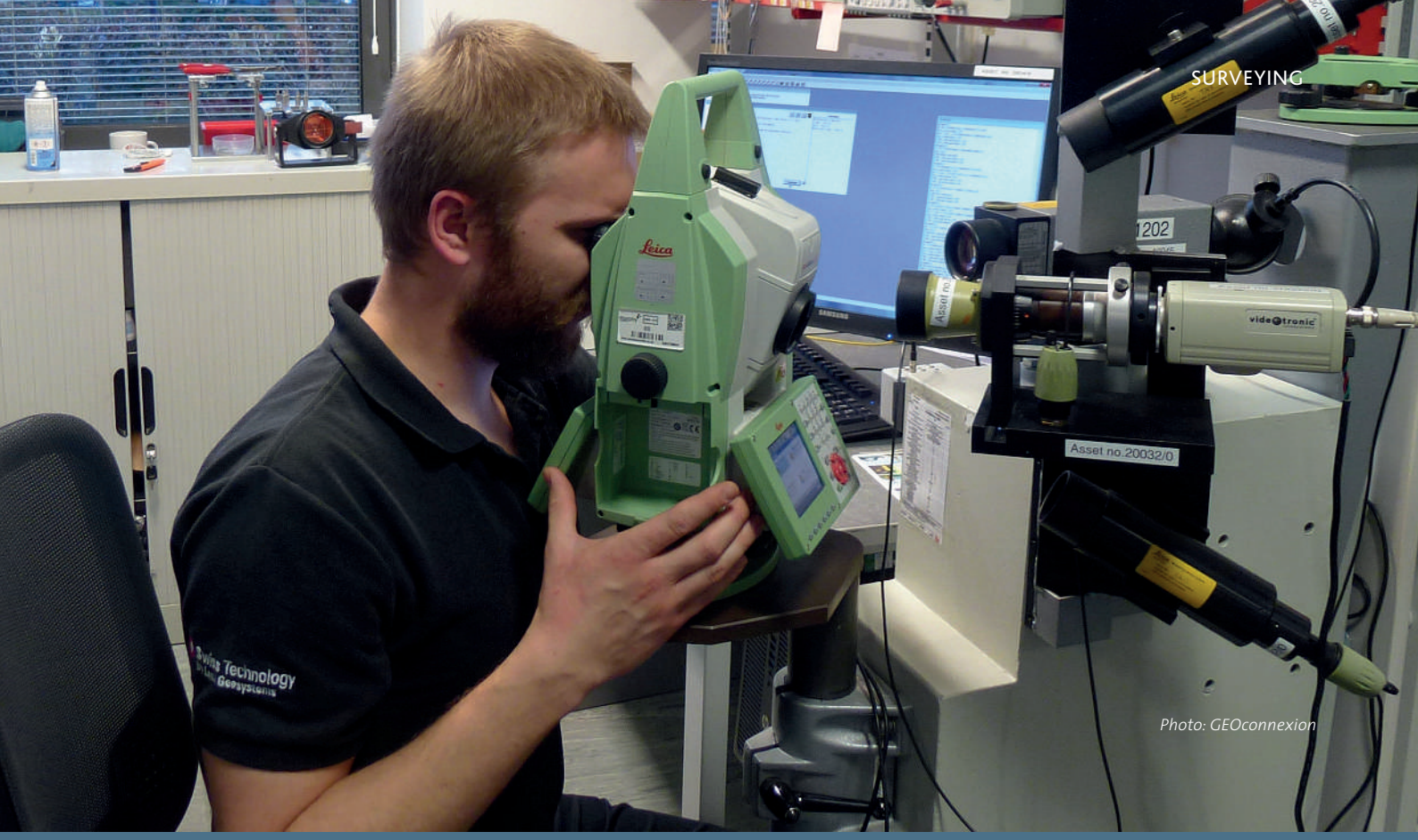

Photo: GEOconnexion

Measuring-up in Milton Keynes

GEOconnexion finds Swiss precision living up to its reputation in the last and largest of Britain's new towns

Milton Keynes abounds with measurements, some more precise than others: the town has 130 roundabouts (but the number grows all the time); its population is put at 245,750 (more or less); 22 million trees have been planted (but there are probably more); 7.5 million people live within an hour's drive of the town (although at what speed isn't clear). And so on. Refreshing then to find one corner of the town where measurements just have to be right.

That much is clear the moment you step into Hexagon House, a smart open plan building shared by Leica Geosytems UK and sister company Hexagon Manufacturing Intelligence (formerly Hexagon Metrology). While Leica Geosystems UK moved into the building just three years ago, its 52 years of trading in the British Isles gives it a unique insight into the needs of customers who employ surveying instruments in every aspect of spatial measurement and dimensional control.

