

# Major fabricator invests in the future

The 1980s saw a dramatic decline in the number of engineering apprenticeships and, even though this reduction was camouflaged by the rise of the modern apprenticeship, the skills gap left by this lack of training is a serious threat to the future of UK manufacturing. Recognising this, KMF is investing in its own future with the opening of a dedicated training centre.

As a manufacturer of precision sheet metal components, Newcastle-under-Lyme based KMF is faced with a real challenge when it comes to finding the right people with the level of skills required as it continues to grow. The general lack of available skilled people in this manufacturing sector, combined with its location in the heart of the Potteries, has led the management team at KMF to radically rethink its strategy for training. The result has just been revealed in the shape of the state-of-the-art £600,000 apprentice training centre officially opened by the company's founder, Michael Higgins, at the end of November.

The choice of speaker at the prestigious event was highly appropriate as former land

speed record holder Richard Noble OBE, the driving force behind Thrust SSC explained the intricacies of his attempt to break the 1000 mph barrier with his new project Bloodhound SSC. In his fascinating presentation, he explained the importance of stimulating the interest of young people in engineering, especially as they are bombarded on a daily basis by visual and audio technology that cause their brains to operate at a faster pace than those of a previous generation. The huge interest generated in the Bloodhound SSC, particularly in schools and colleges bear testimony to this.

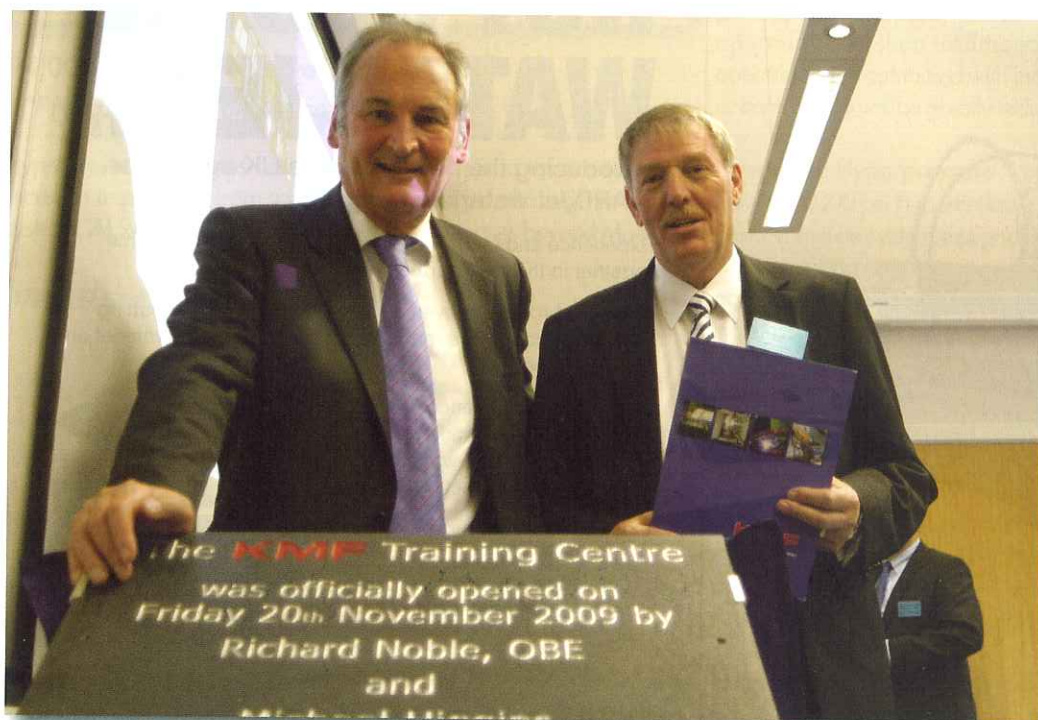
KMF has been taking on new apprentices at the rate of four per year since 2001 and is very proud of its retention rate, with over 90 per cent of those apprentices still working for the company. In the early years of its apprentice programme, KMF made full use of external training providers, but during 2006 it made the decision to bring all apprentice training in-house. Jenny Conlon, KMF's Training Centre coordinator, explains: "As part of our ongoing

commitment towards achieving the highest standards (evident in the investment made in manufacturing technology), we became aware that the content of the practical training provided by the colleges was not sufficient for KMF's needs. This is not a direct criticism of the colleges as they are under resourced and are therefore financially unable to keep up with the pace of technology and therefore, could not provide the specialist training and skills that we need to compete."

