

No HP for brown sauce excavators

The decision by Midland-based PGC Contractors to invest heavily in new equipment is said to be paying dividends. Andy Collings reports.

For Redditch-based PGC Contractors, a company that specialises in groundwork operations – drainage, footings, roadways etc, mainly for industrial sites – the chosen manufacturer is JCB, which has provided the company's fleet of 360-degree excavators.

Commercial director Dean Hocking points out that, in his opinion, JCB machines are well built, reliable and enable a high standard of work to be achieved – a view, he adds, which concurs with that of his operators.

"But it's not just the machines, it's the degree of back-up and support we receive, which is probably equally important," he concedes. "It is having the confidence to put the machines to work – often in multi-million pound developments – and know they are going to achieve the required results. The bottom line is that if they don't perform we are out of business."

PGC Contractors started in business 15 years ago and for those who need to know, PGC stands for Plant, Groundworks and Civils. Over the years, the company has weathered the ups and downs of the construction industry mainly, it says, through maintaining a competitive pricing strategy and by striving to provide a good reliable service.

"The majority of our work has been in the Midlands where there have been some major changes to the heavy engineering industry which used to dominate the area," explains Mr Hocking. "Recent years have seen the emphasis move to different, lighter industries which usually require new buildings and services."

Now well established with a reasonably sized customer base, business was sound and the prospects, as far as could be judged, looked good. Be that as it may, 18 months ago it was realised the company had reached a crossroads. The choice was to either stay as it was and risk becoming under funded, or to invest, expand and take the company into a higher operating league where there were opportunities that could be more lucrative, reasoned Mr Hocking.

PGC Contractors are currently working on the redevelopment of the site of the old Heinz HP sauce factory at Aston, Birmingham.

"We ordered five new JCB excavators – three JS220s and two JS130s, which joined the existing line-up of mini-diggers and dumpers," he explains.

The expansion also meant new operators had to be employed and this proved to be one of the more difficult tasks. Good quality, experienced operators are thin on the ground, it seems.

"I think most businesses such as ours have trouble finding good staff and operators," he says. "You can have the best machines going but if there is no one available to drive them, then it doesn't count for much at all."

The PGC field staff count is now up to 60 and a further ten are employed in the company's offices. Field staff also need transport and one of the major investments has been in a fleet of 20 vans and, while we are talking road-going vehicles, PGC also operates its own low-loader rather than employing a specialist transport company when kit needs to be moved from site to site.





"Rightly or wrongly, we like to be in complete charge of our own affairs," he says. "And that includes owning all our machinery and vehicles outright with no finance, if it can be avoided."

Hand in hand with the expansion came the opportunity to tender for work from new clients – and, in this respect the addition of names such as Sisk, Thomas Vale and Leadbetter Group would appear to provide some encouragement for the decisions that had been made regarding investment and expansion.

SITE VISIT

Current projects include the earthworks, drainage and foundation work on the Olympic Grandstand at the Alexander Stadium and the site preparation being carried out on the now demolished Heinz HP Sauce factory at Aston, Birmingham.

PGC reports it has also been making efforts to expand its customer base beyond the Midlands area and has been tendering for jobs in North London and other parts of the south and south east – including the Isle of Wight.

But it is at the Aston HP Sauce site we catch up with PGC and its JCB excavators.

Main Picture and Above: In order to promote growth in the business a new fleet of excavators were purchased from JCB, comprising a pair of JS130s and three JS220s.

A national landmark for several generations, the HP Sauce plant was demolished in 2007 when Heinz moved production to Holland. Remembered and talked about with some reverence, it is likely its Tower Road location will be referred to as the 'Old HP Sauce' site for years to come – whatever is eventually built there.

PGC moved on to the site in February this year as a sub-contractor to Sisk – the first time it had been involved with the company.

"This was an exciting move up the ladder for us," says Mr Hocking. "It was a flagship contract which put PGC in another league and we were determined to make a success of it."

The 14,000sq.m site is set to have several new developments, including a large cash & carry for which PGC has the task of preparing the foundations, the lift shafts and erecting retaining walls for an underground car park.

"The first task was to divert a main sewage pipe which cut directly across the site and would have been directly under the new building," he explained. "We brought in one of the JS220s for this task."

The JS220 is described by JCB as being an all-round performer and, in many ways this is undoubtedly true – this machine is perhaps just out of the company's 'bread and butter' range but none-the-less, is a popular mid-range excavator.

Powered by a 5.9-litre, four-cylinder Isuzu engine rated at 172hp which, JCB is keen to point out, has 25% more power and 27% greater torque than the previous engine managed to pump out despite it being smaller. The manufacturer says it achieves this through use of an electronic governor that reacts to the demands made by the hydraulic system – a means of maintaining the required engine output for a given operating condition. In the hydraulic department, the main pump comprises two axial piston type units, each of which has a maximum output of 214 litres/minute.

"I think it's fair to say that the JS220 is an entirely functional excavator that has the capacity we need and the ability to produce reasonable outputs," he says. "We have had a few teething problems with them but nothing which has led to any major down time."

He also makes the point that his operators enjoy working with them – the controls and cab environment finding favour with them.

"I think it is really important for operators to be pleased with the machines they work with. There's no way you will get the quality of work or the output if they are not happy in their work."

The same holds true, he says, for the JS130 excavators. Machines for those less demanding on-site operations that do not require the might of the larger excavator, these are powered by three-litre 98hp Isuzu engines having common rail fuel injection. As with the JS220, a variable flow load sensing system is installed fed by two variable displacement axial piston pumps producing a combined maximum flow of 248 litres/minute.

