



Hope for UK manufacturing

Standing on Hope Technology's factory floor you're immediately struck by the size and number of CNC machines and a distinctive metallic smell that dominates the air. It's not long before you see the trademark piles of spiralling swarf, half-cut components and red-hot disc rotors rolling off the production line and off to a different department for assembly and packaging.

Nestled in the heart of Lancashire, Hope Technology is Britain's most well-known bike component manufacturer, with a dedicated customer base from all areas of off-road riding. The Barnoldswick factory has the same feel to it as the beautiful bike bits that are made there. It's a precision engineered unit that works smoothly and efficiently, while being resilient enough to take the unexpected in its stride.

The premises are split into two halves: one self-contained industrial area of organised mess; and another of desks, drawers and packaging. But Hope is far from a disjointed business. Everything possible is kept in house, from the marketing, design and promotion, right through to warranty. The close-knit, face to face nature of this business has many advantages, with all staff in constant communication and sharing a common aim: to make the best possible cycling products – whether that's a skewer or the latest disc brake system.

Getting it made

New product is now a constant treadmill, with small adjustments coming from after-sales and innovations from product designers. Next, computer design shows

Mountain bike technology mostly comes from the Far East. Hope Technology makes it in the heart of Lancashire. **Luke Webber** reports

(Top left) An early Hope hub, dating from 1992

(Above left) Finished products can be packed for dispatch an hour after being a lump of raw material

(Main) A fairly recent introduction: Hope wheels

All photos by Luke Webber

any errors in tooling. And in some instances specialist machines have to be built, or existing ones adapted to suit the needs of modernisation. In this aspect Hope is on the cutting edge of mountain bike technology.

Millions of pounds worth of tools – like a shed of super-sized, sophisticated Dremels – take everything from the same block of billet, no matter what size, from raw material to finished product. But just because robots do a lot of the work doesn't make this a hands-off factory. In fact, most machines are designed, manned, programmed and loaded manually, with the product routinely checked between processes.

Every machine runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week to keep up with demand. A 'rolling stock' system means only a few shelves of boxed goods exist, while everything else is either packed to be shipped, on the shelf, or somewhere in the system. And because of that inter-connected business model, if there is a sudden demand for one line, production can be increased at the touch of a button.

Once the heavy work is complete, the details of anodising, laser etching, assembly, packaging and distribution are all that separates the latest kit from the factory and your bike. And the typical production time for a stem? Around an hour from raw material to dispatch.



Economic cycles

With components for touring, trials, cross country, downhill racing and just the normal trail rider, Hope's product range is diverse. Despite being specialist products, the eggs aren't all in one basket, which is one of the reasons for Hope's business success.

In the current volatile markets, a British company is well placed for continued success. Prices elsewhere are soaring due to the weakness of the pound against the dollar or yen. Hope can bypass most of the increased overheads that others have to contend with, because the components are made in the UK. The value of Hope products – good to begin with – is getting better and better.

Prospering in tough financial times is not a new idea for the company either. It started up as a precision aerospace engineering company in the last downturn, weathering the storm through a mix of hard work, determination and ignorance. Walking into an industry with such high set-up costs was also a barrier to instant success, as co-founder Ian explains.

'Simon and I were working flat out from morning to midnight for ten years just to get the business rolling. As soon as we could afford the next machine we'd buy it, as we knew it made good sense for the business. By increasing infrastructure we would have a rollover effect on production and profits. At the time a lot of top advisers thought we were making the wrong decisions, but 20 years on stupidity turned out all right!'

Hope springs eternal

British-based manufacturing itself is an area where Hope defied marketing experts. Only Hope's carbon brake lever is produced in China. With virtually every other company outsourcing, it was seen as an oddball decision to make stuff in the UK. Ian explains that it was a decision in keeping with Hope's philosophy.

'Our business only works by running efficiently. The best way to do that is keeping everything under control. Initially our anodising was outsourced but the results were

(Above) Bigger than your average tool box

(Above right) The machines run 24 hours a day, seven days a week to keep up with demand

(Right) Patriot hubs: flying the flag

"If there is a sudden demand for one line, production can be increased at the touch of a button"

not ideal and we'd be waiting on product while our lines were still running off batches. After a bit of research, Simon decided it was possible to have our own anodising plant. Within a year we were number two in the UK for the job!

'Simon really drives the innovation side of the company and I am happy for him to do that. He is totally obsessed with doing everything himself even if that means some in-depth research and a new facility.'

It is not surprising, then, that the best advice Ian would give to anyone in engineering who wants to make it is to do it themselves: 'With a bit of study, you can keep growing from the inside.'

With the squeeze currently on overseas production prices, we're betting that this homegrown model will continue to be a winner. As well as a market leader, Hope could be a real influence on the market itself, pioneering a business model that just a few years back seemed to fly in the face of all the received wisdom.

Want to check out the Hope factory for yourself and see where all the product comes from? Hope are looking to open their doors to the public. Visit www.hopetech.com for further information on when you can get your chance to see some bike magic!