



A Change for the Better

Scott MacCallum travelled to Ipswich to meet the team charged with taking Ransomes Jacobsen forward

**RANSOMES
JACOBSEN^{LTD}**
A Textron Company

Contact any large company and be put on hold while you wait for someone to become available and the chances are you will be treated to a snatch of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" or "Green Sleeves", whose composition is amazingly attributed to King Henry VIII. You're left hanging on until the other person picks up the line, more often than not, embarrassingly, just when your whistling has reached a tuneless crescendo.

For much of the last five years at Ransomes Jacobsen it wouldn't have been too much of a surprise if the music they chose to keep callers entertained was a version of David Bowie's "Chi...Chi...Chi...Changes". In the last year, however, that might have been replaced by "Zip A Dee Doo Dah" or, in these difficult times, Billy Ocean's "When the Going Gets Tough the Tough Get Going".

An unusual way to start an article but in many ways it does encapsulate the recent history of Ransomes Jacobsen, previously known as various names under the Textron banner.

Since the giant multinational Textron purchased Ransomes in 1998 to bolster an already strong golf and turf stable, which included the Jacobsen and E-Z-GO brands, the company has been synonymous with change. It has only been in the recent past that all the complicated and sometimes difficult decision making has been completed and the Ipswich-based company has been in a position to make real progress once again.

The Managing Director of Ransomes Jacobsen is a man who is well placed to reflect on the roller coaster ride that the company has experienced over the last five years.

Steve Chicken, who spent 20 years as an engineer in the RAF, joined Ransomes as an Engineering Manager the day before it was purchased by Textron and enjoyed a steady climb up the promotion ladder before being appointed Managing Director 12 months ago.

"Many of the changes we've made over the last four years have been painful and some have been quite confusing to people in the market place but the end result leaves us well placed to cope in these times of economic uncertainty," said Steve, from an office which overlooks the vast manufacturing plant.

"Looking back I don't think anyone would have chosen to do what we've done in the way that we've done it, but with good core products, and underlying good management, I think we now have a very strong business under the two brands which are our focal point, Ransomes and Jacobsen."

In the last year the company has been making positive strides again and have taken confidence from statistics which show that they are gaining increased market share.

"We are a much simpler company today with far less complexity," explained Steve.

"This has been a deliberate decision to become more simple, both internally and externally. It touches just about everything. In the past we were doing things differently in the US to over here but now we have common processes and where we had two separate product lines we now have one, or are moving towards one.

"This all makes the company a lot more nimble so we can react to things a lot quicker but it also gives a much more robust front to the company as people can see a common purpose.

"We've gone from being a British company and an American company bolted together to being a truly global company and by maintaining locations here, in America and in the Pacific Rim we have retained our local knowledge which allows us to define our market place. By having European and American manufacturing plants and design houses we can ensure that we have suitable products for the



Steve Chicken



David Withers

different environments and customer needs," said Steve who, prior to returning to Ipswich was Vice President of Engineering for the whole group, based in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Among the changes which were made along the way in addition to that of the man at the top, was the aforementioned name changes; a definitive reappraisal of the roles of both the Ransomes and Jacobsen products; a revamping of the entire dealer network, and a series of personnel changes.

Listening to both Steve and Sales and Marketing Director, David Withers, you can appreciate the thinking behind each of the changes and how they came to be made.

"At the time of the purchase there was a lot of puzzlement," said David, another man who has risen to his present position in the last 12 months.

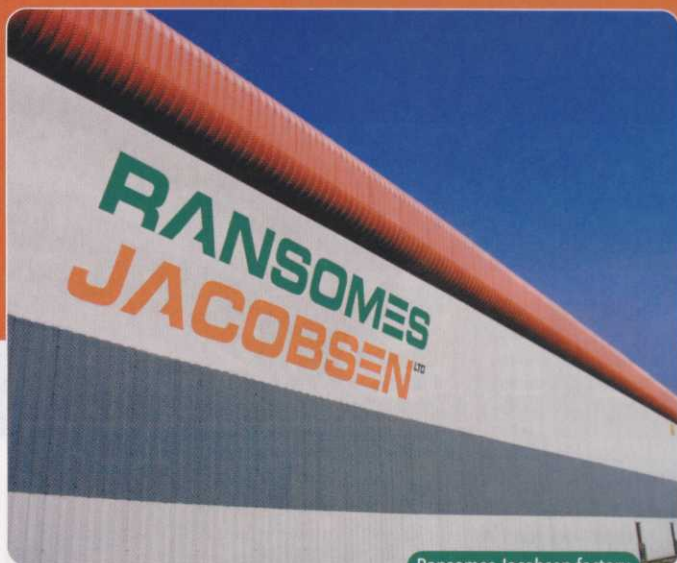
"In Ransomes and Jacobsen we'd brought together two previously competing brands and teams of people, both within the company and customers, with emotional ties to both Ransomes and Jacobsen. It was felt that we needed a name that we could all rally round and felt that should be Textron. We never envisaged changing the brand or having blue machines with a Textron logo but we felt we needed to get the Textron name known," said David, who also acknowledged the benefits of being seen to be owned by such a huge company.

