

New horizons

With any subcontracting business a key decision is the focus of expertise. Some companies aim to be as wide ranging as possible by offering a diverse range of services while others prefer a narrower field of vision specialising in specific disciplines. On the sheetmetal side, there are a number of ways of producing profiles accurately but since its inception in 1990, Cannock-based Laser Process has been firmly anchored in the laser camp. However, things may be about to change as *Dave Tudor* discovered when he met with managing director, David Lindsey.

Continuous expansion since the company began has resulted in Laser Process effectively outgrowing its premises three times. Its current location is a modern, purpose-built facility covering 15,000ft² that has been home to the three-shift, 38 employee company since 2002. Mr Lindsey's association with laser cutting and laser cutting equipment began in 1980, when, after attending an exhibition at the NEC in Birmingham with a previous employer, the decision was taken to take the plunge and purchase a machine.

"Prior to the formation of Laser Process, I worked for an engineering company which was heavily involved in pipework systems for British Gas," Mr Lindsey reveals. "Unfortunately the work began to dry up so we had to explore other opportunities and one of these was the laser cutting of sheetmetal. At the time, the DTI was offering grants for companies looking to invest in new technology so we took advantage of this and bought a laser cutting machine. In 1990 I formed Laser Process and have not looked back since."

Making choices

In terms of equipment suppliers, Trumpf is the preferred manufacturer of choice. Regular investment in new equipment has resulted in a versatile array of machines to handle almost any manufacturing requirement. On the laser cutting machine side, the equipment list is extensive: a Trumpf L4060 6kW, 4m by 2m; 2 x Trumpf 2530 3kW 2.5m by 1.25m and 2 x Trumpf L3050, 5kW, 3m by 1.5m. Pressbrake capability is handled by a Trumpf 170 tonne 3m machine with additional equipment including a Trumpf marking and engraving system, a vibratory deburring facility and a laser-based CMM taking care of quality control requirements.

"One of our main strengths is our flexibility," Mr Lindsey enthuses. "Our customer base is wide and encompasses a number of different industries including materials handling, aerospace, motorsport, the mobility sector and architectural applications. There's no such thing as a typical batch size and we can handle anything from one-off to 1,000s-off in a wide range of materials from mild steel and aluminium through to brass, Inconel and titanium. We can accept data in a number of formats including conventional drawings, DXF and DWG and can supply to schedules including Kanban and JIT. Our aim has always been to produce quality products with a fast turnaround – within a few hours in some cases."

With such an obvious bias towards laser profiling, I ask Mr Lindsey if he has ever considered any other processes such as waterjet cutting. "I've considered diversifying a number of times," he replies, "but each time the company has been in a position to invest in new equipment, we've always needed additional flat bed laser profiling capacity to keep up with demand so that's where we've directed our attention. Having this focus has enabled us to employ the latest laser cutting techniques using the very best equipment," he continues. "We've always been at the forefront of technology and we try and offer something different from the competition – for example we were the first company in the UK to use a twin head laser and we were the first to place orders for 5kW and 6kW machines."

Move on up

In today's competitive marketplace however, there's no time for standing still and for the first time in the company's history, waterjet cutting is being considered to complement laser cutting. Mr Lindsey explains the reasoning behind the consideration. "We've recently upgraded our Quality Management System (QMS) from ISO9001 to AS9100 and that has been largely due to our involvement with work for the aerospace sector," he says. "It's common knowledge that before long, any



company tendering for aerospace work as part of the supply chain will have to be registered to AS9100 and since we have a number of existing aerospace customers and are looking to build on this, applying for registration made good business sense.

"The truth is that many aerospace companies are twitchy about laser profiling and in some cases, justifiably so," he continues. "While it is an extremely effective and accurate method, by definition there will be heat affected zones, which on some aerospace components is unacceptable. In addition, there are some materials, either from a process perspective or a health and safety angle that simply are not suitable for laser cutting such as certain composites and some plastics. In this context, the application of heat can be downright dangerous – certain plastics contain undesirable chemicals such as arsenic and hydrogen chloride and the introduction of heat in these instances is simply unsafe.

"Waterjet cutting in general is a safer process and for certain applications is more suitable. It can cut thicker materials than laser and with no heat affected zones to be concerned about that would have to be subsequently machined off, there's less waste and no contamination issues. Looking forward as a company, we are considering waterjet profiling – hopefully during 2009 – because it's necessary for the markets we want to move into. In addition it will be another string to our bow."

Lacking support

Of course many companies are naturally cautious about making capital equipment purchases at the moment because of the current economic climate. Laser Process is no different in this regard but Mr Lindsey is very critical of the Government's lack of support in surviving these difficult times.

"In terms of pricing and low interest rates, there's never been a better time to buy new equipment, but the lack of confidence generally is outweighing the subsequent benefits," he declares. "To make matters worse the Government isn't exactly helping the situation. I know of a very successful, very well run local company who manufacture fixings for the automotive industry and not surprisingly they're finding things very tough at the moment.

"The company in question applied to the Government for help, but before the claim could be processed, financial reports were required from the bank which cost a staggering £60,000. The final icing on the cake was that following these charges, the application was rejected and now a perfectly viable company just needing a little help has gone into liquidation. I think it's absolutely criminal."

Association matters

As a founder member of ALLU (Association of Laser Users), Mr Lindsey believes that the Association has much to offer any company involved in laser profiling technology. A UK-based organisation with members extending

across five continents, ALLU is a well-established, independent, not-for-profit organisation run by and for the laser community. Members include the main UK players in manufacturing industry, jobshops and research organisations as well as manufacturers and suppliers of lasers and laser-related equipment and services.

"For the membership costs each year, ALLU represents excellent value for money," Mr Lindsey advocates. "I personally sit on the Jobshop sub-committee and find it an invaluable resource for the sharing of ideas and networking but as is the case with many industry associations, it would be even more effective if we could increase membership levels.

"The ALLU website, through its 'Virtual Laser Expert' interface is a great way to pose questions and get informed answers, and membership enables participation on specific forums. One particularly useful aspect is the regular surveys that take place where participating members get privileged access to the results. This facility saved Laser Process tens of thousands of pounds when we renegotiated our gas supply contract at the time of moving to our new premises."

→ **LASER PROCESS**
www.pesmag.co.uk/laser-process

"If you source laser profiling, fabrication or turret punching..."

I know that we'll deliver on time and help cut your costs!"



Dennis Kent
Managing Director

Carlton Laser Services Limited

C.L.S. CARLTON LASER SERVICES LIMITED

Telephone: 0116 222 3192 | Facsimile: 0116 233 9992

Email: sales@carltonlaser.co.uk

www.carltonlaser.co.uk

Carlton Laser Services Ltd
470 Thurmaston Boulevard | Troon Industrial Estate | Leicester | LE4 9LN