Hydraulic cylinders on the boom, dipper arm and bucket are fitted with end cushioning as standard and options include hose burst check valves for the boom and dipper rams. But, in terms of features Mr Hocking says it is the Advanced Management System (AMS) that scores well with him.

"Both the 220 and 130 excavators have the AMS, which I believe to be an excellent operating aid," he says. "Four working modes allow the operator to select the best engine power-to-oil flow ratio for any given task, which means there is a degree of fuel economy and that everything isn't working flat out all the time."

Apart from any warranty work, maintenance and repairs – should there be any – are carried out by PGC's own fitter who is tasked with keeping check on the service intervals of not just the excavators but also the dumpers, mini-excavators, compactors and vans.

"Keeping it all in-house enables us to keep an accurate record for each machine – its oil and filter changes, any repairs or updates that have been made and any breakdowns that have occurred," he explains. "I think it is a much tighter way of managing the fleet and its performance."

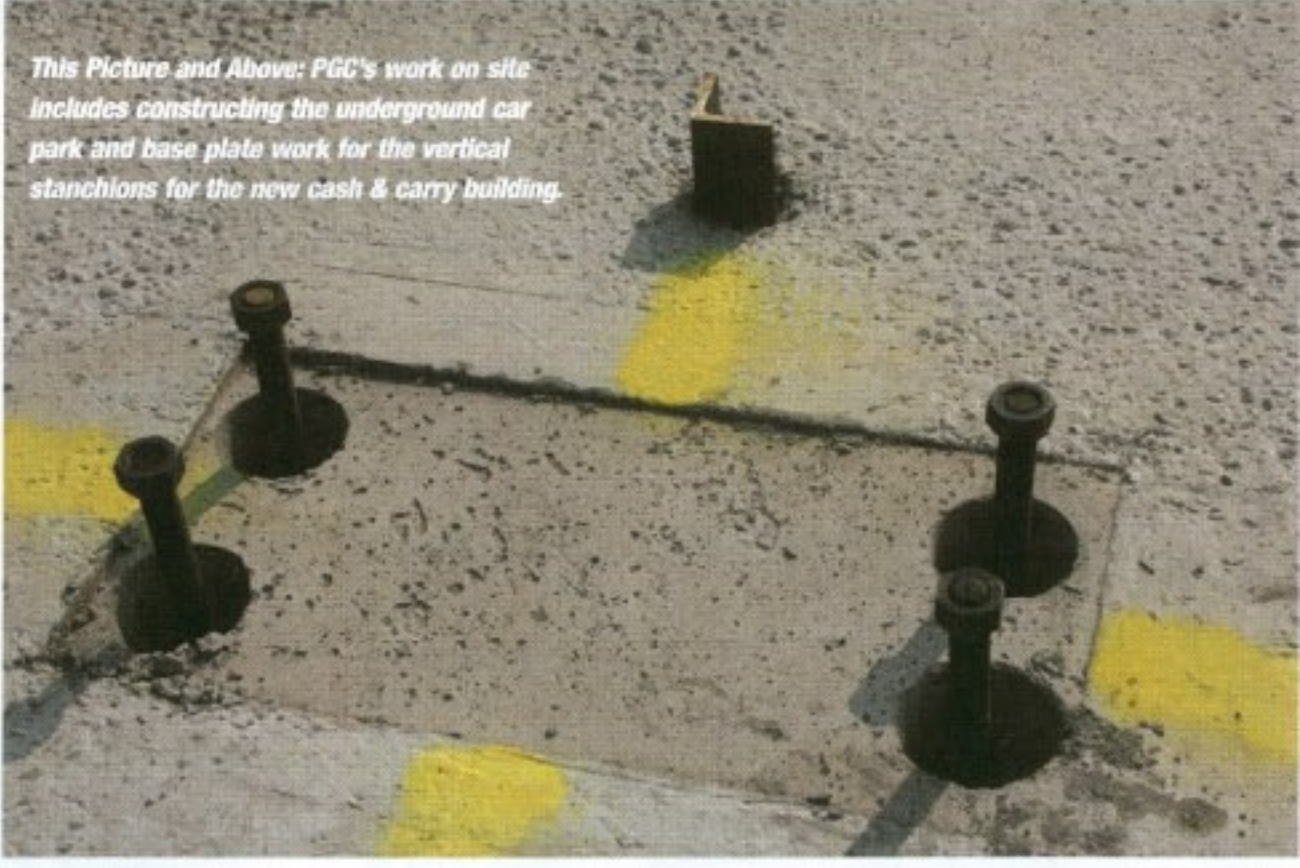
Work then, on the Old HP Sauce site continues. The drains have been laid and the support bases for the steel uprights are in place. There is still some shuttering to erect so that the concrete for the retaining walls can be poured but Mr Hocking reports that, as far as his company is concerned, the job has gone well – on time and on budget.

"It's been some interesting digging – the HP Sauce factory plant was, in many ways, a historic building which over the years had been modified and expanded to the point that long-forgotten cellars and drains appeared all over the place."

He even says that, despite the plant having been demolished over four years ago, there was still the occasional whiff of HP Sauce to be had when the excavators were working.



This Picture and Above: PGC's work on site includes constructing the underground car park and base plate work for the vertical stanchions for the new cash & carry building.



The fleet of support equipment on site includes nine-tonne capacity Torex site dumpers and Benford rollers.



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