

ALFRED G PEARCE – STAYING AHEAD BY INVESTING IN TECHNOLOGY

by Adrian Tatum

If you were growing for the prepared and convenience sectors 10 years ago, then second grade produce might have been acceptable; but not anymore. The reality is, if you are supplying this sector today then a whole lot more is expected of you.

"Supplying these sectors is arguably more of a challenge than supplying the retailers," **Simon Pearce**, director of **Alfred G Pearce** tells *The Vegetable Farmer*.

The company which is based near Kings Lynn was started in 1959 to service the needs of the canning industry and has since developed into a fully integrated operation which involves the growing, processing and marketing of 70,000 tonnes of vegetable crops a year to food manufacturers in the UK and Europe.

A full range of whole, unpeeled and peeled, cut

products including carrot, parsnip, onion, swede, bulk processing vegetables and IQF frozen vegetables, are supplied throughout the season. These products go to food manufacturers for a wide range of product areas including ready meals, soups, salads and crudités, fast food outlets, crisps, snacks, freezing and canning.

Alfred Pearce's range of root vegetables is available fresh from the field in bulk, after some primary processing, or full processing ready for the finished retail article. The company offers both conventionally and organically grown produce, from

its own farms and from dedicated partners in production throughout the UK and Europe.

Last year saw a £250,000 investment in a new high care packing facility, which Simon Pearce says "reconfirms our commitment to the prepared and convenience sectors and has allowed us to start supply direct into the Food Service sector."

The company also aims to be a 'one stop shop' for its customers providing produce prepared in a ever increasing number of different ways, as well as extending its crop portfolio as customer needs change. "We have also tried to re-invest as much money back into the business as possible even in the early days when we were trying to get things off the ground and that philosophy has definitely paid off," he adds.

Alfred G Pearce has gone from strength to strength in recent years despite the recent



Simon Pearce, Director of Alfred G. Pearce.

downturn in the economy. "The convenience/prepared sector has grown far bigger than any of us ever thought possible I think," says Simon Pearce. "There is no sign of letting up on this growth, either. The recent



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Alfred G. Pearce's onion processing line.

recession saw a reduction in the high-end convenience food and ready meals and some of the retailers scaled back their quality ranges but at the same time there was a rise in popularity in soups and sauces. There is a stronger signal than ever, that shoppers want convenience and they want variety," he adds.

Alongside this, recent research by the IGD has indicated that

sales of fresh vegetables and fruit through the convenience sector are growing. Sales of chilled foods continue to go from strength to strength, and although growth in this area has historically come from the convenience multiples, a growing proportion of operators in other convenience segments are ramping up investment in order to improve their fresh food

propositions, according to the IGD. New figures also released recently, revealed that the UK convenience store sector alone increased in value by 6.3% in the last 12 months, and is now worth £30.9bn.

According to IGD's Convenience Retailing 2010:Future Trading Strategies report, the convenience sector now accounts for 20.9% of the total UK grocery market, and is forecast to rise to £41.3bn by 2015 - growing at a faster pace than the overall UK grocery market.

The report also shows that strong promotional programmes, greater format segmentation, new private label ranges, and the ability to respond to changing shopper behaviour, are all contributing to the continued success of the sector. Although this might be a small part of an even larger processing/convenience sector, it illustrates healthy growth.

But providing the consumer with that convenience, in whatever shape or form it is, is as much a challenge in the field as it is among the sales and

marketing desks. "The fact that our customers have very specific demands for their products mean only top quality produce is good enough," says Simon Pearce. "We have to be very selective with our seed rates, the type of varieties we use and most importantly, given the sectors we supply, taste comes before everything else," he adds. "The retailers are always going to be driven by attractive looking produce as well as other attributes but for us it is different. We might be growing a very large carrot or a very small one but they have still got to be excellent quality, have a good shelf life and meet the needs of our customers. We have worked hard over the past few years with specific seed houses to try and encourage them to provide more varieties suitable for the processing sector and they have done just that although in some cases we have gone back to the more traditional varieties which have great colour and taste," he adds: "The driver is more for taste and colour on root vegetables. Also we need specific sizes for

Investing in automation

Alfred G Pearce has made considerable investment over the past few years and appointed **Projx Services Limited** to design and implement solutions to improve on efficiencies, increased yields, reduced labour and improved effluent handling.

Onions; A complete onion peeling and processing plant was installed by Projx Services and **Finis**. The plant enables Alfred G Pearce to automatically peel up to 24,000 onions per hour and supply fresh whole peel, sliced, and diced product. **Rob Allum**, Managing Director of Projx Services said "All product is hydrocooled to give Alfred G Pearce a huge technical advantage over their competitors and all waste flows are to a purpose built enclosed area which evenly distributes the waste into the containers."