The success of this decision is borne out by the fact that the scores achieved by apprentices at KMF now are significantly higher than the national average, as a result of the combination of improved selection, training, working practices and a greater focus on individuals. Apprentices at KMF are taught in classes of four, with in-house lecturers having much more time to address any problems that may arise. Being on-site throughout their apprenticeship also allows a greater involvement with the wider aspects of the business, and time spent in the commercial and production elements of the business are written into each apprentice's training program from the beginning of their employment.

All of the training provided by KMF is delivered to standards set down by EAL (EMTA Awards Ltd), the leading awarding body for engineering vocational qualifications) and as an accredited training provider KMF can deliver training at NVQ and VRQ up to level 4 in a variety of disciplines. KMF chose to use the EAL route as opposed to City and Guilds as, in its view, EAL courses provide a much closer match to what the company needed, particularly for CNC training.

"What we have achieved up to now is a credit to the foresight of the whole



management team at KMF," says Gareth Higgins, KMF managing director. "But we have one person in particular to thank for his vision and drive, and that is John Booth."

John Booth had been working alongside KMF as the NVQ assessor at Stoke-on-Trent College. When the College wanted to move John away from that role, KMF offered him a part-time position helping with their apprentices, a role which grew into a full-time position as training moved in-house. John's determination and enthusiasm is infectious and resulted in the plans being laid for the development of the new training centre. He has also had responsibility for training the three new assessors and mentors who will be responsible for apprentice training at KMF.

"John's involvement has been a great help," says Jenny Conlon. "As an accredited assessment centre we had to go through a multitude of approval processes. All of our lecturers/assessors have to be qualified, and the facilities have to meet certain standards. With John's help and his understanding of the EAL way of working this was a relatively smooth process. Since being approved we are now subjected to six monthly reviews by EAL's external verifier Mark Haig, who ensures that we are maintaining the recognised standards required. Mark's visits involve communicating directly with individual apprentices, checking their training portfolios and discussing their performance with the assessors."

As a result of his most recent visit, Mark Haig had this to say about KMF and its commitment to apprentice training "It's inspiring to see that a company such as KMF, recognises the importance of investing in the future, and providing its apprentices with top class facilities, which will benefit both the apprentice and the company. They will receive training in disciplines which reflect the company's long-term business requirements, and gain National Vocational Qualifications, Vocational Related Qualifications and Key Skills to support their Apprenticeship Framework."

The management team at KMF is rightly proud of what they have achieved so far with regard to apprentice training. The high point, to date, being the recognition gained by Peter Krynicki when he achieved the honour of The 2007 Metals Industry Apprentice of the Year award presented by Metskill. Peter has now finished his apprenticeship and moved into the production area as a bending department technician. He has also taken on responsibility as a mentor and assessor to the current intake of apprentices.

Similarly, Stefan Rduch has made full use of the training provided by KMF and has been rewarded with a position in the purchasing department with a role as a

facility will help to guarantee the future of our business for the foreseeable future," says Gareth Higgins. "It has been a significant investment but one that we can happily justify through the quality of apprentices that the team is producing. That said, I am disappointed at the total lack of enthusiasm and funding that is available from Government sources for projects such as this. KMF, like many other businesses is facing the problem of an ageing skills base: this makes it vital that we generate high quality apprentices who are fully conversant with the latest technology. This is why we feel that it is important to be able to control the content and quality of the training provided ourselves."



company buyer, where he is responsible for managing a spend in excess of £3.5 million. Stefan has also taken up the company's offer of further training, completing both HNC and HND Mechanical Engineering courses, and is now well on the way towards completing his academic qualification for the Chartered Institute of Purchase and Supply at Derby University.

However, despite the encouragement provided by the success of these young men, KMF still struggles to encourage young people into apprenticeships, a situation which culminated in turning an idea into reality with the decision to commence the building of a purpose-built training centre.

"With the groundwork already done in developing our in-house training, this new

The last word on this goes to John Booth: "What Gareth and his team have achieved here is fantastic, in my 40 years working with apprentices I have not seen anything like the level of commitment to training shown at KMF. They have managed to seamlessly blend the teaching of traditional skills with modern technology, and the quality of the facilities with the opening of this new training centre will be second to none."

**KMF (Precision Sheet Metal) Ltd**  
**Tel: 01782 569060**  
**Email: g.higgins@kmf.co.uk**  
**www.kmf.co.uk**