

Key industry makes a welcome comeback

by Andy Read

PIANOS are once again being made in Stroud - 18 months after one of Britain's last remaining manufacturers announced it was to close.

Bentley's Pianos at Woodchester closed down on January 15 last year, after the family which owned it for 115 years sold out to a London rival with the loss of 35 jobs.

But this week the first instruments to be produced at the renamed Woodchester Piano Company were due to leave the factory door.

Fairytale

The news is a real fairytale ending for the three former employees, who spent over a year trying to raise enough money to keep a piano industry in Stroud and save their jobs. Shocked by the loss of the company, three former directors at Bentley's, Peter Freke, Chris and Eddie Griffin set about setting up a successor.

The trio admitted they were about to give up when earlier this year they put out "a last-ditch appeal" for help.

Several generous local benefactors came forward with the £250,000 shortfall and a successful bid for the former factory and machinery was made with ten minutes to spare.

"Once the skills were disbanded they would be lost forever," said Mr Freke, who is now the managing director. "It would have been a tragedy."

Seventeen former employees are currently employed on the site, with plans to raise this to around 30 by the end of the year.

"It takes a little while to get the process up and running again," said Mr Freke. "But we are absolutely delighted to see pianos leaving the factory again. There's a big buzz around



■ Managing director Peter Freke, left, and factory director Eddie Griffin with the first pianos off the production line bound for the music fair at Olympia

the place."

Woodchester Pianos is now one of only two piano manufacturers left in Britain.

Its first batch of instruments, which cost between £2-4,000 each, are to go on show at

London's prestigious British Music Fair later this month.

Bosses already have 80 orders and eventually hope to produce 1,000 models a year.

"We very much appreciate the tremendous support we've had from the local community and media," said Mr Freke. "I must admit there were times when we had just about given up hope."

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