

As you drive into Claro Precision Engineering's premises in Knaresborough, North Yorkshire, everything looks as you would expect it to. The smallish firm's home is on an expansive grey industrial estate and comprises a featureless row of business units. Hundreds of similar companies exist all around the country.

But closer inspection brings a rather nice surprise. Offset to the side of the car park is a carefully maintained garden rockery, a rather quaint intrusion into everyday life. "That's the schoolkids," smiles Martin Doxey, Claro's managing director. "We encourage the local schools to come to the factory to see how a real engineering business operates. We asked them what they thought of the premises and they told us it looked a bit dull from the outside. So they designed the garden and then helped us to build it."

This may seem like a superfluous tale, but it is symptomatic of the way that Claro goes about its business. The firm, which is 26 years old, operates with a careful attention to detail that has seen it win a reputation for the high quality of its precision engineering work. Indeed, Claro is so busy at the moment that the factory is running on double shifts and has actually had to turn away some work – and there are not many engineering firms that can say that.

"It is not an ideal situation but we have been pushed to meet some customer demand," admits Doxey. "You hear stories about the demise of British engineering and how it is all slipping away to lower-cost countries, but we are proof that, if you offer an honest, quality service and ensure that you provide customers with what you say you will, then the work is definitely still out there."

Claro's bread-and-butter business is the supply of precision-machined parts, tooling and assemblies for industries such as medical, aerospace and automotive. It machines parts ranging from single prototypes to batches of 1,000 using materials ranging from plastics through to the most exotic speciality stainless steels. Parts can be provided in sub-assembled or fully assembled condition, all ready to use and fully tested to customer specification.

Doxey says the secret of Claro's success is the time taken to develop real business partnerships with

Claro vision: Integration of milling and turning should make the firm leaner and reduce inventory

customers. As part of its subcontract precision machining service, it is happy to take customers' fag-packet designs, working hand-in-hand to develop them through CAD to manufactured products. He says that these mutual relationships have been built on a firm basis of trust, with Claro working hard to ensure that it never makes promises that it cannot deliver. The approach seems to have worked: 17 out of 20 of Claro's largest customers are the same companies as they were three years ago.

"There is a place for companies that can offer low-volume, high-value products at the innovative end of the market," Doxey insists. "It is here that British firms can beat foreign rivals. The mass-production basic commodity market has gone to places like China, but there is a great opportunity for engineering companies like Claro that can offer a real design and manufacturing service."

Claro employs 45 people, a figure that is set to rise in the coming months. Precision engineering is carried out using a range of CNC machining systems, including Bridgeport, Kitamura, Hitachi Seiki and Matsuura. Doxey says he will be investing in more machinery, and plans to boost factory floorspace by expanding into a new business unit within 18 months.

"I have just made an offer of £250,000 for a five-pallet horizontal milling machine which will increase our output," he says. "The company is moving towards the integration of milling and turning, something that will make us much leaner. The investment will eventually mean less inventory and lower lead times and prices."

Doxey oversaw a management buyout at Claro in June and plans to double the company's turnover through organic growth from £3 million to £6 million within the next five years. However, he says, there won't be any radical changes at the firm to enable it to achieve this, just a steady escalation of what Claro already does.

"We have a good reputation and it would be mad to turn the company on its head to try and meet unrealistic figures," he adds.

"Claro will move forward through a period of accelerated evolution, not revolution. The aim is to provide a cheaper, better, faster, more integrated service than is already currently available."



The miller's tale

The man who led the recent buyout at Yorkshire firm Claro tells *Lee Hibbert* how he plans to grow the business by investing in milling machinery and taking on extra staff

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