

# Risen from the ashes

EO Burton's business was almost completely wiped out by fire two years ago. Now, however, the Essex-based company is stronger than ever.

## SUMMARY

- EO Burton is privately owned by the Godwin family.
- The company supplies East Anglia and the south of England.
- Two years ago it was almost completely destroyed by fire.
- The damaged moulders were re-engineered by

Little more than two years ago timber supplier EO Burton & Co Ltd was facing disaster. Its main operation had been hit by a major fire, turning its production mills into blackened ruins and putting much of its machinery out of action.

EO Burton is a comparatively small, private company, owned by the Godwin family since the 1950s. In these circumstances, options are limited severely. The alternatives are to try to overcome the problems, urgently - or to bring activities to an end. EO Burton gritted its teeth and decided it would carry on.

It occupies 4.5 acres within Thorndon Country Park, at Brentwood, Essex, on a site that was once the park's own sawmill. The company supplies a wide range of cut timber and mouldings to joiners, builders and furniture manufacturers throughout East Anglia and the south of England. Largely because of the tricky logistics of supplying the East Anglian market, it set up a satellite plant at Snetterton, near Norwich. It was a decision that turned out to be a lifesaver.

Following the fire, EO Burton's immediate priority, apart from making its insurance claim, was to get production under way. A large part of the company's success had been in not only providing good quality product but also in prompt supply, usually no more than four or five days. It knew it had to try to continue to meet these deadlines.

## Helping hand

It turned to neighbouring companies for help and began conveying timber to its Norfolk site, around 120 miles away, for machining. It also searched out a company that might refurbish the badly fire-damaged machines.

At its main plant it was left with just one Wadkin moulder, a seven-head machine, comparatively unscathed, in operation. Two moulders, one Wadkin and one Weinig, were seriously affected, although one

are limited in the kind of assistance they can provide. While they may wish to help out a competitor hit by misfortune, the bottom line is that their own work takes precedence. And for EO Burton, being shunted to the back of the queue was not acceptable. Instead, it decided to make the most use of its severely depleted resources.

It began a regular weekend shuttle between Brentwood and its sister company at Snetterton, a smaller operation but one with a well-equipped machining mill. Materials from Brentwood were delivered on Friday, machined over the weekend, and returned to the Essex site.

## Resurrection of machinery

Ten weeks after the fire one of the affected moulders was resurrected and was able, at least for a time, to resume production. Meanwhile, its workhorse seven-head moulder was already back in action.

Although having an additional moulder in full production was clearly an advantage, the drawback was that much of the production area now consisted of a mixture of scaffolding and tarpaulin. It was a structure that might have been acceptable during a warm, dry summer; during late November and December the conditions were unpleasant, often cold and wet.

"It was a bit of a problem when it rained," admitted Mr Barber. "We were relieved when we came to the Christmas break."

But attitudes at the company never wavered. "The future might have seemed uncertain but we never considered giving up," said Mr Barber.

Even in these trying times, EO Burton kept its discipline and its standards. Quality was maintained, even where conditions verged on the intolerable. Delivery times slipped to an average of 7-10 days - still a minor miracle considering the catastrophe it had experienced.

The struggle went on for nearly four months. It was a hand-to-mouth existence at times but one which reinforced attitudes on self-reliance, organisation, quality and service. Even after the main crisis, there was still pressure to get fully hack on track, interspersed with the disruptions caused by the introduction of new accommodation and new machines.

Today, according to Adrian Barber, the Brentwood site is back to where it was two years ago - and on an upward curve. "We're back to being a profitable business," he said. "We kept all our previous customers and we're adding new ones."

## New beginnings

A new, steel-framed building has replaced the two destroyed by the fire. There is a brand new extraction system. The seven-head moulder continues to give excellent service and has been joined by two of the original moulders, now thoroughly re-engineered by Allied Machinery, of Leeds. Two new Stenner resaws have been introduced, along with three Maggi cross-cuts, a Utis spindle moulder, a Utis thicknesser and other smaller machines.

It adds up to a new beginning for an organisation that looked into the abyss - and survived.

"We came out of everything a stronger company," said Mr Barber. "By contrast with what we have experienced, other problems seem comparatively minor. And the smaller the problem, the easier it is to solve". ■

## PRODUCTION AND SUPPLY

EO Burton's Brentwood site concentrates mainly on the production and supply of a wide range of special hardwood mouldings to the joinery and construction sectors. In addition, it provides mouldings for the furniture industry.

Among its readily available timbers are oak, ash, meranti, beech, cherry, iroko, keruing, maple, poplar, sapele, and southern yellow pine. It also provides softwood mouldings for the joinery trade.

The company's output includes handrails, architraves, skirtings, dado rails, window boards and double glazing sections. It has six sawn timber sheds, and extensive outside stacking.

Apart from the construction and furniture industries, it provides keruing half-lap flooring for lorries, timber tyre rails, and balau decking.

managed to stagger on for another eight months before coming to a complete halt. In addition, two resaws were destroyed and a cross-cut, spindle moulder, and thicknesser damaged beyond repair. The fire was so ferocious that some parts of the machines melted. The company's main building housing the production areas was lost.

"The situation was appalling," said manager Adrian Barber. "We had to make up things as we went along, doing the best that we could under the circumstances."

The company did learn some lessons. First, however, genuinely helpful they may wish to be, rival companies