

When the Ebbsfleet International rail station in Kent, England, comes into service in two years time, it will be a key stop on the new Eurostar line linking London and Paris. This huge engineering project includes a 12 mile tunnel beneath the capital, as well as a two mile tunnel under the river Thames, and is transforming communities throughout the region. The prospect of a faster rail link to the continent was an important factor in London winning their bid for the 2012 Olympic Games.

Less than a mile from this new international terminal is the site that independent boxmaker W.E. Roberts have chosen to consolidate their operations and to start a major investment programme.

"The move couldn't have come at a better time," says Managing Director, Mr Paul Roberts. "Our ideal scenario has always been to house our corrugator and our converting equipment on the same

site, and now we've achieved that in an area which is going to see major infrastructure development over the next few years."

The site at Northfleet, just east of London and close to the banks of the River Thames, has been home to the company's corrugator operation for well over thirty years, but only in the past eighteen months has an adjacent plot become available. This additional space has allowed the company to double the size of its facility and now house its corrugator converting equipment and offices on the same site.

Within ten months of the plot coming on the market the move had been carried out and Mr Roberts says that the company is already seeing the benefits of single site operation. "Obviously logistics are easier because we no longer have to take board off the corrugator and truck it thirty miles down the road to Tonbridge. But we're also seeing the benefits of having a single management team and a single

administration."

Planning for the move began in January last year with some converting equipment moved to temporary homes in the corrugator hall during the summer of 2004. Having taken possession of the extra space the company was able to install a new Bobst SPO160-Vision die-cutter as the first item in their new, dedicated, conversion hall. When the plant move was completed, Mr Roberts says he was delighted at how well it went. "We were able to supply our customers without interruption all through the move and this was our key objective. Now we have moved the rest of our converting equipment from its temporary location into the conversion hall. Doing this over the holiday period meant that, again, we were able to minimise any potential disruption to our customers."

No need for new tools.

The Bobst Vision installation is the latest phase of an investment programme which the company put into place two years ago, shortly after Mr Paul Roberts took over the company on the retirement of his father, company founder, Mr Alan Roberts. The forty five years since the company's inception have seen it grow from a simple box merchant into one of the largest independent corrugated case

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manufacturers in the United Kingdom, with group turnover standing above £10m, including the packaging supplies business based at Tonbridge.

To maintain this growth the company knew that it would need to make investments in key areas including logistics, waste disposal, die-cutting, case-making and handling.

Up until the Bobst investment the company operated two hand platens and two automatic platens, but were sure that there were substantial gains to be made by installing a fully featured automatic machine. "We needed a die-cutter that was productive, easy to run, reasonably priced and, importantly, that could use our existing tools without much modification," explains Financial Director, Mr Richard Puffette. "We could see that the Bobst Vision was an excellent machine, but just to be sure we took a lorry load of board and a couple of dies up to their Training Centre in Redditch and they proved to us that with a little bit of modification, our existing tooling would run on it. They even offered to help us convert our stock of dies, which helped us a lot because with the move it was one less thing to worry about."

A product specialist from Bobst Group in the UK arrived at the plant prior to the Bobst's delivery and he set about adapting the company's tooling to fit onto the Vision. Using a Bobst EasySet unit, each die was modified so that it would locate onto the chase of the new machine with its centreline and first knife in the correct positions. The conversion was carried out with the aid of a member of W.E.Roberts staff who, as part of the programme, was trained in the modification process. With the bulk of the conversions now carried out, the company are able to modify those dies that remain as and when they need them.

Maximum speed

"What really delighted us," says Mr Puffette, "was that all the jobs that have been converted have run at maximum speed on the Bobst Vision — that's 4,500 sheets per hour. There are jobs that used to take three days to cut and hand strip with

the old equipment that we can now run in three hours, fully stripped."

Capable of handling board sizes ranging from 600mm x 400mm (24" x 15 3/4") to 1600mm x 1100mm (63" x 43 1/4") the Vision converts corrugated board from 1mm to 7mm in thickness. Bobst say that the Vision benefits from the vast experience of their engineers in the design and manufacture of die-cutters and features a very precise vacuum plate infeed as well as a platen configuration that compensates for frame variation, reducing patching up and making die changeover quick and easy.

Another important factor in the purchase was the support that Bobst could provide. With a service and training centre in the UK, and with thirty technicians and trainers on the road, W.E.Roberts felt reassured that they would get the technical, training and spare parts support they wanted.

With three fewer machines to man, the

company has been able to reallocate six die-cutting staff to other duties, at the same time converting more board than ever before. "We've now got the Bobst, plus a two-colour rotary die-cutter and a two-colour printer slotter," explains Mr Roberts. "Even though we're turning out about a million square metres of board a month from our 1.6 metre corrugator, we've now got more converting capacity than it can fill. That's never happened since the company started converting board."

To redress this imbalance Mr Roberts says that the next major equipment project will be to uprate the corrugator.

Ongoing investment.

The Bobst purchase follows investment in a reconditioned rotary die-cutter, a new palletizer and an automatic baler capable of handling 800 tonnes of waste each month. Additionally, an existing printer-slotter has been fully reconditioned on-site. Proud of its own in-house managed transport fleet, the company now has two 7.5 tonne vans and two Mercedes heavy goods vehicles which, they say, ensures the flexibility of their delivery services.

The results of these wide-ranging investments are already showing says Mr Roberts. "We're finding that we have more capacity, increased productivity and we're spending less on maintenance. Like everyone else, we're fighting paper and energy price increases, so it's been vitally important for us to become more and more productive."

The company's customers cover a broad range of industries and the plant supplies transit packaging and point of sale materials for food applications, plastic products and computer parts as well as supplying box merchants. Standard corrugated cases and die-cuts, both printed and unprinted, are manufactured at the plant, as well as high quality litho laminated cases.

W.E. Roberts uses advanced computerised design and sample making equipment to produce a range of standard and non-standard designs and they like to be involved with the customers' project as early as possible. "We much prefer to be

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given the final product and asked to design the packaging. That way we can be sure it's going to really work for the customer," explains Sales Manager, Mr Ben Wilks.

Customers like website.

It is, perhaps, because of this approach that the bulk of the company's customers are of long standing, many having been supplied by the company for twenty years or more. "I think they like the fact that we give them the sort of personal attention that the big corporate plants can't," says Mr Wilks. "They like the way we respond quickly to them and that we keep up our service levels whatever is happening at this end."

Mr Wilks also believes that their customers like the website that the company has established in conjunction with the packaging supplier arm of the

group. Here customers can see a range of standard styles that the company can produce, view galleries of point of sale products and can order packaging supplies on-line.

The latest challenge for the plant has been the implementation of Abaca shop floor data collection from Corrugated Tech Inc. The system, installed throughout the plant, feeds back real-time statistics from production to sales and management and allows improved planning and the maximisation of machine utilisation. "This gives us comprehensive and up to the minute management information we haven't had up until now," explains Mr Roberts. "With the range of tools included we can estimate costs more effectively, identify areas of strength and weakness in our production operation, manage our stock better and track our raw materials and finished goods. It also means we can

more easily meet the requirements of the packaging waste regulations and we can provide more timely information to the customer about the progress of their order." The system will eventually be fully integrated into their accounting ledgers and sales analysis systems.

Aware of dangers.

With all these changes going on, and the amount of investment, are the company concerned that they have tackled too much too quickly? "Our strategy has been not to overstretch ourselves," says Mr Roberts, "and to invest in systems and equipment like the Bobst Vision which have produced step changes in our performance. But more than anything we haven't compromised on the service levels our customers expect – that's one thing that won't change around here."