

Making it in Leeds

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Controlling The Flow Lands £4.5M Order

A Leeds-based manufacturer of process control systems has landed its largest single order from the water industry for this type of equipment. Software designers and engineers at Safronics Limited are currently working to fulfil the £4.5 million order from Severn Trent Water for its Minworth waste water treatment plant near Sutton Coldfield.

The bumper order crowns an eventful year for the world-class £11M turnover company and it is now gearing up for further growth. A recent £75,000 investment in the current production space at the company's Pearson Street factory in Hunslet, where it employs a 130-strong workforce, has already yielded significant efficiency improvements.

The expansion has been funded from entirely within the business, which remains debt-free and continues to invest in its software development team. Some 30 programmers design and maintain increasingly sophisticated control systems for a variety of different end users, providing worldwide bespoke process control functionality.

The combination of products, services and management culture fit with Saftronics' new strap-line: "We're in Control."

Formed in 1979 as a joint venture between a South African company and Stanningley-based R F Winder, within a couple of years Saftronics became a wholly-owned UK company and a key step change in 2001 saw an MBO by the current team led by managing director Geoff Puckett and commercial director Alan Rayner.

The company is an established supplier of sophisticated process control equipment to the utility industries and chiefly water, now governed by five-year purchasing cycles. Planned diversification into the oil and gas industries has created a steadily growing niche market with US-based contractors working all over the world. Accordingly, Saftronics now has a Houston-based agent, regular Stateside visits by the UK sales force and one major US generator manufacturer standardising on Saftronics' products and placing repeat multiple orders for Leeds-made motor control centres.

Building services, power generation and transport industries, including aviation, also depend on Saftronics' ability to design, manufacture, install and commission equipment produced and tested to recognised global standards. Involvement in the automated control of key services delivering water and power to millions of homes demands a robust corporate responsibility policy and environmental commitment. At Saftronics, this includes stringent Health & Safety standards, recently recognised by a Silver Award in a joint Severn Trent and ROSPA scheme.

Geoff Puckett explains: "We've coped successfully with the water industry's drive for lower prices by increasing efficiency and improving customer service levels. Our staff have been totally committed to these changes, hence the success, and a recently launched staff suggestion scheme attracted some 150 entries. Many have already been adopted into our "working better going forward" plan, bringing important improvements to production processes and product design."

The company has also invested heavily in a comprehensive re-branding and marketing exercise, following in-depth research and mapping of existing and potential customer bases.

"We've also had 100% acceptance of the new branding campaign and new working practices and a large proportion of the workforce is involved in NVQ training on continuous improvement techniques. This positions us well for attacking the re-developing power industry in the UK, which we believe will present us with tremendous growth opportunities."

Alan Rayner points out that Saftronics control centres range in size, from desk-top to 30 metres long and is particularly proud of the new SafSmart products that have brought enclosure fabrication and finishing

in-house to reduce costs to clients and the company's own carbon footprint. It's another example of how the Saftronics strap-line is at the heart of everything the company does.

He is equally proud of the firm's continued investment in software development, with some 30 programmers now based in Leeds and working on increasingly sophisticated control systems that can be operated on-site or remotely and with intelligent information downloads to desk-top terminals or even mobile phones.

"We thought long and hard when our marketing consultant Tony Dexter coined the phrase: "We're in Control," but apart from telling people what we do, we also believe we're now perfectly placed to deliver that promise for the business and our customer." Says Geoff Puckett.

Ian Williams, policy director at Leeds Chamber of Commerce, said: "For modern manufacturing, price inflation isn't an option; in fact, quite the reverse. Savings have to be found through efficiencies in the production and manufacture and a process of continuous improvement is central to survival in fiercely competitive markets. There's a lot that businesses in other sectors can learn from manufacturing companies like Saftronics."

Ends

Photography:

Caption: Saftronics directors Alan Rayner (centre) and Geoff Puckett (right) watch case assembler Chris Doran working on one of the final intelligent motor control centres being supplied to Severn Trent Water's Minworth project - part of the Leeds company's £4.5m contract.

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