

The 'family' firm that's still growing



ELECTROGLASS IS CELEBRATING ITS 30TH ANNIVERSARY THIS YEAR. IN THAT TIME THE SPECIALIST ELECTRIC GLASS MELTING AND CONDITIONING COMPANY HAS GROWN FROM FIVE TO 26 STAFF - BUT, AS JESS WHITE DISCOVERED, IT STILL RETAINS ITS 'FAMILY' FEEL.

In October 1976 Fred Scarfe founded Electroglass with two other directors - his brother Jack, and Jack Alcock, as well as three other non-director founder members. Fred had spent his whole working life in the glass industry, having started at Beatson Clark and then accumulating 20 years experience in electric melting. Today the company occupies 2,500 square metres total office and workshop space at its base in Benfleet, Essex, United Kingdom.

From that day when Fred founded his own company with his own technology and ideas, to this, with the company celebrating its 30th year, Electroglass has continued to grow organically and develop technically. "This is due to our continuing specialisation and focus on developing electric melting, and building or maintaining customer relations, including our follow-up service," says Richard Stormont.

Having first entered the field of electric glass melting in 1970, Richard joined Electroglass in 1989, gradually taking over the running of the company from Fred Scarfe; he became a Director in 1990 and has been Managing Director since 1995. Despite Fred's retirement and sad death in 2002, it still has the feel of a family firm to this day, employing

two brothers who, in common with other staff members, may yet emulate longest-serving employee Paul Holmes' almost 30 years at the company.

PROJECTS AND CUSTOMERS

In the 10 years that Richard has been MD, Electroglass' turnover has quadrupled, with 2004 seeing a record turnover of £5.2 million, mainly due to an increase in all-electric melting projects in Europe and the Middle East. Last year, orders were received from companies in 22 countries in every part of the world. Richard puts this success down to customer satisfaction, citing the fact that half of all orders for the company's precision control bubbling systems, and 65% of boosting system orders, have been repeat orders from existing customers or their direct associates. He also points to the technical advances achieved in all-electric melting, with an increased focus on energy efficiency and glass quality, especially in volatile fluoride-opal and borosilicate glass production.

Amongst Electroglass' longest-standing customers are companies such as Thai Glass Industries and Heye Glas, and its biggest customer of recent years is Samsung Corning,

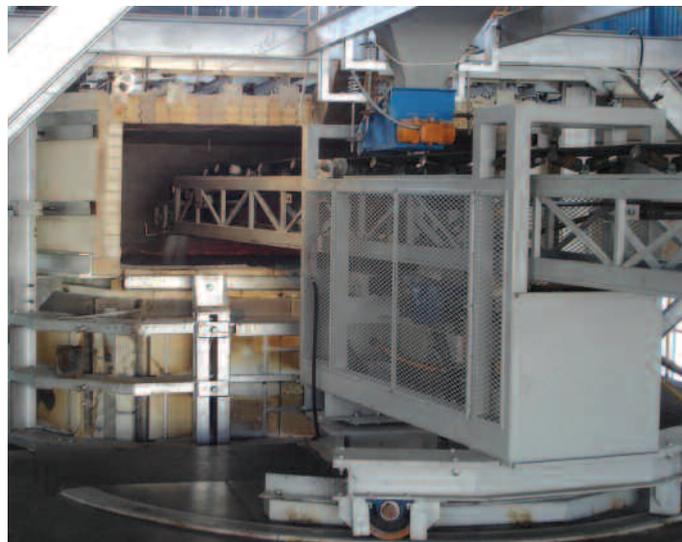
which Electroglass has supplied with large-scale boosting and bubbling systems for TV glass production. The company's largest single all-electric melter project has been in Zimbabwe, designed for 180 tpd, which was first commissioned in 1994 and recently repaired and updated.

Japan and Korea's glass makers are the biggest customers for Electroglass' draining systems, and a new customer in Japan has one of the largest Electroglass bubbler systems installed for fibreglass production.

