

INTERVIEW

with

Mark Smy

GEORGE SELL meets the managing director of Robinson Manufacturing Limited, who, through new factories and new production methods, is helping the roof truss company to scale new heights



Mark Smy, managing director of timber roofing and flooring product company Robinson Manufacturing Limited (RML), is doing the job he has dreamed of for most of his working life.

Smy started his career in "an old fashioned structural and civil drawing office. Before the computer era we used drawing boards, and there were around 80 draughtsmen, all in one big office. I left there after a couple of years and joined a company called Aspect Roofing, which was the beginning of my involvement with the roof truss industry".

"I stayed with them for about five years, and then had an opportunity that came my way from Jewson, who were involved in opening a depot that had more space than they needed for the actual builders' merchant side, and wanted to create a roof truss factory," he continues. "So I moved from Norfolk to Cambridgeshire and set the truss factory up from scratch. On day one I was there on my own, and had to plan the flow through the factory,

where we were going to install the machinery, training guys in using a saw and collecting timber, and in the actual manufacturing process of putting the cut timber together to make a roof truss. We steadily grew that business, and had a couple of designers and a couple of estimators, who were producing the quotations, mainly for the area of Jewson's builders' merchants that we covered."

Smy says: "That carried on for about five years until Jewson decided to get out of the manufacturing process, and I then went and joined a company about a mile down the road called David Smith. They knew what I had done at the Jewson site, and I joined them as a sales rep. From that position I eventually ended up running the roof truss department and had 10 really good years with the company. I had got to the stage where I was wanting to have a stake in ownership of a company, and that wasn't going to be possible at David Smith, so I had some talks with Tim Robinson, who said he had a very small roof truss company but wanted to move it forward before it got gobbled up by one of the bigger boys."

This where the current chapter of Smy's career got started. He says: "I joined Robinson Manufacturing, and spent a year looking at the processes and what we could do to improve things. Then I took over the reins in 2006 and through the recession we grew rapidly. We had a fantastic product, the company name was well known, but I think it was widely considered that we were something of a cottage industry and only interested in staying within a confined radius of the depot here in Wellingborough. But we managed to move the radius further and further out, and took on more of the regions that we were already dealing with at the likes of Persimmon and Redrow. I think during the recession buyers had a lot more time to allow you to come in and talk about what you were doing as a company; they were more inclined to listen to what your plans were. Through that we expanded, which was unusual for a company in our industry, especially in the middle of a recession.

"I think it showed that the strength of the brand was there and we had to bide our time until the industry started to show green shoots of recovery▶



supply chain

and start to move forward. It was at this point that we decided to open our factory in Essex, which was quite a bold move but we were confident in our product and our team. The Basildon factory will be five years old this year, and it started from scratch, so was drawing on the knowledge I'd acquired from setting up the Jewson depot. We had new machinery and we had to train the staff up from scratch. The factory is now at full capacity and has been a great result for us – a reward for the company's bravery to open it when the recession was still very much in evidence."

With the company building up some serious momentum, Smy got the opportunity he had been dreaming of: "We got to the point where Tim Robinson, who had built the business up, was looking for an exit. He'd spent 18 years building the business, so two years ago we did a management buyout and brought in a new team. I'd spent pretty much my entire working life wanting to have control of a business and I'd learned an awful lot about what I believe the industry wanted, and this was my chance to put that plan into action. Tim is still very much involved with the business as chairman – it would have been mad to cut him loose with the huge knowledge that he has. It's always good to know that he still gives us the nod of approval; it's still technically his name above the door albeit with a new management team at the tiller."

The progress under the new regime has continued: "We opened a factory in Wales a year ago, just outside Newport, which means that we now have a huge area of the UK that we cover. It's enabled us to knock on the doors of more of the



national housebuilders, the likes of Galliford Try, Redrow, Persimmon and Taylor Wimpey. On top of that, we have radically redeveloped our factory that produces flooring joists for the construction industry. It was very heavily involved in producing metal web designs, but that market has slowed recently so we have moved in to the I-joist market, which is a similar product but slightly cheaper. Through redeveloping the floor layout, we have been able to take a huge chunk of that market, which we weren't involved with in the early stages."

And Smy is confident that the company's growth will continue, in parallel with the housebuilding sector: "We are very optimistic for the future. We've seen a steady growth in the housebuilding market and I think that's a reflection of the huge demand for houses out there. There are good signs: from our side I think the tap hasn't yet been turned on fully, which enables us to see long-term growth."

We're not going to see a dramatic crash in the construction market; that gives us confidence to develop new factories, hiring new people and investing in where we as a company are going. We still have quite a bit of growth capacity in the Welsh factory. The south-west is proving extremely fruitful – we've taken on a sales person in that area. Looking further ahead, the HS2 development means that Manchester is going to be a hotbed of development in the future, so we would perhaps be looking to have a factory in that area. If you can see that there is going to be a massive expansion in housing output in an area, it's always a good foundation for where you put your next manufacturing unit.

"Internally, we've also made some improvements. One of the biggest changes is that we have achieved ISO9001:2015, and I think that helps you look internally to see how you can improve and ensures you don't stagnate."

Smy points out what he thinks makes RML stand out from its competitors. "Our family branding is a point of differentiation for us. There aren't layers upon layers of management. I will still take phone calls from site agents if there is a problem, and I believe that buyers can speak directly to us and get the information they need. We're always trying to improve the team: we have an apprentice academy, we have a developing leaders academy, and for the long term we have a new directorship academy, so we are looking at the next group of leaders that might be able to take the company forward in 10 years' time. When people see that it gives them confidence that we are always going to be here and always going to be improving." ^{sh}



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