

WHAT'S NEW IN TECHNOLOGY

From loo seats to luxury kitchens in 10 years

When Kevin Davidson opened his first factory under the Phoenix banner in Cleethorpes in 1996, one of the product areas he was keen to explore was the manufacture and membrane pressing of novelty loo seats.

SINCE THEN THINGS have moved on to encompass the bespoke manufacture of domestic kitchens for house builders and the contract production of specialist furniture for schools and point-of-sale displays for shopfitters.

Throughout his first 10 years in business Kevin Davidson has sourced his production technology through John Wilson at Machine Sales Ltd, partly, he says, because he always found the Italian CNC technology of MSL "spot on". But even more importantly, he adds, it is because the level of back-up service he has received, in terms of training and technical support, has been so consistently high.

"I think that Morbidelli technology is as good as it gets," he says, "and my experience up to now tells me that I can expect any operating fault to be attended to and rectified by MSL reliably within a 24-hour window. When you are manufacturing to house builders' or architects' deadlines, that level of response is crucial.

"I have friends who are also competitors and who have CNC systems, some of them Italian, and they have been forced to wait two weeks with the machine out of use due to a technical fault. I simply can't function on that basis – I can't afford that sort of down time in today's highly competitive marketplace."

The existing Morbidelli Author 600 work centre and the Omal Livello 4 dowel and components drilling and inserting layout at Phoenix, both installed earlier this year, have now also been complemented by a new Routech R200 KX CNC router from Machine Sales.

The Routech is a highly flexible machining centre with a mobile gantry and fixed worktable that is capable of processing a range of substrate materials including solid wood and wood-based panels, of course, but also plastics or light alloys.

Machining of wood and panel materials at Phoenix has been transformed by the board nesting technology of Routech which is revolutionising component output for Kevin Davidson. The new Routech is cutting nested components from 4000 x 2080mm boards – everything from



"I think Morbidelli technology is as good as it gets," says Kevin Davidson, who gets 24-hour call out attendance from supplier Machine Sales Ltd.

individual drawer fronts to wardrobe doors and kitchen end panels. Now that works manager Dave 'Cozzie' Costello has learned how to get the best from the technology, output has quadrupled while the man power input requirement has halved.

The new Routech is optimising panels, sizing and edge profiling and face routing where necessary, all in a single pass. With its superior vacuum clamping, more balanced action than the competition and its ability to produce more individual components from a larger single sheet, the new Routech is outclassing the CNC technology it supersedes and Cozzie Costello reckons it holds out the promise of yet better things to come.

Brushless digital motors on the Routech are controlled by cross-section prismatic guides with preloaded recirculating ball slides and very high precision rack and pinion with an automatic lubrication system. The Phoenix Routech has, according to Kevin Davidson, also entirely eliminated the need for a beam saw or similar panel sizing device to tie up premium

manufacturing floor space.

Nested panels are cut and profiled on the Routech before drilling on the Morbidelli or the Omal to accept a wide range of customer-specified construction fittings, hardware or components. The Omal Livello also drills for dowels and glues and inserts them – Kevin Davidson is confident that he now has the ideal pre-assembly cabinet manufacturing station.

So he is going up-market with a new range of superior quality, and therefore more expensive, bespoke kitchen and fitted bedroom furniture designs.

There is now a showroom on the drawing board at the Grimsby factory of Phoenix Fitted Furniture which will be designed and equipped to target new business at street level as well as setting out the company stall to attract builders of higher quality housing in the East Coast area – Kevin Davidson says there is a growing number now going up-market.

One of the builders already in the Phoenix portfolio is Wimpey Homes for whom Kevin Davidson is producing kitchens as kits of parts to be hung on wall frames rather than built on a traditional carcass – the attraction for Wimpey Homes being that the system is

zero rated for VAT.

Kevin Davidson believes that the wood and panel machinery from Machine Sales now on his factory floor, plus the technical staff training support he is getting from the Leeds-based company, means he can go confidently upmarket, where the project values are higher and the margins are stronger. "Fitted furniture built to the standards of precision we can now command is a powerful selling tool for builders," he says.

"I've monitored house sales on the East Coast over a period of time and I reckon that individual homes with high quality fitted interiors – kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms – sell faster as well as commanding a higher asking price and that must surely make the furniture itself a bankable asset. If the fitted house sells three months ahead of the non-fitted one, that alone must surely be worth £1000 to £1500 at the very least!"

In anticipation of generating additional business at the higher end of the market, Kevin Davidson is researching ways to further value-add his products.

He is looking, for example, at the manufacture of granite worktops, all individually cut, sized and polished, and that is something he has been working on in conjunction with John Wilson who reckons it could be a winner – as long as Machine Sales supplies the machine, of course – John Wilson is working on that!

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Far left: Works manager Cozzie Costello now has superior drilling, dowel gluing and insertion to hand with Omal Livello 4.

Left: The new Routech R200 KX CNC router from Machine Sales.

