

# Reaching New Heights

Cousins Jonathan, Brett and Ross Warburton transform their family business into Britain's biggest bakery.

by Ryan Atkinson

Brett Warburton



Over the past 135 years, the Warburton family advanced its business, growing it from a small wing of a grocery store in Bolton, England, into a successful wholesale bakery. But the fifth generation of Warburtons, the current leaders of the business, has made quite a mark of its own.

Three cousins — Jonathan, Brett and Ross Warburton — transformed Warburtons from a mid-sized Lancashire business into the second largest grocery brand in the UK, trailing only Coca-Cola, according to *The Grocer* magazine. For their leadership in guiding that dynamic growth and the construction of high-tech bakeries, they are being inducted into the American Society of Baking (ASB)'s Baking Hall of Fame.

It was in 1870 that Thomas Warburton and his wife, Ellen, set up a small grocery shop in Bolton. Six years later, Mrs. Warburton started baking to fight off a slump in the grocery market. Her first batch — four loaves of bread and six cakes — sold out in less than an hour. Within two weeks, the couple renamed the shop Warburtons the Bakers.

The business began to grow, seeing its fastest expansion in the 1950s, when it acquired several northern England bakeries. That expansion continued into the 1970s, when the fourth generation of Warburtons welcomed royalty to the company's centenary anniversary.

When the trio of fifth-generation bakers took over after their fathers' retirement in 1991, Warburtons was already a successful, well-known brand, having become the largest bakery in the north of England in the mid-1970s. By investing more than \$580 million over the past decade in building new bakeries, refurbishing others and upgrading distribution, this generation of leadership has pushed Warburtons to new heights. Those numbers include seven bakeries now operating with state-of-the-art technology, a bakery at Bristol that can produce 1.5 million products per

week and a new bakery at Bolton that claims to be the most modern in Europe.

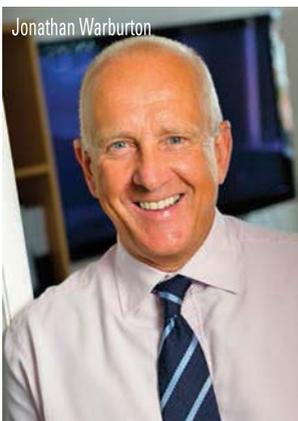
As a whole, Warburtons employs more than 4,500 people and boasts a voluntary turnover rate of 5.16% per year. The company doubled in size during the past decade and jumped from third to first as the most popular bread in the UK, according to London's *The Times*. Warburtons is the first bakery in the UK to move into the baked snack category and the only company in the country to produce baked pita chips.

Jonathan Warburton has served as CEO since 2001, overseeing the company's transition into a national brand. He gained sales and marketing experience with Unilever before joining Warburtons at age 23. He oversaw the development of Warburtons' iconic ad campaign featuring family members. He has held the role of joint managing director and commercial director, laying out the three cousins' strategy to take the business from a regional brand to one that is truly national.

Brett Warburton began his professional career with RHM Foods after graduating from the University of Kent. He initially joined the family business as marketing manager for Warburtons before becoming factory manager at the Bakewell bakery. He later attended Harvard Business School before returning to Warburtons, where he eventually became executive director.

Ross Warburton began as an investment manager for Invesco after graduating from Oriel College at the University of Oxford. He joined Warburtons in 1985 and became executive chairman in 1991, serving in that role until stepping down in 2001. He continues to play an active role in the business while also having served as president of the Food and Drink Federation, where he promoted the interests of the UK food manufacturing industry in conjunction with government and other agencies. ●

Jonathan Warburton



Ross Warburton

