

Morbidelli is Partner for Growth at British Thornton

The name British Thornton ESF doesn't tell the casual observer much about the nature of the company or its expertise. However, to anyone involved in the very specialised field of drawing instruments or, more latterly, in bespoke panel-based furniture and allied equipment designed specifically for the research laboratory and education sectors, British Thornton ESF means a great deal.

Even when the field of view is narrowed down to furniture, there are few companies still prospering with a fully traceable history going back 130 years. But this Keighley-based manufacturer is one of them.

Operations director Stuart Little, together with co-directors Gary Wilks on finance and MD David Jevons, put together a management buy-out in 1995 since which the company has evolved from a small, labour intensive facility into a modern, high volume plant. Morbidelli drilling and routing systems now set the manufacturing standards for a new millennium, with the third of an impressive line up of three Author systems having been installed in April 2006: a Morbidelli Author 600.

But even for a relatively new management team, the flexibility and speed of these state-of-the-art technology resources is a recent luxury: "In our early days," recalls Stuart Little, "we were lacking in serious machining capabilities on the shop floor at any level - and there were far too many hand-work procedures for 21st century comfort."

During the early years of the new management team automation was restricted by available funding, limiting both capability and growth. A couple of single side edgebanders were sourced initially and then, a year or two further down the line, the first CNC machine which pointed the way forward. But management needed more precision, more flexibility and more speed so when confidence began to rise, Stuart Little got the green light to go for his technology of choice



The Keighley factory of British Thornton is 110,000 sq ft and the range of panel based furniture it produces is infinitely variable in size and style

and the first of the Morbidellis, an Author 430, was installed in 2003.

Then an Author 500S was introduced in late 2005 and now, in April 2006, an Author 600 has been added to the technology strength on the Keighley shop floor where the Morbidelli CNC cell is currently producing panels to exacting specifications for furniture to target a wide range of highly specialised scientific, educational, IT and public sector applications. Many of them involve comprehensive room set layouts including, for example, PC LabStations with full drainage, cabling and plumbing and involving worktops with shapes and cut-outs to accommodate specialist laboratory or teaching equipment. Complex panel shapes are also often specified as part of public library installations, for the latest generation of information technology processing or for front of house reception desking systems across the corporate and leisure spectrum.

"Because we design and produce quite extensive and fully integrated bespoke furniture systems to detailed customer specifications, clients are often keen to visit the factory to see how it's done," explains Stuart Little. "We soon realised that many visitors were familiar with the Morbidelli name and reputation and also that the Italian maker inspired customer confidence at many levels, from engineering to management.

"That was encouraging, so when we found that we were getting the performance and technical support that we had been promised by UK distributor MSL we were left in no doubt when it came to ordering the second machine. As workloads continued to build, we bought the next Morbidelli model up the line, first an Author 500S and now a 600, to further enhance our capability spread."

Author from Morbidelli is among the world's best selling, and hence best proven, brand name in multi-tasking work centre systems for wood and wood based panel processing. A working table area of 3200 x 1380mm, a workpiece travel speed of 180mm per minute and a Rapid auto change tool capability with a capacity up to 14 individual tools makes Morbidelli's Author systems one of the star performers of the industry with 20 Kw of installed power giving routing and drilling speeds of 6000 rpm and more.

Under the stewardship of the new management team much else has also changed at British Thornton. A new 110,000 sq ft clean,



British Thornton make bespoke cabinet furniture for a range of specialist applications

light and airy factory on the banks of the river Worth in Keighley is their power house of production technology, which has helped to reverse the fortunes of the company and underpinned its expansion. The catalogue of specialist furniture now runs to more than 120 pages, doubling the product inventory in the last decade.

Panel based furniture by British Thornton extends to a very large range of standard carcass modules which are often adapted or enlarged to planners' drawings or are custom built for purpose. Many ancillaries like chairs and filing systems are simply bought in and supplied on as part of the project management package and in some cases speciality pieces are based on steel or aluminium frames with infills prefabricated in a range of modern sheet materials.

Stuart Little says that the three Morbidellis have trebled the output threshold of bespoke panels and given the management team the confidence to go after bigger and better individual contracts. Some of these are now occasionally overseas - like a recent educational layout built for a British customer fitting out a new school in Kuwait.

The payroll at British Thornton ESF has also risen - from less than 50 people in 1995 to 135 now, of which 80+ are shop floor based with the balance in logistics, site fixing and systems commissioning. Annual revenue has also increased from £2.7m in 1995 to chase a targeted £15m for 2007 - and even after so much inward investment, profitability is rising fast.

"Morbidelli has made all the difference to us for precision manufacturing of this kind," says Stuart Little. "There are huge benefits in reduction of waste, reduced site work, greater quality guarantees and higher levels of customer satisfaction. The company and its commissioning staff must both have full confidence in relation to in-house manufacturing technology - and

so, of course, must the customer.

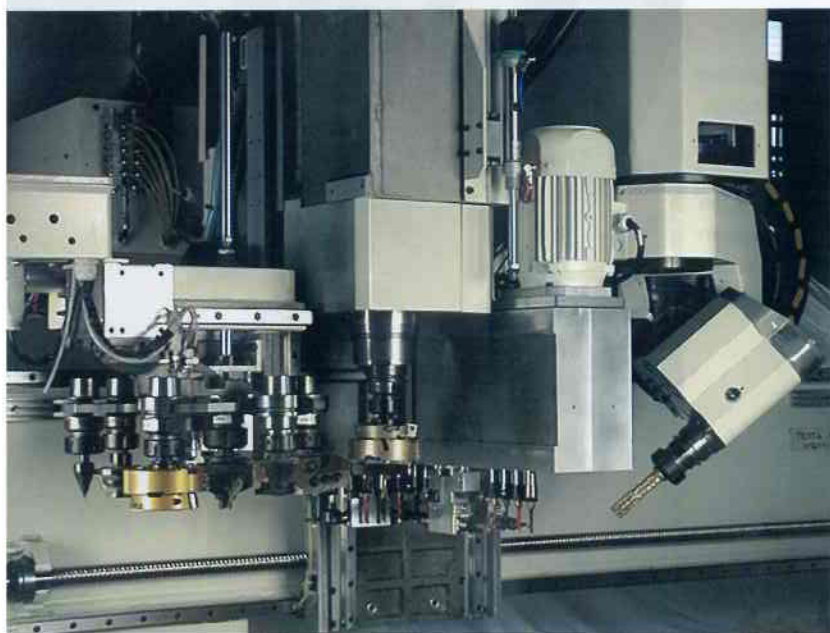
"As pressure builds behind rising sales volumes, the more vital it

becomes to be working with a production technology partner like MSL. We've found John Wilson and his team at Machine Sales to be people we can trust and rely on whenever - and for whatever - they are needed."

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The Morbidelli Author 430 set the standard for CNC technology at British Thornton back in 2004.



The engineering standards of Morbidelli are widely acknowledged to be among the world's finest