"We wanted to focus on the fact that we were owned by a very very secure multi national and that the finance would be there for long term stability."

The downside was that the strong brand names of Ransomes and Jacobsen were diluted somewhat but the feeling within Ipswich was that it was the correct move to make at that time. The Textron name was replaced by the current Ransomes Jacobsen name at SALTEX last year.

Another major issue which had been tackled towards the beginning of the process was that of organising a dealer network to cope with such a wide product range. On the mainland 10 companies were handed the account, from Scottish Grass Machinery in the north to PJ Flegg in the south.

"We changed distribution throughout the world in a nine month time frame and that is a tough thing to do because if you ask customers when they buy machines it is 50% because of the machine and 50% because of the company selling to them and with a lot of dealership changes we did lose market share," admitted David.



Ransomes Jacobsen factory



Steve astride a Jacobsen triple mower

However, with that situation settling down and a further change involving the move to two Regional Sales Managers instead of four and three staff who look after the key accounts they are beginning to reap the rewards.

"We currently have a fantastic order book. The best in many years. We are focusing on customers and giving them what they want."

To that end a large party of customers and potential customers was taken to Atlanta so the Course Managers and Head Greenkeepers could assess the new products and give honest appraisals of what they saw.

"They are very open and frank and some of what they say is brutal but that is what we want as it allows us to produce what they want," said David.

Another of the major changes occurred in July 2000 when the announcement was made that from that point onward orange Jacobsen machinery would be earmarked for the golf market and the green Ransomes machinery would be aimed at the municipal market.

"Prior to this change in essence we still had Ransomes and Jacobsen product competing on the golf course market and it wasn't until we made the change that we could move away from being seen as two competitive companies to being one consolidated company with different products in the golf and municipal markets."

That process is now virtually complete with the more rounded in style Jacobsen products going into golf clubs and the squarer, robust looking, Ransomes products being sold to the local authority parks and gardens market.

"We still have one machine - a T Plex 185 - which has yet to be re-styled into the Jacobsen family, but all the others have been changed and there is a true family resemblance within the ranges," said Steve.

Looking back Steve is proud of the way the company has handled such a complex situation over the last five years.

"Bringing together two huge companies is not an easy task and in hindsight we probably wouldn't have supported every decision but the end product has been pretty good," said Steve, adding that other companies with whom they compete might one day have to go through similar processes.

"We've done ours," he smiled.

"I don't think any company ever stops changing but we are as near as damn it where we want to be."

So, looking ahead, what can we expect from Ransomes Jacobsen?

Well the company is, to Steve's knowledge, the only machinery manufacturer in the industry which has achieved ISO 14001, the environmental quality standard, and they are pushing the fact that they are the environmental friendly manufacturer.

"We've based our decision on the fact that more and more environmental issues will come to the forefront. At the moment people like the idea of being environmentally friendly but they wouldn't make it key or a defining reason for doing something. I think that will change," said David, who has spoken to both the Audebon Society and Committed to Green about the need to build into their scoring criteria the machinery which is being used on the golf course.

"Let's face it, there are now very good electric mowers and if there are 100 petrol golf cars on a golf course that's a 100 little polluting machines whereas an option would be electric or LPG, an E-Z-GO version of which was launched at Harrogate this year."

Although rightfully cagey about giving too much away they do hint at some new additions to the product range which will be revealed in due course.

The company has long been a staunch supporter of BIGGA and has recently launched the Ransomes Jacobsen Scholarship Awards which give greenkeepers funding toward further educational courses thus giving them the opportunity to better themselves when a lack of finance might have otherwise prevented them.

"We feel the financial contributions we can make is going towards the future of the industry and as BIGGA is the main body within that industry we want to be seen to be helping the top Course Managers and Head Greenkeepers of the future," said Selina Flynn, Communications and Promotions Manager.

Having spent so much of the last five years in changeable mode the Ransomes Jacobsen team will be no doubt be pleased to have a period of normality over the next few years.

You never know that might stretch to making you listen to "Four Seasons" or "Green Sleeves" when you call them up.

