

### *Pulling out all the stops*

***With a history that others can only admire and envy, Birmingham Stopper has adapted and prospered over 120 years using far more than gutsy determination and good fortune. Success here is instead founded on an unerring commitment to investment and best practice, ensuring the business reacts quickly and seamlessly to new customer and sector demands.***



Over the years Birmingham Stopper has seen its core focus shift through everything from bottle stoppers, hence the name, through to bicycle and motorcycle components. Today, the emphasis is on cross-sector subcontracting, embracing industries such as off-highway vehicles, diesel engines, telecommunications, marine, machine building and HVAC to name but a few. Birmingham Stopper has also brought its own products to market in recent years, including manufacturing a highly successful line in pallet feet & fittings.

With no direct sales function, this company mainly trades on recommendation and it's easy to see why: investment is a key part on the management team's strategy here. The fabrication side of the business, as opposed to the presswork side, was originally reliant on punching technology and it is retained to a lesser degree. However, Birmingham Stopper has witnessed a gradual transition to lasers in recent times. Today the company operates four Amada CNC laser profiling centres, including two 4kw

LC3015 F1s and a 4kw FOll 3015. It also runs nine Amada press brakes (up to seven-axis x 3m x 100 tonne capacity) and uses Amada Dr Abe software for programming. In fact, such is the company's reputation that it was one of the fabrication shops to have an input into the London 2012 Olympics, producing large heritage signage for one of the appointed building contractors.

*“Until not so long ago we were running four turret punch presses, but now we only have one, and instead operate four laser cutters,”*

confirms the company's Operations Director, Bob Paton. “The reason we have standardised on Amada technology is simple. Yes, the machines are good, but the service is great – it can't be matched in my opinion. Not just in terms of machine servicing, but software and applications support also, Amada has a good team.”



**“The reason we have standardised on Amada technology is simple. Yes, the machines are good, but the service is great. It can’t be matched in my opinion.”**

**Bob Paton, Operations Director**

## Amada Equipment List:

- LC3015 F1 Laser
- LC3015 F1 Laser
- FOII 3015 Laser
- LC1212 Laser
- Vipros Punch
- HFE 80-25 Press Brake
- HFE 50-20 Press Brake
- APX 80-25 Press Brake
- ITS2 25-12 Press Brake
- ITS2 25-12 Press Brake
- 4 x other Press Brakes
- Dr ABE Blank Software

As the proverb says, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and if success is used as the measure, then Birmingham Stopper's decision to invest in Amada is paying real dividends. The company continued to trade successfully through the worst of the recession, winning new customers. Mr Paton reports that the company recently secured a significant new, long-term contract with a major international manufacturer.

Smart manufacturing and management guile are what help Birmingham Stopper thrive in a fiercely competitive marketplace. The company is still privately owned, operates on its own freehold premises with around 100 employees and is cash rich. Birmingham Stopper use agency staff to manage the peaks and troughs of fluctuating demand that are notorious in the subcontract arena. Furthermore, although the company still occupies its original two acre site in the Hockley

area of Birmingham, today this is a state-of-the-art manufacturing space approved to ISO9001, ISO14001 and TS16949, along with many other customer approval standards. Full measuring capabilities include CNC controlled co-ordinate measuring machines.

The company's skilled manufacturing personnel are supported by a quality orientated team and are encouraged to make continuous improvements through fully established lean processes. From a training perspective, all machine shop personnel at Birmingham Stopper are not only trained to operate, but also program and set the Amada machines. This delivers higher levels of job ownership, and hopefully, a satisfied workforce with low staff turnover. In fact, so impressive is this latter statistic at Birmingham Stopper that a certain Harry Grove retired in 1980 having completed a staggering 66 years' service. The company also implements an intensive skills matrix linked to NVQ qualifications.

Today Birmingham Stopper is a supplier of complete solutions, accommodating manufacturing processes that include profiling, forming, pressing, CNC machining, grinding, welding (including robotic) and assembly. The speed of the Amada F1 lasers makes them the company's show piece machines, but Birmingham Stopper has also opted for a FOII 3015, simply because it processes a high proportion of material 8-10mm thick, where speed is less of an issue.

Although all batch quantities are processed here, 500-off is fairly typical. Application areas range from 0.9 up to 20mm thick mild steel, zintec and stainless steel, as well as glass.





Regarding the latter, the company has developed special fixtures that accommodate the curvature of automotive windscreens on the Amada laser cutters for a customer that requires sections to be cut and removed for testing purposes.

*“As with all of our processes we have to develop the most cost-effective solution for our customers”, says Mr Paton.*

“It would be disingenuous of me to suggest that anything other than price is top priority in our marketplace – factors such as quality and delivery are assumed as given. With this in mind, we try to exploit our Amada lasers to good effect when it comes to minimising component cost. For instance, although we are a single shift operation

we always leave the factory with a sheet loaded on the machines – and another on the pallet changer – typically producing long-running small parts. The machines will then operate unmanned to completion. We never have a problem, which is just as well because many of our customers demand zero ppm rejects and 100% on-time delivery.”

***Birmingham Stopper Ltd***

*235 Icknield Street*

*Hockley*

*Birmingham*

*B18 6QU*

***Tel: 0121 551 7781***

***Email: info@birminghamstopper.co.uk***

***www.pressings.co.uk***

## Key Achievements

- 1892 Formed as The Birmingham Stopper Company
- 1900 Name changed to The Birmingham Stopper & Cycle Components Company
- 1945 Truck and off-highway become the company's largest markets
- 1992 Centenary marks the reversal of name to Birmingham Stopper
- 2010 Installed Amada LC3015 F1 4kW laser
- 2012 Installed Amada FOII3015 4kW laser
- 2013 Installed Amada LC3015 F1 4kW laser