



# Shipshape at Shepshed

*Optician* visits Shepshed Optics in Leicestershire to see how organisation can help a prescription house provide a superior service

**D**espite the success of his prescription house Shepshed Optics, managing director and owner Clifford Austen's passion for lenses is such that he still takes time out of managing the company to glaze some rimless.

'If one of the regular technicians is off, I step in and do a bit of glazing myself. I do really love glazing rimless but unfortunately I don't get to do that much these days because of demands on my time on the general management side of the operation.'

That certainly wasn't the case when Austen first founded Shepshed Optics from his home back in 1999 with the aim of attracting clients through his skills as a technician. 'I used to work as a technician in Loughborough and some of the experienced optometrists I came into contact with would compliment me on the standard of work I produced for them, feeling it was superior to what they received from other sources.'

Austen explains that the impetus to start up his own business came from a couple of the practices who were impressed enough by his work to commit to giving him their business. 'Starting up we had a couple of key accounts through people I had met while working at Loughborough. Because of the standard of my work, these practices said that, if I set up on my own, they would send me all their work. Without those two I wouldn't have had the opportunity to start up. To this day we still get all of their work and they have grown too.'

Steadily increasing the amount of business handled, Shepshed moved to its current premises in 2004. 'Word gets around and the work came in from recommendations – we've never had to go out to look for work. This was particularly the case with the quality of work that we did on rimless – back in the day when it was harder to find someone to glaze rimless well, we could because of our staff's expertise and investment in equipment.'

'At that point there were four of us who came down from working at the house,' adds Carole Borzacchiello, Shepshed Optics' office manager.



**Clifford Austen, managing director and owner and Carole Borzacchiello, office manager**

'Most years since then we've taken on an extra member of office staff and picked up technicians along the way as good ones became available. The work keeps growing and we now employ 13 people.'

Austen points out that in the glazing market a company's success is dependent on having good technicians and feels Shepshed is very fortunate to have found the ones currently employed. 'There is so much experience and expertise here with the technicians all specialising in a particular area of glazing.'

## Get organised

Organisation is the watchword at Shepshed and this has involved developing the premises from a gigantic single space into a number of rooms dedicated to particular purposes. Impressively, the manufacturing areas are just as clean and well organised as the front of house office. 'We have to be organised because it streamlines everything,' says Borzacchiello. 'We have a good system in place that saves time – we know where everything is.'

In terms of client base, Shepshed Optics is capable of serving anywhere within the UK. 'We've got accounts all over the place, including one in the Lake District,' says Austen. 'We look to supply busy independents that want the product quickly and want the insurance

that the customer will not be returning the product due to a fault. With the advantages of modern overnight courier services it doesn't really matter how near or far a practice is within the UK.'

There are some advantages though for practices in the immediate area as Shepshed runs a van service for them. 'The van goes from here to Nottingham, Newark-on-Trent and Mansfield and back,' says Austen. 'There are a lot of customers on that run who like the convenience of having their orders collected, brought here for glazing and then returned to their door. We are looking at expanding this service to benefit more of our customers.'

To keep delivery times to a minimum, Shepshed glazes an impressive 98 per cent of lenses on the same day they are received. Anything particularly complicated may be left until the end of the day when the lab is quieter. When asked about the product range of the lab, Austen is keen to point out that Shepshed specialises in these more difficult jobs. 'We have accounts with all the major manufacturers so there is no lens that we cannot get hold of. We make the effort to do a great job on out-of-range orders. Many of these lenses are sourced from smaller independent lens manufacturers. Similarly with frames we can get hold of pretty much anything and work closely with the companies.'

'Overall we aim to work in conjunction with practices and if there is something that is not right with an order, we are able to tactfully advise practices that they might like to change something here or there to make the end result better for the patient. They may have overlooked something or ordered the wrong lens. Obviously you don't want to question someone's dispensing, but since we have a good relationship with our clients we are able to give them a ring and have a constructive chat.'

## Future plans

Having come a long way from setting up in his home, Austen envisages the company continuing to grow and harbours some hope that his two young children may one day take over from him. 'We are looking to keep expanding and that could mean a move to new premises. Another option could be to take over the unit next door. I quite like the idea of my children having the chance to work here and eventually take over if they want to. Both are colour blind, though, so they will struggle with tints!' ●