



Building on our heritage

Earlier this month saw the official opening of the Norville Training and Heritage Centre in Gloucester's Russell Street. The new centre is just a stone's throw from the original Norville outlet which opened in 1898 and is both a celebration of that history and techniques for the future.

The imposing four-storey brick building will act as a learning centre for Norville staff and its customers across dispensing, retailing and manufacturing. Training courses will also cover reception staff and looking at some of the less well explored areas of retail practice such as window dressing, receptionist training and sports vision.

Unveiling the centre, chairman Frank Norville said that while the firm boasted a heritage stretching back 111 years it had its eyes firmly on the future. Despite the tough economic conditions and competition from overseas, manufacturers had to remain optimistic, he said.

The company has recently undergone a £1.2m investment in technology and, since the beginning of the year had taken on 15 new staff, and spent £500,000 on equipment. Norville called on politicians, local and national, to provide a workforce and business conditions that continued to make such investments viable. 'Manufacturing exists and it is important, it's called wealth creation.'

Picture of the past

The top floor of the building houses an extensive collection of spectacles, lenses and paraphernalia throughout the ages. There is also a slide show of manufacturing photographs which were used by Norville's father when he lectured on optical manufacturing in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the equipment from that time is housed in the basement, although most of the exhibits have yet to be classified and catalogued.

Norville is adamant that preserving a link with the past is a useful and interesting exercise. Most of the collections from the big chains and manufacturers have been disbanded by their new owners, he says. 'There is something about the past, when you see how things were made you have to have respect for the people and

Norville's Training and Heritage Centre will act as a learning centre for practitioners and industry staff. The aim is to offer a valuable link with the past as optics accelerates towards a high-tech future



Exhibits include photographs from the 1950s and 60s

ways in which they worked.'

The maze of small brick terraces on the southern side of the city is home to Norville's Magdela Road site. Here some of the most experienced and knowledgeable prescription manufacturing professionals in the country work and the facility has just taken delivery of the latest lens manufacturing technology.

That technology is in the guise of the latest Satis Loh free-form generator, the only one of its type in the UK. Having to impose this technology into a factory whose heritage is in the post war period is a double-edged sword. Many of Norville's staff live close by, so moving out of town could be a risky strategy. 'There is a shortage of competent technicians,' says Norville. 'Some of that is our fault because we are not able to pay them properly. It's a Catch 22 situation. Low margins for the industry mean less profit to pay technicians. So technicians either leave the industry or are poached by competitors.'

Those same low margins also limit the scope for investment in new spacious premises. But for once technology has come to the rescue. The new free-form generator installed by Norville does away with the mass of tools and different lens blanks as each lens is generated to the specific needs of the wearer. Its throughput also reduces the number of people and so the amount of space needed.

The new Satis Loh machine generates a lens, from any material, in as little as 24 seconds. Eventually this single machine will feed three polishing

machines, although it probably won't be that long before even polishing becomes unnecessary. This level of technology also reduces the need for staff, with one machine producing 80 jobs per hour. The need for tools is done away with and polishing is by disposable heads which are automatically picked and placed on the polishing head, reducing space further.

All of this means faster, high-tech production, allowing a UK manufacturer to compete with the best in the world. Norville's excitement about this latest technology is clear. 'It's a revolution in manufacturing. We have been waiting for 55 years for someone to do away with those laps (tools). Once you added in all of the different indices of the lenses required the process had become unmanageable but we are now no longer dependent upon the lens manufacturers to supply semi-finished lenses.'

High quality future

The future is in high quality lenses, he says and this is true for both labs and optical practices. Those that don't embrace that will go by the board. 'They can't afford to stay down there with Murray Wells,' he says, hinting that one day there will be low-tech optical business that Norville will simply walk away from. The number of customers available to the independent lab sector will also shrink as further consolidation of the retail optical and lens manufacturing businesses continues.

'We are still surprised by the reluctance to sell better products. Opticians must do more to inform their customers about the products that are available. For its part Norville will be ready to produce any of the lens designs in any of the materials available.'

New technology has levelled the playing field for lens manufacturing, says Norville, and the company now has high-tech manufacturing to add to its history, knowledge and customer care. 'We are equal to anybody else in the world when it comes to manufacturing technology.' ●