Current projects include boosting in fibreglass and container furnaces in China, Portugal, Belgium and elsewhere, bubbling systems in several countries and upgrading a batch charging system for a furnace in Germany, where a fluoride-opal furnace is being expanded from 42 to 45 tpd. A 30 tpd borosilicate furnace

ABOVE: AN ELECTROGLASS CONTINUOUS CONTROLLED DRAIN

BELOW: AN ELECTROGLASS ALL-ELECTRIC FURNACE





THE ELECTROGLASS TEAM INCLUDING (LEFT TO RIGHT BACK) RICHARD PETROCOCHINO (ELECTRICAL PROJECTS MANAGER), PHIL DAVIS (LABORATORY TECHNICIAN), ANDREW SELIM (PROJECTS ENGINEER), RICHARD STORMONT (MANAGING DIRECTOR), ANDREW BARLOW (ELECTRICAL DEVELOPMENT MANAGER), GRAHAME STUART (CUSTOMER SERVICE ENGINEER), AND (CENTRE FRONT) GARY GAMMON (PROJECTS ENGINEERING MANAGER), CELIA HIGGINS (SALES OFFICE CO-ORDINATOR) AND ALAN BRETT (WORKSHOPS MANAGER) WITH (CENTRE BACK) PAUL GAMMON (COMMERCIAL CO-ORDINATOR)

in Mexico has also just been commissioned, and Chile's Toro glass – a new customer for Electroglass – has just placed an order for an electric boosting system.

PRODUCTS

On average over 95% of Electroglass products are ordered by customers outside of the UK. All-electric melting technology has been the biggest seller over the last few years as a result of electric furnace design advances. "Energy efficiency and glass quality is the key," says Richard. "This has meant that boosting design and all-electric melters have been the focus of developments here." Electroglass undertakes physical modelling of any future electric melting or boosting system projects and will build dedicated models to test out electrode configurations and convection currents.

Electroglass supplies precision control bubbling systems, which are electronically controlled by either a PC or a PLC interface. More than 80 systems have been supplied, half of which are repeat orders from existing customers. The company also designs and makes its own batch chargers for electric furnaces; testing is undertaken for two weeks prior to going out to the site.

Electroglass makes its own electrodes and holders, in-house, starting from the raw materials. Around 500 water-cooled electrode holders are produced annually, along

with many dry type forehearth electrodes. Many are used in Electroglass systems, but other customers – particularly Japanese ones – use them in their own systems. The biggest standard Electroglass electrode holder is 4 inches, used mostly for TV panel glass.

A key strength of the company, according to the MD, is its customer service. Electroglass asks for operating readings from its customers so that it can monitor system performance and improve services to that company. "This is in the best interests of the customer and of course it's in our best interests too," he says, "to offer a continuing service to help them make the best of the systems and technology we've supplied."

Research and development is "given consistent importance" by the company. Even the packing is done in-house as the company believes in maintaining control over as much of its production and distribution process as possible.

DISTRIBUTORS AND GLOBAL MARKETS

The key markets when Fred Scarfe established the company were south and south-east Asia, and Australasia. Electroglass subsequently gained customers in Japan and China, and expanded further; it now has customers in 40 countries worldwide. Frazier-Simplex has been the distributor for the company in the USA for the last 15 years. It has also had the same Japanese distributors for almost 30 years, and agents in Korea and China for 15 and 10 years respectively – although Electroglass started working in China via a Hong Kong agent in 1986, with customers such as Owens-Illinois and Emhart Glass. By comparison, an agent in Central America is a relatively new addition to the Electroglass family.

When asked about Electroglass' market, Richard says that while there are big swings in annual sales of specific product groups, the upward trend in all-electric melting is particularly strong. "Some customers approach projects on a long-term basis, such as in Japan," he explains. "Then there is the other extreme. At one exhibition we met a new customer from the Middle East. After two two-hour meetings, we signed a contract a week later for

an electric furnace."

However Electroglass will not take on business where the margin will not allow a reasonable level of service and after-sales service. "We have walked away from some projects where potential customers have tried to knock down prices too much – and have been proved right to do so," Richard asserts.

THE GLASS INDUSTRY

Over the course of the company's history, says Richard Stormont, two marked developments in the glass industry have been a consolidation of manufacturers into larger groups and the development of the industry in China and Korea. He does not see the development of the glass industry in the 'new' markets of Asia, Russia etc. as a threat to glass production in local markets. However, some sectors in developed countries will, he believes, continue to see manufacturers suffer because of lower production costs in these emerging regions.

THE FUTURE

The Electroglass policy is to retain control of all aspects of its products and customer service. Future strategy is to continue to remain determinedly independent. "Our strength is in specialisation, not diversification," explains Richard. "We will continue to develop technologies and design features that improve energy efficiency, glass quality and furnace life. Increasing worldwide environmental concerns also mean ever more interest in large scale electric melting installations, and this is a particular area we are focussing on in our technical developments."

He is also determined to continue promoting good customer relationships and after-sales service across the board. As Richard points out: "Although we are gaining new customers every year, our future growth will come mostly from existing customers." ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

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