

Old school with innovation

Maidstone-based DSL provides service and maintenance for hundreds of school buildings, including the world's oldest school.

FOUNDED IN 1984 by Ron Bryant and Dave Lucas, Delron Services started life servicing and refurbishing steam boilers – then a common feature in schools and hospitals. Today, the work has changed dramatically with the firm specialising in large mechanical services installations and service and maintenance contracts for a wide range of clients.

It now has an annual turnover close to £6million and directly employs 77 staff within two divisions. Bryant runs the contracting arm while Lucas is head of DSL Fabrication specialising in offsite fabrication.

DSL currently manages all the 600 school buildings in East Kent on behalf of Kent County Council. It also looks after the oldest school in the world: Kings School, Canterbury, so has unprecedented experience of working with site managers struggling to keep ageing building stock fit for purpose.

HVCA president-elect Martin Burton is a recent addition to

DSL's team as project manager and is concentrating on developing the large projects side of the business. One of his first successes was securing the contract to supply all the mechanical services to the 500-pupil Manor Community School currently under construction in Swanscombe, Kent in conjunction with Kier Southern.

The contrasting challenges of designing and installing services in a new build and tackling the everyday issues of existing facilities in partnership with site managers has given DSL's management team a clear insight into all aspects of school buildings.

The Manor Community School project will include a 10m solar array to provide a large proportion of the new facility's hot water, as part of the design carried out by consulting engineers at Jacobs; but such luxuries are not widely available to those running existing school buildings. "In most cases, we can only achieve a limited amount in terms of cutting emis-



The 500-pupil Manor Community School currently under construction will include a 10m solar array

sions and lowering running costs," says Burton. "We do try and make improvements, but the priority has to be ensuring the school operates as smoothly as possible. Good maintenance will, of course, always improve energy efficiency and that is often the best tactic for school managers.

"When a 30-year-old boiler breaks down, while it would be nice to be able to upgrade the whole heating system and install something more efficient, the reality is the school needs heating and we just have to do what we can as fast as we can."

Burton is a great believer in new technologies, however, and thinks we are not far away from some real breakthrough solutions for school buildings. "The new generation of air source heat pumps can generate temperatures above 65°C, which means they can be added to existing heating systems – that's critical," he says. "We are also not too far away from a generation of fuel cells that can be applied to buildings to improve performance vastly and reduce carbon footprints. The key is to improve the running of the system with little disruption."

Burton also believes the company's pre-fabrication expertise could play a larger role in helping deliver fast-track refurbishment work. In a number of projects, pre-fabricated plant rooms can be connected to the existing services to keep the school up and running during major refurbs and as long-term replacements for conventional services.

It was a decision taken by Bryant and his senior team in 2005 to work directly for end clients, rather than through the traditional

construction supply chain, that led to work for KCC along with the NHS, MoD and other projects for local authorities. DSL also does work for Southern Water including managing its biogas facilities, which allows the company to draw on its heavy engineering heritage, but also move into the



Co-founder Ron Bryant (standing) and contracts director Ian McGregor

environmental management area.

"Like many others, we had run into difficulties with main contractors going out of business or being reluctant to pay their bills," says Bryant. "Thanks to our engineering background, we are happy to have a go at things that other firms in our sector would probably walk away from," he adds. "We have been able to adapt our business and now have a strong training ethos that includes taking on at least one apprentice every year."

Working directly for end clients, many of whom are blue chip com-

continued on page viii

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