Many instruments, whether DMEs, Total Stations, LiDAR scanners or GPR rigs are subject to extremes of weather and handling. As the majority of users have but a passing knowledge of what happens under the bonnet, a sizeable chunk of the Milton Keynes facility is dedicated to repairing, servicing and calibrating supplied hardware to the highest level of repeatable precision.

Doing the job right

Doing the job right is clearly important – and regular auditing by the Swiss Association for Quality and Management Systems (SQS) ensures this is up to scratch – but so too is the need to be seen doing the job. John Fraser, regional director for Leica Geosystems with responsibility for its business in the UK, Ireland, Belgium and Holland, explains. "When customers bring in equipment for repair or annual servicing, the ground floor layout gives them an uninterrupted view of our engineers at work. It encourages visitors to venture in and learn more."

A co-located service administration area is where the customer experience starts, whether booking-in equipment in person, requesting courier collection, or discussing orders online or by telephone. Servicing times and steps are mandated by the Leica Geosystems factory in Heerbrugg and these are closely monitored to ensure quality and performance standards are maintained and strict lead times are adhered to. The entire job planning and progression function, as well as stock control, is supported by SAP Business Intelligence applications.

Needless to say, the contractual details, warranty status and service history for every item of equipment is recorded from the time it leaves the factory gate. As well as theft protection afforded by Leica's 'my Security' remote locking option, there is also an effective procedure for flagging stolen equipment that will, inevitably, find its way back for servicing or repair at some point, whether in the UK or further afield!

From repair to replacement

The main workshop in Milton Keynes employs a dozen technical service engineers, all of whom are trained in Switzerland. Perhaps bucking the general trend, it has managed to attract and retain a younger age group to replace its once ageing workforce. This, in many ways, reflects the changing nature of the job says John Fraser. "Stripping down and repairing a classic opto-mechanical theodolite such as the T2 was a highly complex, labour-intensive task. These days, modular product design, with its high electronic content, makes replacement a much faster and easier option in the majority of cases."

Even so, the launch of new and updating of existing products imposes its own training challenge. "All our technical people spend a week every year familiarising themselves with new developments, and this hands-on training is complemented by online tuition. The latter has been particularly effective in understanding the finer points of Captivate, the new touch-technology software for a variety of our measurement instruments."

The workshop is equipped to handle Leica's standard green products for terrestrial surveying as well as its standard yellow products intended for construction industry applications. There has also been a substantial increase in the throughput of Leica's machine control products following a successful try-before-you-rent campaign for its iCON-branded guidance systems for loaders, graders, excavators and other heavy machinery.

A full complement of electro-optical and GNSS test equipment is provided at each station in a workshop that also features laser calibration and baseline measurement ranges, clean areas and anti-static flooring. A small technical warehouse located on the premises satisfies day-to-day needs from colour-coded bins of used and rental stock, while a contract with a large warehouse facility in Cologne can deliver parts or finished goods within 24 hours.

Technical Support

Another element of customer care is found on the upper floor of Hexagon House where a five-strong Technical Support team resolves incoming product queries and monitors the availability and accuracy of nation-wide resources such as SmartNet, the Leica Geosystems 24/7 GNSS correction service.

A recent innovation is the implementation of a Live Chat facility on the Leica Geosystems myWorld portal whereby customers needing quick answers can have a real-time dialogue with team members. Launched last April, the messaging facility has rapidly gained traction, with 250 customer contacts logged in its first quarter and double that number in Q2. Although 25% of team time is spent handling Live Chat requests, this is significantly less than that which would otherwise be spent handling telephone or email queries.

The upper floor also houses sales, marketing, administration, Polycom video conferencing and customer training areas, plus a flexible 140-seat seminar suite. Perhaps uniquely, the latter can be made available free of charge to anyone in the industry seeking a conference or demonstration venue.

The open plan layout of the ground floor gives visitors a full view of the workshop area. Photo: GEOconnexion

The service administration area handles the booking, planning and progression of jobs against strict lead times. Photo: GEOconnexion

Each workstation is equipped with a full range of electro-optical test equipment.

Leica ScanStation being checked in Technical Support to ensure it captures 3D data and HDR imaging at a rate of a million points per second at ranges of up to 270 m. Photo: GEOconnexion

For John Fraser, the challenge going forward is to drive the many technical and managerial improvements that underpin the company's 'Smart Change' ethos. But of one thing you can be sure: raw measurement data will continue to be much more than mere figures for those working in Hexagon House.