Investing in the future

Claas

In 2013, Claas set out on a mission for its long-term future by fully redeveloping its UK headquarters and through the inception of its own training academy. *CPM* visited its Saxham site to see the fruits of its labour.

By Melanie Jenkins

Claas has a vision for the future, one that is both long-term and customer focused. With the opening of its redeveloped UK headquarters at Saxham in Bury St Edmunds in 2020, the firm has put money on the table to show its faith in the long-term prospects of UK agriculture.

Upon first seeing Claas' multi-million pound structural investment, it's clear to see the company could almost fit in among the many behemoth skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, with the firm's UK and Ireland CEO, Trevor Tyrell describing it aptly as a 'glass cathedral'.

But the new building is more than just an investment for Claas' future, it's also steeped in the company's past, with owner Catrina Claas, still farming a stone's throw up the road.

The site was originally purchased by the Mann family in 1950 to operate as a Claas dealership, and every year of that decade it expanded as the business grew. This included the acquisition of three ex World War II aircraft hangars, which were altered over time to suit the requirements of the business but were due an upgrade.

New site design

So in 2013, Claas hired an architect to design a building for the future, explains Trevor. "In 2014, the new used machinery centre was opened where one of the old hangars stood, this was followed by a training academy centre in 2016 and then by autumn 2020 the larger site was completed. This included a parts warehouse servicing the UK and Ireland, a repair and service workshop, a cleaning area for export and Claas UK's offices and showrooms. Manns still has a dealership on the site, and it's one of Claas' biggest dealerships, turning over £25-30M."

Due to Covid, the official opening, which had been intended as an on-site celebration, was moved online, but now the site is fully open and welcomes numerous visitors every day. "Overall, this has been a €25M investment which we hope will still be here in 100 years," says Trevor.

Although he plans for this investment to have longevity, Trevor also sees it as a way for Claas to adapt to the changing industry. He acknowledges the impact that climate change is having on agriculture as well as ▸

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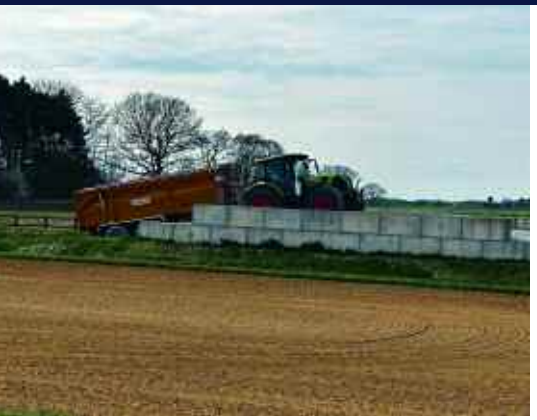
Claas Customer Experience Centre brings 15-20 customers to the site each day to provide them with a technical perspective.



Customers, mechanics and apprentices visiting Claas' Customer Experience Centre can drive tractors, tele- or material handlers or wheeled loaders on a 365-day purpose-built course.

Claas opened its newly refurbished training academy in 2017, consisting of seven workshops and 10 classrooms, and it now welcomes 16–18 year olds who join Claas dealerships as apprentices.

▸ the shift brought about by Brexit, but also feels there's a progressive move from larger to small machines.

This movement, alongside what the firm has felt to be a change in the show circuit, is what led to the development of the on-site Customer Experience Centre.

For anyone who had a farm toy set as a child, Claas' Customer Experience Centre is likely to be a dream come true, as it's essentially a life-sized version. Unlike a real farmyard where the inexhaustible 'to do list' pervades the joy of driving around big machines for the sake of it, the Customer Experience Centre reintroduces the fun to operations that might otherwise have become ordinary.

Be that moving around a pile of rubber pellets (in place of maize silage) and making straight lines in giant sand pit (imitating a cultivated field) or driving a tractor and trailer over an artificial ramp, all while presenting Claas' latest technology and machines to customers.

"The Customer Experience Centre allows us to welcome 15-20 customers to the site each day so that we can show them our support centre and provide them with a technical perspective. It means every single apprentice, mechanic and customer that comes here can drive our tractors, tele- or material handlers and our wheeled loaders," explains Trevor.

Test area

The 365-day, all weather test area includes a CMATIC driving track, a telehandler experience area, a clamp for wheeled loaders and a GPS digital steering area. "We have groups in four days a week from the UK and Ireland and incorporate this with a stay at a local hotel and a brewery tour or a visit around Bury St Edmunds to provide an all-round experience," he says.

In addition to improving customer experience and developing buildings aimed at lasting for generations, Claas is actively investing in the mechanical engineers of the future by becoming an authorised school complete with Ofsted inspections.

