

Keeping an eye on quality

Norwich-based Ecoglass always strives to manufacture the best quality IGUs possible in the marketplace, and believe that sourcing machinery that can keep up with its customers' demands is paramount.

Glass Times editor Nathan Bushell talked to directors Gaby Mendham (pictured) and Roger Middleton, and Hegla's managing director Steve Goble about quality, efficiency and the shift to triple glazing.



Even before the interview had properly got off the ground, Ecoglass director Gaby Mendham and Hegla's Steve Goble discussed the importance of placing quality machinery at the heart of a glass processing company's workflow.

Gaby also pointed out that advanced and reliable modern machinery is needed in a manufacturing environment. "Our customers rely on a strong delivery service, and rightly so, having quality machinery is a large part of being able to provide such a service," she said. "Working with Steve and a world class name such as a Hegla does give you confidence"

"Well, if you have been in the industry as long as I have, you build up a good idea about how things can run optimally," Steve said, modestly. Ecoglass was established in 1947, in the centre of Norwich before moving to its current premises on the outskirts of the City in 1998. By this time, the company had started to develop its skill in IGU manufacture..

From the outset, Gaby said that Ecoglass's philosophy is, and will always be, to use top quality components and state of the art machinery to produce a product that is second to none.

"Not all IGUs are produced equally," she explained. "Some manufacturers strip the costs by using cheaper components. That is not for us – we always use branded quality components to produce, what we believe, is the finest IGU within the marketplace today. This, coupled with a dedicated, motivated and skilled workforce, ensures consistent



Right: Hegla Optimax cutting table with the loader in the background (reverse view above).

quality product."

Steve agreed that the market was right for this approach because consumers were looking at glass in a different light. "When Document L came in, it made the unit more than just something to keep out the wind," he said.

technical expertise

Glass was becoming more intelligent, Gaby said, "and there are a lot of clever people out there with great technical knowledge. What was effectively a cottage industry gave way to a bigger industry that brought together technical expertise from all the way up the supply chain."

As a continuation of this philosophy, Ecoglass recently invested in a Bystronic IG line, which would give the company the opportunity of increasing both its triple glazed unit output (currently accounting for up to 10% of products

sold) and standard IGU capacity, while efficiently producing dual-sealed units made up of glass from Saint-Gobain Glass and rigid warm edge spacer bar from Thermoseal and Swisspacer.

That line was installed in the summer of 2013 along with a Hegla cutting table so that the increased capacity could be met. Interestingly, Gaby and Roger appreciated that if IGU output were to increase then there could be a bottleneck in the manufacturing process if glass wasn't being cut at a sufficient rate. They therefore decided to make provision for a loader for the cutting table – at a slightly increased cost – should that need arise.

It turned out to be a wise decision. Before the Bystronic line went in, the company was manufacturing circa 4,000 units a week. By the end of 2013, that figure jumped to 5,500

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Left: units are checked.
Right: Bystronic line.



units a week, on a single shift, which can peak to around 7,000.

"We have always concentrated on quality and service, which has allowed us to weather the economic storm while some competitors fell by the wayside," Gaby said. "For example, we have a high quality product, and we won't alter the specification of that product for different customers; whether commercial or residential, the product remains the same."

quality is key

The company has invested in a Vipotron quality scanner, on which operators were receiving training as Glass Times was shown round. "Primarily it is there to ensure the consistency of quality," Gaby said. "Quality is key for us and key for our customers, any technology that can help improve our quality even more, is always a good thing."

Ecoglass also employs one person in a full time role who continually carries out component and finished product testing. All IGU components are continually tested all throughout the shift to ensure optimum performance during manufacture. All finished IGUs are quality controlled for a final time by a team of six people.

The Hegla loading table was installed last spring, which has allowed the company to increase its manufacturing capacity even further.

"The cutting table is an excellent piece of kit," Roger said, "and it is used to it fullest capability thanks to the loader, which can quickly and easily switch between all the high performance glasses used."

"The biggest difference is without a doubt the cutting capacity, coupled with better optimisation and less waste."

Roger also pointed out that

Right: IGUs stacked awaiting distribution.



"Quality is key for us and key for our customers, any technology that can help improve our quality even more, is always a good thing."

Right: Units are finished by hand.

Below: Cullet waiting to be taken away.



efficiencies were improved elsewhere as a result. "The Hegla cutting table is now the hub of the operation," he said. "Because that runs efficiently, it means more glass goes through the toughener. We now have a single shift operating the cutting table, and a double shift on toughening."

steady workflow

Alongside the manufacturing machinery runs software by Clear Thinking Software, which enables the company to barcode products throughout the factory and ensures a steady workflow through its glass optimisation and racking systems to final destination.

On the subject of triple glazing, Ecoglass is cautious. Many in the industry will remember Gaby's presentation on triple glazing at the Triple Glazing Question last year. Gaby clearly demonstrated that triple glazing required almost double the amount of resources than double glazing, and the market for it would be doomed before it had properly got of the ground if companies sold it with little or no increased margin.

It is a position she still stands by, and she believes that she isn't alone. "Triple glazing hasn't grown as quickly as people expected it to," she said. "I think they are reluctant to push it before systems are properly

in place, and also educating the consumer to ensure they are buying the correct produce for the correct reasons, and not just for triple glazing for triple glazing's sake.

"Triple glazing raises some other manufacturing challenges but with careful training methods and a reliable, dedicated workforce, we continue to deliver a top quality product again and again, whether its double, triple or single glazed."

As a result, the future looks bright, and Ecoglass is going from strength to strength.

It is always a possibility that because some treat IGUs as a commodity product, cutting the cost of manufacture could result in corners being cut when it comes to maintaining the product's quality. However, for Ecoglass, an investment in the right machinery, and the determination to "deliver top quality products and service as standard" results in products that command the respect they deserve.

