Investing for success

Lancashire company buys multi-tasking machine with expansion of the business in mind

When founded in 1972, Pennine Tools Aerospace was like many other fledgling sub-contract companies, taking work from anyone and any industrial sector that it could.

In more recent years, a combination of enthusiasm and a willingness to invest in the Barnoldswick-based business has seen the company develop into a specialist supplier of precision components to the commercial and military aerospace sectors.

Having worked in manufacturing for a number of years (with an emphasis on work study and multi-manning techniques), Bruce Meldrum took on the challenge of founding his own operation. "At the time it was a daunting prospect, and to be honest it still is to some extent," he says, referring to his company's most recent investment — a £250,000 Mazak Integrex 200-IV S multi-tasking machine tool from Worcester-based Yamazaki Mazak UK Ltd (Tel: 01905 755755). The machine has been purchased with the future expansion of the business in mind.

Mr Meldrum says: "We have always had the philosophy that we should plough profits back into the operation. In this business, you have to remain competitive, and investment in new technology is crucial to maintaining our reputation for supplying leading-edge technology companies with the precision components that they need — when they need them."

As an approved supplier to Airbus, GKN, and BAE Systems (for which it has a five-year rolling contract to supply civil aircraft spare parts), Pennine Tools Aerospace is proving a point with its investment policy. With the recent announcement that the company has signed up for Tranche 3 of the Eurofighter programme, it understands that it has to become leaner in order to remain competitive. With the downward pressure on component costs, along with Pennine Tools Aerospace's reputation for rapid response — especially for its 'Aircraft on Ground' support — this ongoing investment is proving to be a winner.

"Having used Mazak machines for over 20 years, we are well acquainted with their build quality and reliability. In fact, our original Mazak lathe is still running seven days a week, producing good-quality components."

Replacing manual machines

This first machine was purchased to replace a number of manual machines that were being used to produce batches of spindles for yarn-tufting machines. At the time, each spindle took 50min to produce; the Mazak machine reduced this cycle time to just 20min. From this simple two-axis lathe, Pennine Tools Aerospace moved on to Mazak machines with driven tooling, and the benefits seen with the use of these machines led to the Integrex being a natural progression.

"The investment in the Integrex from Mazak supports our belief that we need to make things quicker and more efficiently," says Mr Meldrum. "By doing so, we will be more competitive in terms of component cost — and we will be able to offer our customers greater manufacturing flexibility. In the current economic climate, we have to ensure that we provide continuity of service, quality and on-time delivery — and make our business as lean as possible. Looking at the investment we have made in the Integrex machine, we have the opportunity to retain our margins while at the same time being able to offer cost reductions and greater efficiencies to our customers."

In addition to investment in machine tool technology, Pennine Tools Aerospace is also developing its working practices, in association with the North West Aerospace Alliance's *Aerospace Supply Chain of Excellence* programme. This programme, for which participation is by invitation only, is helping to raise standards throughout the supply chain — and safeguarding the future of the aerospace industry in the UK.

"This is all part and parcel of strengthening the business to ensure its success," says Mr Meldrum. "Through our affiliation with the North West Aerospace Alliance, plus our established contracts, we are well placed to move forward, but we are also aware that we have to continue to take decisions to invest in technology to make sure that we remain competitive."