



# Glazing in Gloucestershire

**I**nvestment in cutting-edge machinery and access to latest technology is enabling Sinclair Optical to fulfil orders efficiently and offer new coating solutions to independent optical practices.

The advancements are largely thanks to the backing of French lens group Essilor, which took over Sinclair in 2007.

Despite the added scale, managing director Nigel Corbett wants Sinclair, which employs 70 primarily local workers across two lab locations, to keep its personal touch.

Speaking about the time leading up to the acquisition, he says: 'It is fair to say that the business had stagnated over a number of years. It wasn't really making any progress financially and operationally there were some things we wanted to do. We've really re-focused on the sales side of the business, plus service and efficiency. We have a very loyal and longstanding customer base including people who've been with us since day one, so the key thing for a lab like ours is service.'

The Gloucestershire firm has invested around £750,000 on new equipment at its coating and prescription labs since 2010. Its active client base has risen to 900 practices, served by prescription lab services in Staunton and a lens coating lab in Ross-on-Wye.

## Mr Orange

New high-range coating technology is now being implemented at Ross-on-Wye, most recently resulting in the launch of Sinclair's Easiclean HDUV coating (News 26.07.13), which prevents harmful rays reflecting off the back surface of the lens. In Staunton, latest edging equipment has been installed including Kappa machines and a Mr Orange glazing instrument. A new business management system is also being introduced across the whole group called Annapurna.

The upgrades – financially impossible for many local labs – have helped generate annual revenues of around £6m at Sinclair.

'You have to get that return on investment. Our business has grown and developed and is much stronger now than it was when the Essilor Group first took over.'

Ideally, Sinclair's coating and prescription labs would be located

Sinclair Optical Services has gained a new lease of life since being acquired by Essilor six years ago and now celebrates 30 years of lens production. **Joe Ayling** reports



**Nigel Corbett says Sinclair Optical relies as much on its own independence as it does on investment from the top**

together, concedes Corbett, who did not rule out such a move in the future.

However, transferring the firm's gigantic Satis vacuum coating systems from Ross-on-Wye would be another matter. The machine's pressures are monitored remotely from Essilor's French headquarters to prevent any faults, but *Optician* asks whether this level of involvement is welcomed at a market town lab in the Welsh borders?

Corbett says: 'When you've got that degree of maintenance and that degree of visibility you can react before your customer even knows. We expect it to be right and we make sure we make it right very quickly. For us it is a huge advantage, and we are absolutely proud to be part of the group. In the same context though, what made Sinclair successful over the years was being able to look after individual customer needs and offer a personal touch.'

He adds that although much of Sinclair's business was built up on the basis of making deliveries within a 60-mile radius, the firm supplies independent practices extending into Lancashire and Yorkshire.

'Fundamentally our business has to support the independent optician,' says Corbett. But how has the economic downturn impacted on Sinclair's high

street clients? Corbett says: 'Since the financial issues of the recession it has been much more difficult for independent practices and high street retailing is much more fragmented at the moment. Having said that you can go into some practices and the test book is virtually full, but you go into others and it's a different story. Footfall is the main issue, and attracting patients into the practice. There are some tremendous practices out there doing extremely well even in difficult economic times.'

## Weekend away

A significant part of Sinclair's 30 year anniversary plans, which also include taking 25-30 of its most loyal independent practices on a weekend away in October, is rolling out Easiclean HDUV, which is derived from group technology.

Speaking about the launch, Corbett identifies an increased public awareness of protecting the eyes from UV, and not just in optical circles. 'HDUV lets an independent practice offer something that a multiple cannot offer,' he adds.

The new coating is billed as the next generation of Sinclair's established Easiclean brand, produced alongside scratch resistant, sun spec, mirror coated and cosmetic tinted lenses at the Ross-on-Wye lab.

At Staunton, meanwhile, Sinclair is enjoying high demand for its iValue, Varilux, Sharp View freeform varifocals and Polar One prescription polarised sunwear. However, no booking is too small and Sinclair is willing to take an order for 70 pence stock lenses if required. 'We have to fulfil that demand, it is important because the customer has a patient who is waiting for those lenses,' adds Corbett.

As with the customers it serves, the success of Sinclair relies as much on its own independence as it does on investment from the top. Departing Ross-on-Wye there is every reason for UV protection on a bright August afternoon but there is a testing summer ahead before Sinclair's October celebrations. ●