."

He mentions having progressed discussions to purchase Links of London last year, a negotiation that ultimately did not work for Allied Imports. "That gives you a sense of the scale of our ambition," he says. "We think there's a very strong opportunity around a more premium offering in Britain, and similarly in Ireland if we can talk to people who are interested in working with us, with a view to being acquired, or forging a joint venture. We're active in that space. We're talking to people, and we're also interested in people coming and talking to us."

The family business that begets an ever-broadened family of brands is the mission statement. But Scanlan isn't interested in becoming a busy fool. "I see people in the papers, with their €100 million turnover businesses," he says, "and I'm looking at them, thinking 'You made €1.2 million on that €100 million, sure there's no point, you could lose 10 million on a currency fluctuation overnight.' We want to get to about 30 million in turnover on our current margins. That's a sensible business in my book."

Widening the reach will involve making mistakes, Scanlan says, as our conversation draws to a close. "Experience is making mistakes," he says. "Someone can tell you what might happen all they like, but nothing beats making the mistakes yourself. I've made them, I'll make more, and that's okay. Sure isn't that all part of the fun?" ■

“I'm great when I'm leading. I struggle when there are people ahead of me who may be clipping my wings, or not coming up with ideas while telling me what's wrong with my ideas . . . that has never worked for me