



An invitation from Essex

Colin Jackson, managing director of Iceni Optical, has worked in optics since he left school. While he has gained experience at various labs over the years, Jackson harks back to his first job when asked to identify which was the most significant.

'I worked in Walthamstow for Atlas Optical. I realise now that I was very fortunate in that the owners gave me a good grounding in all aspects of optics and made me realise that quality of product and customer service are the things that allow a company to stand out in the prescription business.'

Jackson worked there, specialising in glazing, for eight years and consequently worked for several other companies before setting up Iceni Optical seven years ago.

'The company I was working for was running a two-location operation with the surfacing in Witham [Essex] and the glazing in the London borough of Islington. For practical reasons, the owner decided to merge to one location so at that point I moved to Witham. The owner sadly fell into ill health and after he passed away the business came to an end. At that point myself and my wife decided it was time to start up our own business and use the expertise I had built up over the years.'

Iceni was set up on a limited budget and the first premises were a single room above an optical practice in Billericay, Essex.

'We were there for about two years and as the business made progress we were able to take over an adjacent room to use as an office. Business continued to flourish and, as our plan was to reinvest all the money we made, at that point we bought a new van to make deliveries and moved over to our current premises in Witham.'

Keen to gain more control over the production process, Jackson added a surfacing lab to the operation four years ago and brought in a new member of staff to run it. Once that started to increase revenues, he put in a new polishing machine for Trivex work, in keeping with the ethos of reinvestment.

Most recently the Iceni office has moved out of the production premises to a location on Witham high street,

Prescription house Iceni Optical in Witham, Essex extends an invitation to practice staff to come and find out more about the role of a lab. **Mike Hale** reports



Colin Jackson: experience and expertise in the lab can easily be harnessed by practices

so the lab now has further space to expand the surfacing and improve the stock capacity.

Teamwork

Today Iceni has six members of staff consisting of three lab-based staff, two delivery drivers and Jackson himself in a managerial role, although he still likes to get involved on the production side when possible.

'We work as a team here,' he notes. 'I encourage staff to give their opinions and feedback. We are geared up for quality and service and we have years of experience in providing quality finished product. This enables us to suggest and provide better solutions to jobs.'

According to Jackson, the experience and expertise in the lab can easily be harnessed by practices.

'We function as a helpline to practices. If a practice sends a job in

and we don't think they are doing the right thing, we will phone them up and discuss it. If a practice has inexperienced staff or the owner doesn't have time to worry about every job that is going through we can act as an effective fail-safe and suggest the necessary changes for a better job.'

The lab is happy to let practice staff come in and find out more about the role of a lab in optics. 'Once a year we have an open evening to facilitate this but would help out at other times too,' Jackson notes.

Iceni's client base consists primarily of practices in Essex and the adjoining area. 'We serve the majority of our clients via our van delivery service, which makes runs into London and Hertfordshire as well as around Essex. Beyond that we operate via Royal Mail. Delivery is free on orders over £10 with a small surcharge for cheaper orders.'

The lab works with frame companies to provide package deals and faster service. Jackson also highlights the ability to communicate rapidly with practices in the event a job is held up as another positive aspect of Iceni.

'We've grown through word of mouth and good relations with frame reps who know practices can rely on us for quality of product. We've helped some new accounts by offering flexibility in our pricing and payment structures to help them get started. I know what it is like to start a new business, you need support from other companies and we like to offer that support – ultimately our success is based on their success.'

Asked about the future, Jackson is keen to offer the lab's capabilities to a wider audience.

'We are looking to continue growing the company but it is important to grow at a natural rate so there is always the capacity and skills to do all the work to a high standard. We can't compromise on that for the sake of short-term expansion because it only takes one bad job and all your good work is undone.' ●