

Workers at a Wisbech factory were celebrating as they collected a prestigious award

Special feature in The Wisbech Standard



Anglia Components invested £200,000, and spent two years preparing for the trusted kitemark award to show the firm is compliant ahead of stringent new EU safety guidelines. In fact, Anglia is among only four companies out of a potential 20,000 to so far achieve the BSI safety standard which reflects a commitment to reducing toxicity in its components.

With a 200 strong workforce, a growing order book and turnover of £30 million a year, news editor JOHN ELWORTHY paid Anglia a visit. As he discovered, the firm really is a jewel in Fenland's crown.

Quite why Britain should be able to nurture some of the worlds finest electronics engineers cannot be properly explained by Anglia's managing director Steve Rawlins. It just happened, so embrace it. That is his philosophy.

But quite why Wisbech has become home to the UK's seventh largest electronics components distributor – and the 15 th largest in Europe – is more easily explained. One of those engineers happened to move to the Fens and so started his company here.

Bill Ingram founded Anglia Components that was, and Anglia that is, in 1972, and never looked back, building the (still) privately-run company into the formidable world leader it is today.

One of those he employed four years after launching Anglia was an enterprising and talented young northerner, Steve Rawlins, who joined as a salesman, was promoted to sales manager seven years later, and ascended the corporate ladder to become managing director in 1997, and managing director of the Anglia group of companies six years after that."

"In the end the success of this business has been built on one thing and one thing only – the staff," says Mr Rawlins. "Hiring the right people at the right time has been fundamental to our growth. "Sure we have the land available for expansion, sure we have the space, but it's not that, not the logistics or the work load. It's getting the right people."

Which is always a constant battle as Anglia has to raise its head, quite frequently as it happens, above the cultural parapet to encourage newly skilled workers to discover Wisbech and the Fens.

Many people still think they have to go to Peterborough or beyond to work in electronics," says Mr Rawlins. "We have to work hard to remind people of the opportunities that are available, right here and right now."

Those opportunities cover a multitude of skills, and Anglia is embarking on a recruitment drive to add to its key skills base. Vacancies are arising for sales, technical, field staff and engineers that will help them cope with a burgeoning order book.

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VAST STOCK: Warehouse operative David Bliss dealing with some of 260,000 product lines marketed by Anglia.



DESIGNER: Martin Davey at work in Anglia's design laboratory.

“By the end of this year we expect to have recruited up to 20 extra people,” he says. And if any hardware or software design engineers are picking up good vibes from reading this piece, Mr Rawlins will not be unhappy if they drop him an e-mail.

Malcolm Grant, quality manager, accompanied his boss on our guided tour, reeling of some of the impressive facts and figure that comprise the Anglia story.

Anglia, for example, occupies 55,000 square feet of office and factory space in Sandall Road, has an adjacent empty shell totalling 30,000 for further expansion, and there is even a spare 100,000 square feet lose at hand which is currently sub let.

“Our customers can choose from some 240,000 product lines,” says a breathless Mr Grant as we explore the highly sophisticated warehousing where components arrive from abroad ready for distribution or re-working into specialised circuits for re-sale to any one of 3,500 manufacturers in the UK and Europe which form Anglia's customer base.

Anglia ships something like 1.5 billion components a year, which equates to some three percent of the market which in turn is worth £1 billion a year. Anglia is set for a bigger slice of this action, as it provides its customers with specialist knowledge, design strengths and product development to add to its primary wholesaler strategy.

Part of the company's strength came in the way it foresaw manufacturing capabilities of the Far East, creating strong links with China more than 20 years ago. Anglia now has a network of suppliers across China, Malaysia and Thailand, creating strong partnerships with its core suppliers.



GETTING THE FACTS: John Elworthy (centre) with Anglia's managing director Steve Rawlins (right) and quality manager Malcolm Grant.

Mr Rawlins say; “Twenty five years ago when most other weren't even in China or even considering it, we were there. We have built up excellent rapport with them, seen excellent quality products, and the logistics are now to a fine art.” But while quality of production is one thing, Mr Rawlins is anxious to return to skills base of his employees in Wisbech, and to the fact Anglia has some of the highest staff retention statistics both locally and industry wide.

Mr Grant says: "I have been here 14 years, and when I started the company only employed 60 people. Yet even today, there are 35 people who have been here longer than me. I think that gives you some form of perspective."

There is no doubt Anglia takes care in recruitment (inevitably sales staff must undergo considerable product training and knowledge before being unleashed into this highly technical world) so choosing candidates at whatever point of entry is important.

Over lunch I get some further indications of how this pans out in reality, since with no finished product as such the sense of achievement must be honed in other directions.

There is also the prospect of changing the Fens culture which Mr Rawlins regards, still, as too orientated toward traditional food based industries or college training which focuses on trades such as bricklaying or carpentry.

But quietly, some may think too quietly, Anglia goes about its business, fostering important community links through such events as its annual staff fun day or participation in the Wisbech Rose Fair.

And there cannot be too many employers, locally or anywhere else, which provide not one but two full sized snooker tables, and an adjoining billiards room, with which to relax.



RELAXING:
Steve
Arnold and
Derek
Thorpe
enjoy the
benefit of
Anglia's
lunchtime
facilities.

Mr Rawlins is a keen admirer of the Marks and Spencer philosophy of nurturing its business through close contacts with its suppliers, and monitoring manufacturer, distribution and logistics right through the supply chain.

And while he accepts some of the difficulties of being located in Wisbech, even he would concede that his CEO's decision to start there, and expand from there, is firmly non negotiable.

"It is easy to walk around Wisbech Market Place, see the large number of charity and discount shops there and think that's it. However, that's only a very small part of Wisbech and the sum total is much more impressive."

"Anglia's ambition, if you like, and given our high tech status, is to become the flagship of the Fens."

Some may think that has happened already. After all how many firms in the fens can boast that you are never likely to be more than 20 feet away from one of Anglia's components".

They are in hundreds of everyday appliances, ranging from fire extinguishers and electrically operated shop doors to burglar alarms.

You could even find them in a Fenland field – some of Anglia's components even find their way into some of the high tech mechanisms used in tractor cabs.

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