

'TIME TO BRING THE FISH HOME'

Valley Foods managing director Andrew Clackett has submitted plans to add a fish-processing plant, as he explained to **Emily Moore**

AS he emerges from a year in which his business was 'turned on its head', you could be forgiven for thinking that Andrew Clackett was looking forward to sitting back and taking things slightly more easily for the next few months.

The reality, though, could not be more different.

Despite being able to count on one hand the number of days off he has had since the pandemic hit, the managing director of Valley Foods has already returned to what he calls The Fish Project – an initiative first conceived in 2019.

'While Covid forced us to put this project on hold, we have now submitted plans to install a fish-processing plant at our premises, which would enable us to supply fresh local fish and shellfish to retailers, restaurants and individuals,' he said.

And while the project was conceived before the combined factors of Covid and Brexit propelled the Island's fishing industry into the spotlight, its timing could not be more relevant.

'The fishing industry has been hugely affected by recent events and, as a result of the changes enforced upon them, local fishers have realised the tremendous potential that working with Island hospitality businesses and retailers offers,' Andrew said. 'As a proud Genuine Jersey member, and a food wholesaler with a 40-year trading history, we want to help to make this happen.'

'Having spoken to Don Thompson, the president of the Jersey Fishermen's Association, and other key stakeholders, I understand that talks are taking place to establish a unit somewhere near the Harbour where the fishermen can drop their catch and receive payment. We would then like to purchase the fish from that unit, put it through our processing facilities and distribute it accordingly.'

It is a process for which the company is already prepared, as the butchery team offers a similar service for meat products.

'We added the purpose-built butchery to our site in 2010 and, since then, we have supplied fresh meat to both commercial customers and individuals,' Andrew explained. 'Two years later, we bought Trinity Fine Foods and built a high-spec production kitchen which enables us to bring in whole hams and turkeys and slice and package them for delivery to a number of cafés, independent retailers and householders.'

'The theory for the fish products would be the same, as our team – many of whom are former chefs or catering professionals – would cook and prepare items such as lobsters, pick the crabs and organise

the distribution.'

As well as supporting the fishing industry, such a move would, said Mr Clackett, meet the evolving needs of restaurateurs and hoteliers.

'All the hotel groups, pub chains and nursing homes who we work with are looking for a one-stop shop when it comes to their suppliers,' he said. 'That is where the market is moving to and we are committed to supporting the local market.'

'Adding fresh local fish to our product range is a natural extension of the work we have been doing for more than a decade and is an opportunity which we identified many years ago, and had been doing on a small scale up until 2019, but the infrastructure wasn't there to support a larger-scale operation.'

'We already have a kitchen on site and have facilities where we could start setting up a fish-processing plant but we would prefer to do this within a new purpose-built space.'

The kitchen plays a key role in Mr Clackett's vision for Valley Foods' fish project, as he also sees the company returning to a venture first undertaken in 2016.

'At that point, we were working with a scallop diver who brought us his catch and we used his beautiful fresh scallops, together with potatoes from Homefield, wine from La Mare and butter and cream from Jersey Dairy, to create our Coquilles St Catherine,' he said. 'We also teamed up with local chefs to create a range of signature ready meals but this offer came just before the market was really looking for such items. Now, I see huge potential to resurrect this idea – and use the "off-cuts" from the prepared fish – to create a range of stocks, soups and ready meals for both householders and commercial customers.'

And Mr Clackett is confident that the demand for local produce is high.

'I think that, historically, there has been an issue with supply from a restaurateur's perspective but Covid and Brexit have shown fishermen, chefs and Islanders the value of the local market and the quality of our seafood,' he said.

'Our role would be to take that product, prepare it and pack it in the correct environment and get it to our customers, from the hoteliers and supermarkets to independent stores and householders.'

'As someone born in Jersey, with a strong sense of our fishing heritage, I believe that bringing this project to fruition is crucial to the fabric of Island life. It is time to bring the fish home.'