Establishing Claas' training academy has been a highlight for Trevor. "One of the biggest issues we have in our industry is finding young people who want to go out and service machines. Working in our industry isn't something that's generally encouraged in schools, so it's something we have to undertake ourselves."

To do this, Claas opened its newly refurbished training academy in 2017, consisting of seven workshops and 10 classrooms, and it now welcomes groups of 16–18 year olds who join Claas dealerships as apprentices. "We're an officially registered technical college with Ofsted inspections to ensure we're meeting the educational standards, both in terms of the curriculum and safeguarding," says Trevor.

As of September 2024, there'll be 100 apprentices in training at the facility, with 20-30 students per class, working on site for three weeks at a time. There are four different trainers whose full-time role is to educate the students, with the aim of having a full contingent of a total of 120 students at one time, consisting not just of mechanics but also parts and sales reps.

In the past, students would have attended external colleges and might not have visited the Claas site until their fourth or fifth year of study, he explains. "This means they wouldn't have had access to the facilities or range of machinery that we have on this site. But now we have students at this facility, they get to work on the most up-to-date machines as well as those which genuinely require a service or repairs through our workshop. It's a great way for them to get hands-on experience so that once they're back at the dealership, they can operate as a trained mechanic."

This set-up also allows Claas to shorten a student's training to become a master mechanic by around three years because they're getting all of the NTA Level 3 schooling through the academy. "The academy acts as the first step in their technical career and will take students from mechanical tools right through to using the most advanced technology," says Trevor.

The academy is licensed to provide ▸

New launches

With the return of Agritechnica last November, Claas celebrated 50 years of its Jaguar forage harvester as well as launching its Xerion 12 series tractors which is all part of the firm's drive for an increasingly digitally linked operation. "The first of these machines have already been rolled out in Australia and Canada and there's one on its way to the UK," says Trevor.

But the latest innovation from the firm is its Claas Connect system which Trevor hopes to roll out to every customer's pocket, farm office and machines. "Claas Connect means everything you do with your machine will come through to your mobile phone and your mechanic can all have access to relevant information for a machine if given permission."

The digital system brings together machine management, service planning and licensing, along with yield and application maps and documentation to a single cloud-based platform. "Our new strategy going forward is very much about the digital business," highlights Rob Fillingham. "Our everyday life is becoming increasingly digitised, bringing you closer to the manufacturer and putting everything at your fingertips, to improve the overall experience."

Claas has also partnered with Amazone to create the Advanced Automation and Autonomy project. This involves operating an Amazone cultivator behind an Agxeed robot in a bid to further advance automation in agriculture. "Claas is a shareholder in Agxeed because we want to see this level of technology on farm in the future, and if we want to achieve this we have to start by getting everything connected digitally," explains Trevor.

