

UK KNITWEAR PRODUCTION



BHM UK headquarters in
Fleckney, Leicestershire

Home and Away

Off-shore production blended with UK-based design and quality control has proved the ideal combination for one Leicestershire knittwear supplier.

We expect loyalty, but in turn, we are extremely loyal to our partners and suppliers.” This bon mot may have the essence of management speak and spin, but after an hour in the company of BHM Knitwear managing directors Steven Anstee and Richard Witting, it seems a rather fitting (no pun intended) conclusion to our discussion. In fact, I realise that it’s this somewhat avuncular message that effectively underpins the operation here at this modern UK knitwear supplier.

Let me explain. BHM Knitwear began life in 1974 under the patronage of a gentleman called Ben Moffitt here in Fleckney, Leicestershire, the traditional heartland of the UK’s knitting industry. After growing the business and gradually upgrading to ever larger premises, Ben was regarded locally as something of an experimental pioneer, a reputation that was based on his willingness to explore the latest technological advances before many of his peers. After the purchase



BHM Knitwear managing directors
Richard Witting (Left) and Steven Anstee

of a Bentley Ace, which was one of the first electronic machines that allowed him to knit intarsia, Ben purchased his first electronic Stoll v-bed machine in 1976; and the company hasn’t looked back since.

Fast forward to the 1980s and just a few miles away, Steven Anstee, who at the time was employed as a knitting technician at

hosiery maker, Atkins of Hinckley, saw this growth of the electronic side of the industry and realised he needed to be involved. Both Steven and Richard began work on the same day in 1985 and now, as joint managing directors in 2009, they have firmly grasped Ben’s ‘design and development led’ baton.

While the philosophy may not have changed over this period, the company’s operating procedures certainly have.

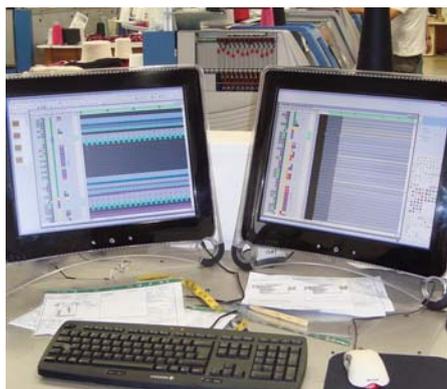
Having once employed over 100 people here in Fleckney, knitting the garments themselves, the sea-change in the UK’s textile industry swept through BHM six or seven years ago leaving the administration, sales, design and sampling facilities in the UK with the knitting operation now established in Eastern Europe.

“The manufacturing site has been lost,” explains Steven, with an obvious, but resigned, tinge of regret. “But the design, the development and the quality control certainly has not. This is what we are geared up for.”

The way BHM operates is simple. The company has built up a network of partners in countries such as Romania and Turkey, which although independently run, house BHM-owned knitting machines. BHM receives an order, creates a sample in-house in the Fleckney base and once the final order is placed, the company makes use of its latest Stoll MIplus design software and sends the knitting programme to one of its suppliers where the order is fulfilled. Every piece of ladies’ and men’s knitwear, which at peak time can total more than 100,000 per week in gauges ranging from 3G to 12G, is then shipped to Fleckney before distribution to a wide array of leading UK high street chains. BHM is also responsible for ordering the wide variety of yarn, mainly from Turkey, Italy and Spain, which includes everything from cotton, acrylic, acrylic/nylon, viscose and blends to fancy yarn; in fact anything that is feasible and cost effective.

And it is here that we return to the theme of loyalty. “In Romania after the collapse of communism, we found many previously state-owned knitting mills now in private hands,” explains Steven. “They had no design and sales expertise but they knew how to manufacture. As our partners, everything is done for them. We order all the yarn, we own all the accessories and provide the designs so they have no other overheads. This gives us a cost effective, well made product and we can offer linking services that with a skills shortage here in the UK, makes it impossible to do here.

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The company makes use of the latest Stoll M1plus design software

“We supply the orders and in return, as we are responsible for the majority of the production at these plants, we know our orders will be fulfilled. If there is ever a problem, we know we can juggle things so that all of our orders are met on time. Our partners are focussed solely on manufacturing. We provide all the labels and the bags – all they have to do is make the jumper.”

Customer fears over quality control, working practices and health and safety in the European mills are also allayed. Each factory is independently audited on an annual basis ensuring that working conditions and other guidelines are strictly adhered to. “Everything has to be above reproach,” says Richard. “We pay for factories to be audited so there is no conflict of interest and our customers can see that.”

