

Partners in coatings

2011 was a dramatic year for Optimum Coatings; the Morecambe-based lab underwent a change of ownership and a move of premises in a space of a few months.

Paul Bailey came in as co-owner, joining Martin Harwood as directors of the business.

'My background is not in the optical industry but in other fields of manufacturing and business,' says Bailey. 'The previous co-owner and myself shared the same accountants so when he came to retire I had the opportunity to take over his shares.'

Conversely Harwood was first bitten by the optical bug during his teenage years, and was appointed technical manager of Optimum Coatings when it was founded in 2001. 'My uncle was an optometrist in North Yorkshire so I went to work there as work experience during the school holidays. I qualified as a dispensing optician at Bradford University and worked in a practice for 17 years including working as a group practice manager for various independents and multiples. In 2001 I was ready for a change and that was when the chance to help start up Optimum came along.'

While the first year of trading was largely a case of learning on the job, the company has expanded steadily. This meant a mezzanine floor was added to the original premises after four years when the lab started a surfacing service. A second unit was required after six years as the business continued to develop and last year the whole company located to larger



Satisloh AR coating chamber

Optician visits Optimum Coatings in Morecambe, Lancaster and finds a business that prides itself on its efficiency and staff expertise



Applying hardcoating to lenses

premises on the same industrial estate.

'Moving under one roof has been very good,' says Harwood. 'We now have a really logical product flow – surfacing, hard coating, anti-reflection coating then dispatch. The departments are all where they should be and we avoid any backwards and forwards movement to save time.'

'We've also avoided some duplication of staff that we had on two sites,' adds Bailey. 'Now people can move around the processes as the working day progresses. Generally we are a lot more efficient than before and our clients benefit from a faster service. We've been able to pass a lot of our saving on to our clients.'

Overall there are 19 members of staff working at the lab, with the five administrative employees added to 14 people in production roles.

Coats and tints

As the name suggests, in addition to surfacing and glazing capabilities Optimum Coatings offers a variety of coating services including the scratch-resistant OptiHard, anti-reflection coatings OptiMar and OptiClear as well as a full range of tinting options.

While much of the lab's business comes from other prescription houses, the directors estimate that currently 10 per cent comes directly from independent practices who use the lab for the all-encompassing service.

'We have state-of-the-art equipment,' says Harwood. 'Combined with the high level of staff expertise – anyone technical in a position of responsibility has

been here at least seven years – it means that the quality of product and turnaround time offered to clients is a given really.'

Meanwhile Bailey has been impressed by the customer service performance since he joined.

'Our customer service team are really the face of the business,' he says. 'Being from an accountancy background, I'm obsessed with measuring things with a view to improvement and we do a lot of customer surveys on a monthly basis. The response to their work liaising with the customers and people's respect for how quickly the lab turns jobs around for them is overwhelmingly very positive.'

Optimum is a national lab; indeed Harwood estimates that the local region accounts for less than 20 per cent of its business, and the partners are looking to expand its client base as the lab has capacity for a lot more work.

'We serve clients all over the country by delivery service and we aim to turn work around so jobs go out the day after we receive them,' says Harwood. 'We are a full vertically integrated lab so we don't have to send any work out. We also offer an express service which, for a premium, means getting a job received in the morning back out that same day.'

The new premises still have free space on the ground floor and a mezzanine floor that could be used for production in the future.

'The equipment we use has quite a bit of capacity in reserve and we intend to stay over-equipped as that ensures we never let customers down,' says Bailey. 'We've got massive capacity to produce work of a very high standard and that allows us to focus on serving the optical practices. Repeat orders for the optician and then subsequently for us is what our business is based around.'

For the future the lab is working on an updated website that will allow better and automatic tracking of jobs as well as developing a new coating product that Harwood says will take coatings to the next level. ●