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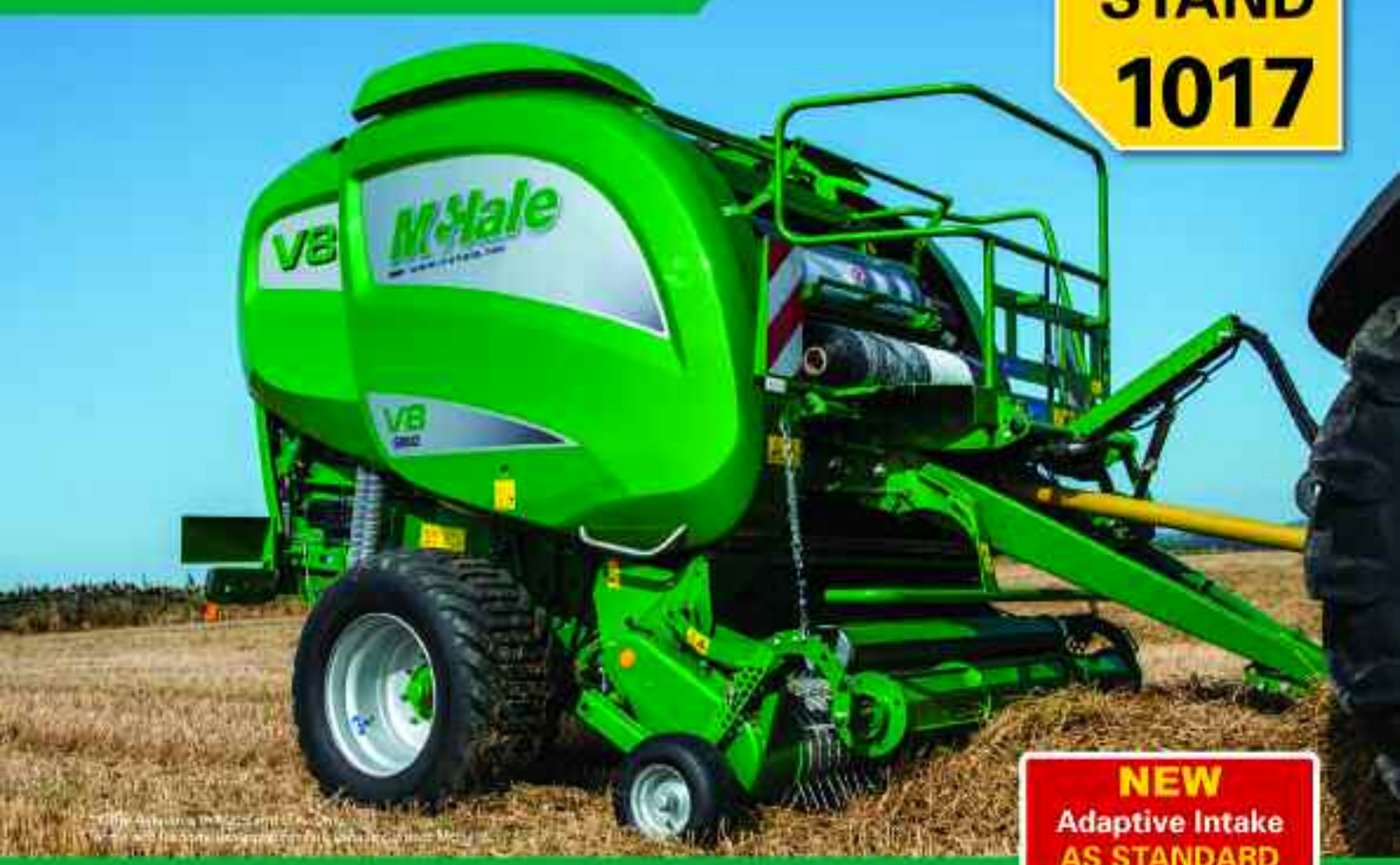

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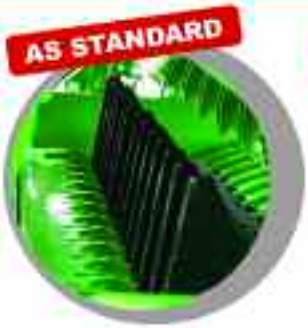

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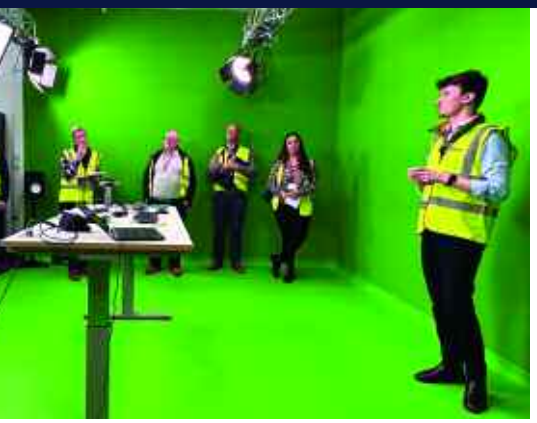

Claas' greenscreen room is a specific investment which allows for purposely tailored training to be presented to engineers around the world.

▸ apprenticeship courses for land-based service engineering technicians, explains Claas' Patrick Frawley. "This is a pretty unique set-up within the agricultural machinery sector and also in the automotive industry as well."

The reason the firm decided to establish an in-house academy, as opposed to continuing with the previous situation of working with external colleges, was to create both a better experience and to produce top-quality mechanical engineers, he says. "With the previous arrangement, we were finding the apprentices' ability to think on their feet somewhat diminishing, so we decided to invest in our own scheme and bring things back to basics.

"We're now teaching hard skills such as welding, fabrication and engineering, rather than just parts swapping, so apprentices can identify how to fix something themselves. We're trying to instil the understanding of engineering practices and material sciences in them, so that when something does break, they can think on their feet to find a solution.

"And because they're based at the same location as Claas employees, they have access to some of the most knowledgeable and experienced team members on a daily basis. This is a way of future-proofing ourselves and guaranteeing better quality on the ground."

Funding the investment

But how does the firm afford to train these engineering students? The students are employed by the dealerships which partially pays for the apprenticeship, while the remaining funds are delivered through a government levy Claas pays into which is then drawn down into the accredited academy, which is Claas in England and SCUR in Scotland.