It sounds straightforward enough, but according to Richard, it is the technology BHM has invested in that makes it all possible. The company has more than 200 of its own Stoll and Shima Seiki v-bed knitting machines installed in the plants, a number that has recently been supplemented with a bank of 50 new Stoll systems. The latest orders are for a range models - mostly CMS 530 and CMS 822 multi-gauge, Knit & Wear systems in gauges E2,5.2, E3,5.2 and E7.2.

“Our intention was actually to purchase ‘newer’, used machines,” adds Steven, recounting the process that led to this recent investment. “I went over to Germany and met Mr. Stoll, where he explained the latest technology and how his company would offer the latest training for the technicians both on the machines and the new M1plus software. The help and support on offer was fantastic.

“It was a big step for us to go to new programming systems, particularly as we were moving to new premises at the time and had to ensure that we were still able to



Above: In the last 12 months, BHM has bought eight brand new CMS 530 multi-gauge systems for its sampling dept. Top: The company supplies high-fashion knitwear to some of the UK's leading high street stores.

meet our existing orders. But Stoll convinced us about the new technology and now we are really seeing the benefit.”

“The latest technology has helped tremendously,” agrees Richard. “Both in terms of speeding up knitting times transferring the knitting programmes and sharing designs with our partners. We now offer a six-seven week delivery and as low as three weeks on repeats.

“They (the partners) have the will and the expertise to makes the knitwear but do not have the means to invest on a large scale in

the way that BHM does. We don't mind doing this because we are in it for the long term and the machines always remain our assets.”

This investment is also replicated in the company's sampling department, an area where clearly, no expense has been spared. In fact, as a colleague in the industry pointed out to me recently, “they've invested so heavily in the sampling department, it resembles most other companies' knitting floors”. This proves to be the case. In the last 12 months, BHM has bought eight brand

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new CMS 530 multi-gauge systems and runs three in E7.2, two each in E2,5.2 and E3,5.2 and one in E3, giving it the capability to provide customers with beautifully made samples in less than 24 hours if needs be.

"For a sampling department this is a huge investment," adds Steven. "We have four designers, three knitting technicians and three people on make-up creating samples day in, day out. There are also two on quality control making sure everything is perfect before it goes to the customers."

"We have around 100 samples on our list at the moment," Richard confirms. "This is the strength of our company. Nobody invests in sampling the way BHM does – even the big firms that are left don't have the sampling capacity that this company has which keeps opening doors and always keeps the company fresh."

Expansion

Although the customer base is firmly centred on the UK, BHM is looking at identifying customers in Europe over the next 12 months and is also looking to grow

its manufacturing capability, this time with a focus on Bangladesh. Some of the latest purchases from Stoll are earmarked for a new partner in Bangladesh who, although not yet selected, will be used to add a new string to BHM's bow.

"We're going to pick a partner that will be run in the same way as our Romanian operation," says Steven. "Bangladesh has a very skilled population and it is a growth industry for them. We can offer our expertise on the electronic machines and offer a different product from Bangladesh rather than replicate our existing lines."

Talk of further expenditure at a time of general belt tightening may raise eyebrows in some places but at BHM, which actually increased its turnover last year to nearly US\$20 million, it is described by Steven as the only way forward. "There is an economic downturn but BHM has managed to increase turnover during this time. Our customers are reluctant to place bigger orders with long lead times with Asian suppliers. Larger orders from there can have a 20 weeks lead time and as the dollar has

fluctuated it's a double whammy. They have to commit to orders, and pay in dollars for an item that is taking so long to come, they don't even know if it's going to sell when it gets here.

"When things are good, it's an advantage to get products in quickly because they are selling quickly. When times are bad, by using a company such as BHM, it's acceptable to make decisions later – colour, quantity etc – because the retailer knows that we can turn orders around quickly and repeat quickly. Given the time we've had over the last nine months, it may cost a premium but it's worth it.

"BHM has always put design, development and lead time above costs and price level because we don't want to be the situation where you have to be the cheapest. I think that's why we're still around. It's going to be challenging times for everybody over the next 12 to 18 months and although price is always key, it's up to us to tailor our product to make sure our customers can meet their margins."

Loyalty, it seems, is a two-way street.

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Published by Mowbray Communications Ltd which brings you *Ecotextile News* and *The Apparel Analyst*. *The Textile Dyer* is edited by Phil Patterson, who until recently worked for Marks & Spencer for 10 years as the Dyeing, printing, finishing and colour manager.

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