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Making it in Stonington

By [Lee Howard](#) Day Staff Writer

Fibrelite employs 42 people making 21st-century industrial manhole covers from a new mix of composite materials

Stonington - Manhole covers used to be boring metal contraptions that rusted quickly and could become scaldingly hot, but the Fibrelite manufacturing plant in Pawcatuck is riding a new wave of fiberglass-composite coolness.

Looking for a manhole cover with your company logo? No problem.

How about a school-mascot cover? Done.

Yes, there are even shockingly pink manhole covers these days at Fibrelite, thanks to a process allowing for the creation of a wide array of designs and colors that are spicing up the previously mundane industry.

"We typically build to order," said Jim Goodman, president of Fibrelite's North American division, during a tour of the 30,000-square-foot manufacturing plant, previously home to Harris Press.

Fibrelite traces its roots to England in 1980, but it was only eight years ago that the company opened its first factory in North America, tapping Stonington resident Goodman to lead the way.

Goodman naturally decided to open the plant in his hometown, setting up shop at 100 Mechanic St. and winning support from the SouthEastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, a New London-based development agency that loaned Fibrelite \$300,000 to get started.

An initial crew of seven employees has since grown to 42, surviving the Great Recession with barely a nick, according to Goodman. In the past two years, sales growth has been between 20 percent and 30 percent annually, he added.

"It's been an enjoyable ride," he said.

About 80 percent of Fibrelite's business is with retail petroleum suppliers - mostly gas stations and convenience stores. The company provides both the manhole covers and structures beneath the ground for such major oil companies as Shell, Chevron, Exxon and Mobil as well as convenience stores such as 7-Eleven and Cumberland Farms.

Adding to their allure, composite containment systems can be designed so they are water tight. The local plant makes Fiberglass underground containment systems that sit on top of gasoline tanks and enclose submersible pumps.

"There's a huge issue in the retail petroleum world of keeping water out of storage tanks," said Alex Yellowley, U.S. sales manager for Fibrelite.

About 85 percent of Fibrelite's products are distributed within the United States, with 7 percent going to Canada and the rest being spread throughout South America and the Caribbean. Last year, the company's three factories, including facilities in the United Kingdom and Malaysia, rang up more than \$22.5 million in sales.

Fibrelite claims to have invented the first composite manhole cover in 1982, and manufactures them locally in a variety of sizes ranging from 12 inches to 42 inches in diameter. Fibrelite, the world's largest manufacturer of composite manhole covers, produces more than 20,000 of these products every year, about 6,000 of them in Pawcatuck.

"We're a market leader," Goodman said.

The first Fibrelite customers, mostly major international oil companies, were attracted to the idea of reducing occupational injuries by installing manhole covers that were lighter and easier to remove. But the advantages are many, Goodman said, including composite's ability to resist corrosion, prevent water seepage

BUSINESS SNAPSHOT

What: Fibrelite Corp., division of Fibrelite Ltd.

Where: 100 Mechanic St., Pawcatuck

President: Jim Goodman

Established: 2005

Employees: 42

Website: www.fibrelite.com

Contact: 860-599-6081;
covers@fibrelitecorp.com

and insulate against heat - a major advantage compared with metal manholes in industrial applications that can become dangerously hot.

"We feel we're the Mercedes brand in the composite-cover marketplace," Goodman said.

The Pawcatuck plant manufactures round manhole covers exclusively, since it is the American standard. In Europe, rectangular covers are the norm, Goodman said, so Fibrelite's plant in Yorkshire, England, has a different focus.

While gas stations have been the main focus of business over the years, Fibrelite is starting to see growth potential in other areas, such as water and sewer plants and utilities.

"Retail petroleum is the Steady Eddy," Goodman said. "Now we're beginning to tap the non-retail petroleum market."

Boeing, Dow Chemical and Bechtel are among the large corporations that are showing an interest in the nontraditional manhole cover, he said. Fibrelite covers are generally about one-third as heavy as traditional metal or cement covers, which can run up to 300 pounds.

And Goodman said Fibrelite's proprietary manufacturing process creates an internal structure that is much stronger than what his composite competitors offer. The covers can withstand up to 90 tons of weight, suitable for airport applications, with only minimal bending, according to Goodman.

One of Fibrelite's latest marketing moves is onto college campuses at Ivy League schools as well as large state universities. The idea is to provide manhole covers at football stadiums and elsewhere that help in the branding of universities.

"Every university wants to see their university colors and university logos around the campus," Goodman said. "We are focusing on the customers with deep pockets that want to do this."

Goodman said Fibrelite can mold any color imaginable onto its manhole covers.

"It's a way of making manhole covers a little more exciting," he said.

l.howard@theday.com