Rob Portman highlights that the firm is still does face-to-face training and the site hosts in-person teaching for those who've purchased foragers or combines.

One issue that could pose both frustrating and a loss of investment is retaining engineers within the company once Claas has put time, effort and money into their education. "Because the apprenticeships are government funded, students aren't locked into a contract to stay with Claas once their training is complete," explains Trevor.

To reduce the risk of students leaving Claas at the end of their studies, the firm has

a novel solution. “Claas provides them with a toolbox, something that would usually be paid for themselves or by their family, and this is then on a 10-year repayment plan. For every year the student remains with Claas, £1000 is knocked off the price of the toolbox, so that if an apprentice stays for 10 years, they can keep the toolbox, which is worth a total of £10,000.”

This is an investment Trevor believes is entirely worth it. “Mechanics will have a van each worth about £25,000, and when they’re experienced, they usually have a toolbox worth up to £30,000, plus the Claas tools. This means a single van could be worth £60-£70,000. And then there’s the mechanic who’s had four years of apprenticeship training, plus continual professional development, and who’s likely earning £30-£50,000 per year.

“So a service van is worth £100,000 and the only reason we have these is to provide for our customers. We’ve around three or four times as many people to service and repair our machines as we do to sell them. This is why the training academy is so important,” says Trevor.

Claas’ investment in its future mechanical engineers appears to be paying off, with a retention rate of around 90%. “The aim is to maintain retention at this level, consisting of four years of training and six years with the dealership afterwards,” says Trevor.

Virtual training

To provide training to its dealer network beyond the academy, for technicians, parts and sales reps and customers, Claas has a virtual training facility set up in its training academy, explains the firm’s Rob Portman. This consists of a designated greenscreen room and a canopy backdrop in one of the workshops which technicians can stand in front of to provide personalised training to Claas’ dealer network via video link.

“We can also set up multiple cameras in the workshop to stream a live session straight to the dealers or customers,” says Rob Portman. “And with a system like this, there’s no limitation on how many people we can address at once, but we do try to keep the numbers low because this makes it more personal and allows for those being trained to ask questions.”

The greenscreen room was a specific investment of up to £40,000 which allows for purposely tailored training to be presented to engineers. “For example, when we’re providing software training it means we don’t have to bring the technicians to our Saxham site to look at laptops for a day. Instead, they can be based in a home office or at their dealership and receive the exact same course remotely.”

Rob Portman highlights that the firm is still doing face-to-face training, but this provides another form of training to the firm’s world network. “We also have small podcast-type rooms with screens for simpler interactions and all together this allows for a lot more flexibility in our training capabilities.”

The site also still hosts in-person training for those who’ve purchased foragers or combines. “Customers are able to bring themselves and several of their staff to the site to do a full day of training to get the most out of their product. This is something we’ve been doing for more than 20 years now.”

To further streamline operations and create a better customer experience, Claas’ service manager has been digitised,

Apprentices are taught hard skills such as welding, fabrication and engineering, rather than just parts swapping, so they can identify how to fix something themselves.

explains the company’s Rob Fillingham. “Our digital service manager can receive automatic alerts such as error codes or service alerts from connected machines that ▸

Claas' service manager has been digitised to receive automatic alerts such as error codes or service alerts from connected machines that create automatic orders for the workshops.

▸ create automatic orders for our workshops. We can still take jobs manually from customers, but these can now be managed through our digital process.

"Previously, jobs would have been recorded on paper and this limited accuracy and meant there wasn't any live access to the error codes on machines," he says. "But we now take the digital jobs and schedule them with a service engineer who'll be alerted via an app. Engineers then add the data we require to the digital job card through the app, providing us with better information to be able to look at quality improvements, identify issues in the field, and so we can determine how we can be more proactive. Going forward, the more machines we can get digitally connected, the better the service we can provide."

And this links up with the parts warehouse, whereby logs of parts that might be failing over and above anticipated levels are flagged and this can be fed back to the parts team to increase stocks, explains Patrick. "It all works in tandem to provide a better service."

The parts warehouse itself is almost three times the size it was before the renovation of the site, says Claas' Michael Ives. "We use a parts inventory management system to make the operation more fluid with around 500 boxes handpicked per day."

The digitisation of system allows parts to flow back and forth between the Saxham warehouse and dealerships, and between Claas' site in Hamm, Germany, says Michael. "Urgent parts will be sent straight to a dealer, even if they have to be flown in, rather than having to first travel to a centralised warehouse. It's becoming more and more fluid to make things more efficient for everyone." ■

A parts inventory management system in the warehouse helps to make the operation more fluid.