Carrots; Within Alfred G Pearces' intake area, Projx Services installed a custom-built continuous weigh belt with print out facility to monitor the raw material that enters the processing areas. This resulted in giving an accurate record of product that enters the factory.

One of the largest investments was automating the carrot processing plant. Projx Services completed a viability study looking at existing labour, yields and waste, and together with Finis designed a solution to produce whole peeled, sliced, diced, shredded and baton carrots down more than one packing line at a time.

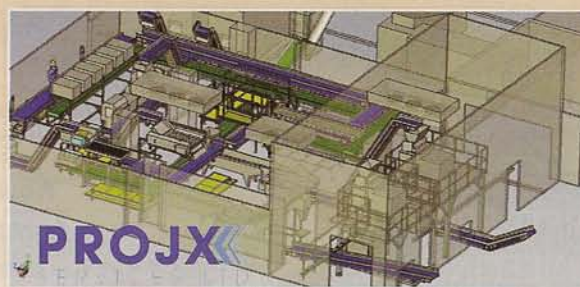
Alfred G Pearce has the flexibility to divert products to different processing options, depending on customers' requirements, and all product is metal detected prior to dispatch. The waste is then divided into two streams with total waste and usable waste, keeping yields and effluent where they need to be. Controlled centrally with modem links directly to the Finis technicians in Holland, Alfred G Pearce has immediate support if required.

The project was based on minimal downtime; therefore temporary

solutions were used during installation to enable Alfred G Pearce to satisfy their customers. **Simon Pearce**, says; "The decision to proceed with this project was an easy one as it increased yields, throughputs, processing options, reduced labour and waste, enabling us to remain very flexible and competitive."

High Care; Following many successful previous projects, Alfred G Pearce also asked Projx Services to deliver a high care turn-key solution. As part of the project a new compressed air system and line was delivered. This enables the business to wash, process and pack a whole variety of products using a multihead weigher with a vertical form fill and seal machine. In addition, all products are checkweighed and metal detected before leaving the area.

Effluent; With escalating waste management costs, Projx studied the best way to handle the effluent from the whole site. The decided solution was to install a large twin screen waste compactor alongside the existing system to enable the factory to separate the solids from the liquid more efficiently and therefore, reduce their effluent management costs.



Projx Services' plans for Alfred G. Pearce's carrot processing plant.



Alfred G. Pearce's carrot processing line.

specific cuts of products. This means using varied drilling densities, variety specifics for customers and a lot of NPDP work our end on variety selection coupled with making detailed databases by month, soil type and variety, measuring taste and colour."

There are also challenging demands on the company to compete several audits as well. Its processing factories and produce meet or exceed all legal and safety requirements which means full traceability can be achieved. As well as a £250,000 investment in 2009, an additional £900,000 was invested in replacing all production lines in the company's medium care operation which included, for the first time, the inclusion of multi-head weighers. This has now enabled Alfred G Pearce to increase its factory capacity by 30% through faster and more efficient lines.

And like many growers the company has also worked hard to minimise its pesticide usage. This has been achieved by assessing crop risk more closely, and taking into account factors including variety, soil type, field history and rainfall.

Only when the assessment indicates a need for treatment is a suitable pesticide applied, following the recommendations of the company's BASIS-trained agronomist, and in line with the guidelines laid down by GAP,

microbiological testing by UKAS laboratories.

But is planning and delivering produce easier in this sector, as apposed to dealing with the retailers? "Actually, no, it's equally difficult with most tenders and contract negotiations taking place in August well after drilling has started in December the previous year. I guess the high level of investment needed in plant and skilled technical people is a deterrent for companies entering the sector," says Simon Pearce.

But beyond the technology and the growing techniques lies another secret to Alfred G Pearce's success. And that is staff - good staff. "Apart from technology and innovation we have invested heavily in recruiting and training good quality staff and managers. This is such an important part of any business and has particularly helped us develop our business and venture into new markets, more of which we hope to do in the future," says Pearce.

He still sees potential in the sector as well. "We will always be pushing forward. We realise that some of the markets we are in don't have endless potential for continued growth, so we will be working hard to find new business but the convenience and prepared sector will always be strong and it is up to us to lead on innovation and development."

Assured Produce, Tesco Nurture, M&S F2F and LEAF auditing schemes. Pearce's factory also holds BRC A Grade status for its medium and high care facilities. In addition, the produce is subjected to a continuous programme of residue and

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