

'The right thing, in the right place, at the right time' - Hamptons makes its move into manufacturing

THERE has been no long-term written plan behind the expansion of Hampton Steel and Wire into one of the foremost manufacturers of agricultural fencing.

That isn't to say there has been no plan, but as managing director Mark Johnson says: 'It's been a case of making sure we have the right thing in the right place at the right time.'

Investment in machinery has seen the company's transformation from stockist to manufacturer at a time when it would have been thought less than prudent to spend in excess of £1 million increasing its manufacturing capabilities.

'We have invested at a pace consistent with our customer needs,' said Johnson. 'Our aim has always been quality of product, service to customer and efficiency of manufacturing. To maintain quality you need to be in control of manufacturing. To have that control you need to invest in the machinery and the working practices that ensure the reputation of the product and therefore the company.'

Hampton Steel and Wire also became a leading producer of chain link fencing at a time when many in the industry were turning their backs on the product to focus on mesh systems.

history in steel stock holding and cold rolling, but the change in direction in the late 1980s proved that they had the skills to handle wire products.

'There was a steep learning curve involved, but it was not insurmountable and we soon realised that we could move further into the fencing market. That was the foundation on which all other parts of the fencing business have grown. We gained confidence and were prepared to take our time in getting it right.'

Johnson is not one for rushing into markets. As an accountant who is a self confessed lover of manufacturing, he is all too aware of the need to get it right.

'A reputation for quality can take years to build, but so easily be demolished and that's why in protecting our reputation we need to take hold of the production of the products we are selling. When you are simply a stockist you can spend frustrating amounts



“With production under our control we can better standards and better meet the needs of our customers”

of time on quality issues that are totally out of your control, but they still reflect on you as the supplier.'

That determination to have a tighter control on quality led to the introduction of a plastic extrusion facility to coat the wire for chain link, with further facilities being installed two years ago.

'Plastic coating is essential and hand-in-hand with that is colour and texture. Variations cannot be tolerated. A customer expects there to be continuity. It's important to get it right and by being in control we do get it right.'

In the past two years other investment has come in the shape of machinery to produce stock fencing, barbed wire, staples and last month another high tensile barbed wire machine was commissioned.

One of the major acquisitions was a machine purpose built to handle the production of

two 500-metre rolls of stock fence simultaneously (pictured above).

Hampton Steel and Wire. 'That's one reason why we've seen our customer base grow and increased our penetration into the market, as well as retaining our existing clients.'

There is little comparison between the product brochure of five years ago and Hampton's current one.

'Quite frankly there is very little we are not able to do in terms of configuring our machines and that's why we have moved to where we are now. Sales patterns are always changing and we can respond accordingly.'

In-house training has ensured that Hamptons retains the skill levels needed to keep pace with its growing operation. Having started with 15 people now there is a staff of 75 and retention levels are high.

'That's important,' said Johnson, 'and the investment we make in staff is crucial to maintain standards.'

More investment will come if the circumstances are perceived to be right and Johnson is also looking to increase sales into Europe.

'Ours might not have been a meteoric rise within the industry but it's certainly proved to be a very significant one. Hamptons as a company has a great deal of pride in where it has come from and where it is going to. We are a British company which is growing its manufacturing capability. That's certainly bucking the trend' ■



▶ Mark Johnson

'Yes, we were told that chain link was no longer worth investing in - well we've increased our volumes 10 fold. So we think that our decision was justified.'

Hamptons had no background in chain link production. There had been a



▶ Peter Matten

'We've taken our time in assessing the needs of the market place and how we can serve those requirements. Ours is a determination to get it right even if it takes that bit longer. With our line wire production we originally had people telling us that we wouldn't be able to handle wire at more than 100-metres a minute. Today we are dealing with wire at 400-metres a minute. Yes, we are innovative, but that innovation is built around a knowledge that we can hit higher standards.'

Today, the Northampton site is double what it was five years ago and Hamptons hold a balanced stock of supplies and products.

'With production under our control we can react to customer needs and so there is flexibility which is paramount in today's marketplace,' said Peter Matten, sales manager at

