



# IT'S ALWAYS BUZZING IN IPSWICH



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There is always buzz when you visit Ransomes Jacobsen's Ipswich Headquarters and this occasion, visiting the company to write a Golden Key profile, was no exception.

Even before I'd got through the front door I heard my name being called out by a group of greenkeepers, who'd spotted me in the car park. As soon as I had stepped into the foyer there was Managing Director, David Withers, chatting with someone beside the Reception Desk, eager to greet me. Once I'd signed in and was following David to his office I bumped into UK Sales Manager, Rupert Price, deep in conversation with someone, in the corridor.

"We have a target to bring 1000 visitors to Ipswich each year, show them around and give them a flavour for Ransomes Jacobsen," explained David.

Last year they achieved a very laudable 920.

"It helps us to build relationships with our existing customers and, hopefully through what we can show them here, encourage others to become customers."

is very difficult to change him.

"We know we make good machinery and I'm sure the other companies believe they make good

machinery too. Let's face it, it all works, so the real differences come in after sales, the quality of the dealership and the relationships that have been built up."

Two of those dealers were already on site – White's and Doe's – each hosting groups, while there was also a party of Danish greenkeepers on another tour. As I say, it's a busy place.

"I don't think you would find a greenkeeper changing brands for his greens mowers straight away, as they all know that they are judged by their greens, but you might just be able to convert them to a tractors or a rough mower. It's good just to give them a chance to visit us and see what we do."

It also gives visitors the opportunity to see the latest acquisition to the Ransomes Jacobsen stable of attractions – the superb three hole par-3 golf course, which was opened by the Mayor of Ipswich, in October.

Relationships are exceedingly important on all levels at Ransomes Jacobsen. There is a 1% turnover rate per annum on staff, excluding retirements, while the annual length of stay for the 200 shop floor staff, and 340 in total, is 25 years.

"It's great to have the continuity of employment because we have vast experience on the factory floor, while our sales staff, including Nigel Church, Alan Prickett and Rupert Price, are all extremely well known and respected within the industry."

It's great to see a genuine manufacturing plant

still prospering in the UK and David, although he has done it many, many times – the previous day, for example, he'd taken round the Ipswich Town FC ground staff - is genuinely enthusiastic about taking me around the plant and showing off what Ransomes Jacobsen is best known for – producing grass cutting machinery.

The first thing that struck me from my previous tour, which must have been about four or five years before, was the airiness and brightness of the factory.

"We're just coming to the end of a five year restructuring programme, part of which was to paint the ceiling white and lay new cushioned flooring throughout the building.

"We've noticed a significant drop off in the number of back complaints we've had since the flooring has gone down. It's only a couple of millimetres thick but the cushioning has obviously helped and with fewer days lost to bad backs it has had some benefits said David, who, judging by the chat as we moved through the building, knows most on the shop floor by name.

One of the main aims of the restructuring was to improve the production work flow.

"The assembly lines had run sideways and not long ways which wasn't the most efficient, as we kept having to move partially completed machinery around the shop floor.

The assembly lines were, therefore moved to run long ways down the building, starting with the





RJ International, the new three hole golf course

paint shop, moving onto the assembly line, with the cutting units fitted at the end. The welding and pressing areas were also sited to reduce unnecessary movement around the shop floor.

“It was a bit like doing a Rubic Cube to move everything around. We had to slide some sections into temporary areas until their new location had been completed and it was a really complicated procedure all round.”

The restructuring freed up 35,000 square feet of factory space which became the Customer Care area, and allowed room for the £4 million worth of spare parts which are carried.

Indeed, the most delicate move was parts because if it didn't go smoothly the customers would surely notice.

“We tackled this at night, moving around 200 parts a time, and it all went extremely smoothly. In fact, one dealer was worried about the effects of the move and was delighted when we told him that we'd actually finished the entire move the previous night.”

One recent innovation on the shop floor is the yellow painted “master copies” of machines which sit alongside the assembly lines.

“They give the workers something to use as a reference if they are not 100% sure about a component. They can give it a hands-on test on how it fits and how it should look once it has been fitted. We're currently fitting them onto to rigs so that they can be spun around making the underside as visible as the top,” said David, who believes a company never stands still – it's either on an upward or a downward spiral.

“We were on a downward spiral in the late 90s and early noughties following the merger of Ransomes and Jacobsen while the upward spiral has been in place for the last five or six years.”

The assembly lines allow for individual specifications to machines to be carried out as the line rolls forward and often green Ransomes kit and orange Jacobsen kit is worked on at the same time.

“Each piece is clearly labelled at the start so the assembler knows what bespoke elements are required on that particular machine.”

It was also extremely interesting to see the trolley system which operates and which eliminates the need for much of the paperwork you'd expect to see in a fully functioning factory.

A trolley is filled with parts and goes to the person who is going to be fitting that particular part. When the trolley is empty it goes back to where the part is made and refilled.

“The pace of production is dictated by how many trolleys we have in place. The more we have in operation the faster the rate of production and if we want to slow down we just remove some of trolleys. They are a little like the oil that makes the factory operate,” said David, as we walked past the party of Danish-based greenkeepers staring intently at a particular production process.

Once the factory tour was complete the Danes, and the other two parties, enjoyed some lunch before testing some of completed machinery on the RJ International, the new three hole golf course, which opened recently. The culmination of the visit is a game around the course where one over par 10 is still the score to beat.

“We are going to put all the scores on the website to create a bit of interest,” revealed David, who claims the number of rounds he has had could still be counted on the fingers of one hand.

“We are really proud of our course and, while I've take a bit of ribbing about having our own course, it has some really practical benefits for us. For example we can have customers and potential customers test kit in authentic conditions – we have different rootzones and grasses on each green to give ourselves as many options as possible.”

The course is maintained by young greenkeeper, Rory Ferguson, who spends one day a week at Writtle College, and the rest of the time on the course, revelling in being one of the few greenkeepers who doesn't have to worry about where his next piece of kit is going to come from.

“He likes his machinery. I think he'd be lost without an engine,” joked David.

The newly-developed piece of land also includes a superb decked terrace overlooking the golf course for staff to enjoy their lunches in the summer and a training football pitch.

“Ipswich Town Manager, Jim Magilton, was here for the opening and he's going to bring his first team squad over to train on the pitch and then have a game of golf. It keeps the interest level for the players and gives our staff something different to look forward to,” he said.

Ransomes Jacobsen has had a longstanding relationship with BIGGA and been a Golden Key Supporter of the Association for a number of years.

“Again it's about relationships and we have done a great deal to foster the relationship we have with BIGGA and its members over the years and are pleased to have been able to help so many,” said David.

The Ransomes Jacobsen Scholarships, which were introduced in 2002, have given financial assistance to a total of 92 BIGGA members to complete higher education courses while the company also donated generously to the production costs of the Safety Management System which was launched in 2007.

You can be sure that the Ipswich HQ will continue to buzz as David has a cunning plan to ensure many medium and long term projects are done.

“In many places it's these plans that are overlooked but I believe if you timetable an occasion every year it gives a deadline to meet and you can hang other jobs on the back of that occasion.

“For example we had Sir Bobby Robson open our new offices four years ago; we had the opening of our new parts department two years ago; our 175th birthday celebrations in 2007 and our new golf course opening earlier this year.”

It certainly promotes the buzz and a “Can do” attitude to working at Ransomes Jacobsen.