

Decision time

Mollart Engineering set up its Welsh facility in 1998 to supply next-door-neighbour TRW with volume components. It didn't work out like that, as Machinery reports

Wayne Thomas, plant manager, right, with Guy Mollart in front of a reinvigorated Resolven unit

As Mollart Engineering Group celebrated 10 years of operation at its subsidiary sub-contract machining facility, Mollart Automotive in Resolven, with an order book that is almost 50 per cent over original budgets, managing director Guy Mollart announced plans for a £1 million-plus investment programme and more jobs at the South Wales site; up from 28 to 50 by the end of the year.

"Over the last year we have seen the benefit of re-structuring Mollart Automotive from a high volume, low value component production facility, largely in support of the automotive sector, to one that has a positive focus on high value, high precision engineering," says Mr Mollart. "By drawing on the expertise in sub-contract machining at our Chessington, Surrey, headquarters we have created an unbelievable turn round of business."

The Mollart Group has built an international name in machine tools since it was founded in 1929 by Mr Mollart's grandfather to develop deep hole drilling technology and produce

world-leading techniques for machines and special tooling to make accurate bores for gun barrels. The family-owned firm progressively expanded this technology into machining deep holes for medical, telecommunications, automotive and a vast array of allied industry sectors that led to the establishment of 'added value' sub-contract machining services for components requiring deep holes. The Group is now a major player with sales of £12 million and 110 employees.

BURSTING AT THE SEAMS

With the Chessington facility 'filled' to capacity with machine tool building for global customers and a progressively expanding sub-contract production facility – particularly for oil and gas, nuclear, telecoms, medical and defence sectors – in 1998 the Group took advantage of grant status to set up Mollart Automotive in Resolven near Neath in South Wales. This venture was one of the very first 'through-the-fence', Just-in-Time sub-contract operations

supplying automotive power steering specialist TRW, which occupied the adjacent factory, with power steering components and assemblies.

"Unfortunately the pressures of invogue global manufacturing frustrated our early plans with TRW and the predicted volumes never materialised as the company transferred most of its production from the UK to Eastern Europe and beyond," Mr Mollart explains. "As contracts depleted, and our processing equipment and employees that were geared to high volume production became under utilised, the business progressively stagnated until the contract ceased in late 2005."

At that time the Mollart management team faced a dilemma: retreat to the Chessington plant in Surrey with little available capacity for expansion of the business; or risk the expense of restructuring the business at Resolven. Critical in the restructuring would be reskilling the workforce, already depleted to just five competent precision engineers. The board of directors decided

SUB-CONTRACT MANUFACTURING

to take the bull by the horns and invest in new equipment to build a sub-contract business that would offer added value services in the same way as the Chessington plant.

Against the fashion for sending work overseas, many of Mollart's customers and potential customers were keen to have local supply and this became a spur to think positively about expanding operations at Resolven. Mr Mollart also maintains a rising market and growing confidence in his business – plus the ability to solve problems with the willingness to invest in the right machine tools and service support – also helped sway customers' decisions.

Over the last 12 months more than £1 million has been invested by the Mollart Group in new high technology equipment at Resolven, including a 3D co-ordinate measuring machine, two

Mazak Integrex multi-axis, turn-mill centres, a large capacity Weiler CNC lathe (Kyal Machine Tools) and a Mollart gundrill. Quality and management systems have been set up as an extension of Chessington. Chessington now provides half the work passing through the new facility, releasing Surrey capacity for certain types of operations.

NEW WORK WON

"But," says Mr Mollart, "pleasingly, the other half of the order book is all-new work at the Welsh plant, won on the back of the of the factory's capability. Order books are growing fast, especially with oil and gas industry work."

Not only was there significant investigation into the best machine tools and equipment to satisfy the projected path of the business, but training was also put high on the agenda to upskill the

existing workforce and train newcomers. Staff have been sent to Chessington to benefit from the expertise and knowledge built up over 20 or so years of sub-contract production, while there has also been external management, quality control and CNC technology training at machine tool suppliers and on specialist courses to suit the requirements of the individual, the job and the company.

"The Mollart Group is heavily committed to investing in the future of manufacturing in South Wales and has already seen benefits of the decision to reinvest in Resolven, with the attitude of the workforce helping to expand our order book, which is currently approaching 50 per cent above the original forecast. With new equipment, proven methods and motivated staff, we can see a continued positive return for the Group, concludes Mr Mollart." □



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