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UK foundry industry alive and kicking

So that's it then, the UK foundry industry is dead, the obituary is written and we're all looking for a new job... what a load of rubbish!

The UK still has a strong and vibrant foundry industry and now, having survived the difficult times of the recession, most are busy and operating successfully and profitably.

I would like to talk about some of the things we have done at Castings plc that put us in such a good position now and promising an even brighter future.



David Gawthorpe, Chief Executive of Castings plc.

Firstly, a brief description of the business: Castings plc is the largest foundry group in the UK, with an expected turnover of over £120 million in the current financial year and consisting of seven separate green sand iron foundries on two sites and machine shops, also on two sites, with about 100 CNC machines. We have about 1050 employees, all in the Midlands area. The group makes mostly ductile iron castings weighing from 0.1kg to 40kg in quantities from one to millions per year, mainly for the heavy truck and automotive industries and with a total goods weight capacity of 80,000 tons/year. We export directly 60% of our production and indirectly another 20%.

Some business was lost to China and India about 10 years ago when sourcing from low cost economies was all the rage. Since then, however, very little has moved. In fact, we are now finding a major shift towards the repatriation of castings manufacture back to Europe and this year alone, orders have already been received for over 40 parts that were previously sourced from India. According to our customers, the reasons are price, quality and logistics, all of which are better when buying locally.

Within the past six years, we have invested £63.5 million in equipment and buildings, enabling us to meet customer requirements and remain at the forefront of casting and machining technology. This total includes £18 million for a greenfield foundry in 2009 (one of the few to be built in the UK in the last 10 years), £5 million for a new despatch warehouse completed in the last month and over £30 million in state-of-the-art CNC machines.

In addition to manufacturing facilities, our customers need major technical support in design and development to reduce costs and risk. So we

have teams of experts who, if necessary, will spend weeks at a time with designers either in the UK or overseas to ensure the best result is achieved. This is something that would be extremely difficult to do with a supplier several thousands of miles (and time zones) away.

We have 3D printing facilities, which allow us to convert a 3D

model into a printed pattern and from that, an iron casting in 48 hours. This shortens the development time, allowing variants of prototypes to be manufactured and tested faster than ever before. All prototypes made are production-ready designs; it is pointless producing and testing a part that cannot be manufactured in volume. Again, none of this can be achieved with suppliers situated on the other side of the world.

The group also has 3D scanners that allow us to approve new parts fully dimensionally in minutes rather than the previously required days; all shortening the time to delivery which is so often critical in new product development. The scanners can also be used to reverse engineer a 3D model from an existing part, which is sometimes required so replicas can be manufactured for parts that are sourced from low cost sources and actually bear little relationship to the 3D models or 2D drawings from which they were supposed to have been made.

We regularly employ new graduates and have several apprentices to ensure the next generation of managers and business leaders are receiving the training and experience needed to continue the growth and future success of our business. Whether it's in new product development, foundry production, reverse engineering, logistics, technical sales etc, the foundry industry still offers an exciting and rewarding career to those who are willing to grasp the opportunity with both hands.

So despite reports to the contrary, the UK foundry industry is alive and kicking and in fact, is actually doing rather well.

David Gawthorpe, Chief Executive, Castings plc