

FROM SHORT RUNS TO THE SHARD

UWP attributes the success of its mouldings business to diversity of product and flexibility of service. Mike Jeffree reports

SUMMARY

- UWP started MDF product manufacturing in the 1990s
- The business collaborates with architects and designers on bespoke profiles for developments
- Products have been specified for The Shard and the British Library
- UWP has recently invested in a vacuum priming and finishing line

Universal Wood Products by name, universal by market perspective.

The list of end users of products from primed MDF mouldings and profiled components manufacturer UWP reads like a who's who of the big-name developers.

Via merchant trading partners including Travis Perkins, Saint-Gobain and Grafton Group, the company's ranges find their way into the developments, amongst others, of Berkeley Homes, Taylor Wimpey, Persimmon Homes and Countryside Properties plc.

At the same time, from its Romford base, the company services a diverse customer base of independent timber merchants and major joinery producers. It has also made a name for its bespoke operation, which has seen its products specified for some of the prestige, architectural construction projects of recent years, chiefly in London and the south-east, but also in Liverpool and Manchester.

TIMBER ROOTS

UWP has developed this wide-ranging approach from the basis of long experience in the timber products sector. It traces its roots back over a century, starting out as a trading division of the Swedish Match Company.

It was also among the first UK agents for the developing European MDF manufacturing sector of the 1970s and 80s, including such names as Intamasa of Spain.

Realising the potential of this relatively new material, UWP migrated into MDF products manufacturing in the 1990s.

"Today we focus on capitalising on the benefits of high quality, moisture resistant MDF," said managing director Martin

Cossington. "We've also developed the market through our commitment to educating customers in the inherent advantages of this material."

The company, he added, also constantly looks at opportunities to bring out new products to meet market need, with its range now including profiled components for the partitioning, picture framing, kitchen/bedroom door and fire door manufacturing industries.

"The continued, managed growth of the business relies on the support of our merchant group and independent distributors," said Mr Cossington. "This mutual collaboration is what has led to development of profile requirements directly with architects and interior design consultancy practices looking for a supply partner for specific developments; be it that they want a new, contemporary themed design, or a match with an existing profile in a modern substrate, for example MR MDF.

"And we can have TCT cutters produced to meet specific architects' drawings or to match a specific profile sample clients may already have. This sort of service has resulted in our products being specified for such projects as The Shard, the British Library and the Hilton Hotel Wembley."

At the other end of the spectrum, UWP has also built a reputation for supplying bespoke short-run productions.

"This can be challenging, but we always consider that if we meet today's small order with a prompt, competitive service, we're more than likely to be considered for the next order, which could be a six-month production and supply requirement," said Mr Cossington.

UWP acknowledges that it operates in a

competitive market and one, like much of the rest of British industry, unsure of the outlook for coming years.

"We hope economic uncertainty does not lead to a slowdown in housebuilding," said Mr Cossington. "In meetings I've attended with major housebuilders, they say this won't be the case over the next two years, with any demand downturn in our sector unlikely until 2020."

UWP is upbeat about its prospects due to a varied customer base and flexible production.

"We continue to benefit from flexible production and prompt response to customers' demands," said Mr Cossington. "Having invested recently in the latest vacuum priming and finishing lines, we look to 2018 with confidence. And we've also invested in a Talbot dust and incinerating plant and allied dust extraction to meet health and safety and process MDF dust away from production."

The company is also currently seeing growing demand for flame retardant specifications, possibly a consequence of the Grenfell Tower disaster.

The UWP customer split is now 70/30 between the timber and merchant sector and major joinery producers. It would, said Mr Cossington, never say never to supplying the national buying groups, but currently it's not on the cards. "We prefer to provide customers, who are more than capable of managing their purchasing options, our flexible service, rather than dictate minimum order quantities to obtain agreed unit prices under a buying group agreement."

Marketing and point of sale support for customers is another area UWP will develop through 2018. ■



Machining operations at UWP