

BACK ON TRACK

Alun Williams used kit from Hartness to get G&J Greenall's premium brand spirits back on the market

End-of-line packing: Austria's largest private brewery benefits from bought rather than leased kit

Packaging: How the metal can is maintaining its grip on the European beer market

Cartons: A low-key Kiwi investor has joined the race to acquire SIG Holding

Profile: UK energy drink Relentless hopes to mirror the success of Monster in North America

High spirits

UK-based spirits producer G&J Greenall has come through some challenging times. Tom Woerndl reports

There can be no worse sight as a filling line manager than to see your production base burnt to the ground.

This is what Alun Williams, operations director at UK-based spirits filler G&J Greenall, faced on October 15, 2005

It was a bad day for the company and one that would test the resolve of every employee, as its filling site, located in Warrington, suffered what appears to have been an arson attack and was destroyed by fire.

Only the distillery and a disused warehouse were left standing, and staff at the factory, where a number of leading brand gins are distilled and bottled, had to find a way of continuing to supply these iconic drinks, along with a number of other popular own brand spirits to UK supermarkets.

"Most people may well have given up on the situation," said Williams, when I visited the plant late last year.

But in typically British fashion a massive clean up operation ensued, which saw the distillery up and running within seven days, and completing 24-hour shifts within another two weeks.

Work then started on converting the disused, solitary standing warehouse into a temporary bottling plant.

In the interim G&J used co-packers to bottle 100 percent of the company's product.

"We had to keep supplying our customers, and as such moved to co-packers," explained Williams.

"Looking back, what is apparent is that the Greenall team have actually introduced 100 percent of their product lines, twice in 12 months. Once for co-packers and again to return the products back to site."

After securing the support of the various co-packers Williams then looked throughout Europe at potential filling equipment suppliers for the new lines. All the usual names such as Kronos and MBF were considered.

"It was really an eleventh hour decision to go with Hartness, but we're definitely pleased with our choice," he said.

The US-based manufacturer supplied two 8100 GlobalFill machines, each with an out-

put of 400 bottles per minute, along with two Dynac accumulation conveyors.

And as Williams explained the filling machines were chosen for a number of reasons.

"Firstly, the accuracy of the machine was specified as being superior to others on the market," he said.

"The filler operates on to a +/- 1mm level of accuracy, compared with 2mm for most other machines. This saves costs. We've used capability studies which proves this to be the case."

In addition, each machine features a novel handling concept, based on a patented self-adjusting gripper system, which enables a huge range of bottle formats to be filled.

"The rubber gripper system allows a great deal of flexibility," explained Williams.

The cost of change parts for the filler was also a key consideration when selecting the GlobalFill machines.

"For conventional rotary fillers the typical cost of such parts can be very expensive at around £25,000 (US\$49,000)," said Williams. "On the Hartness machine the cost of change parts is as much as 70 to 80 percent less."

Finally, the previous fillers, supplied by the likes of Kronos and Dutch manufacturer Stork,

had a maximum output of only 100 to 200 bottles per minute depending on format size — less than half that of the Hartness machines.

"This was a great opportunity for us to leverage our capacities overnight," said Williams.

Indeed the Hartness filling machines installed at Warrington represent a very new technology that has

not been extensively tested under the pressure of production. There are only five GlobalFill machines installed worldwide; two of which are at G&J's site, with the others located at Hartness' headquarters in Greenville, South Carolina and at Diageo sites in Leven, Scotland and in Relay, Maryland.

The machine features ten filling bowls with six heads and benefits from the UK-designed Mayhew valve.

Before entering the filling machine, bottles are rinsed with alcohol, while regimen-

Globalfill at-a-glance

- The filler features dual rows in a rotary format allowing a reduced footprint
- Typically filling heads can be separated into banks of units dedicated to a particular product
- Its versatile self-adjusting handling system has a grip range of 1.5 to 5 inches (38 to 127mm). No starwheels are needed.
- Capacity of the machine is easily expanded by adding a single row configuration with a diameter of around 6.5 feet (2 metres)
- Rinsing and draining sections are separated and the machine is also suitable for aseptic applications



tal cleaning of each GlobalFill takes place every time the product type is changed.

Dynac accumulation conveyors (also from Hartness), were chosen because of their fully automated nature and remarkably small footprint. "It's a relatively intelligent conveyor system, which is automated in terms of speed and accumulation. This helps prevent any long line stoppages," explained Williams.

"The other benefit is that it only operates with the length of conveyor it needs, taking into account line balance and speeds. This reduces the transport time normally required ▶



Jewel in the crown: two Globalfill machines from Hartness (right) run at G&J Greenall's Warrington site, filling a renowned gin brand, as well as a host of other own brand spirits

Bottles are handled by a patented gripper system (above) that allows simple product changeover and a great deal of flexibility



FILLING SYSTEMS

Photography: Richard Southall





Each GlobalFill machine (left) features ten filling bowls with six heads and benefits from the UK-designed Mayhew valve

Two complete filling lines (below) were shoehorned into the only warehouse (right) that remained standing after a fire destroyed the original bottling plant

Most of the installation work at the Warrington site was carried out by G&J Greenall's staff, with only a handful of outside contractors hired. "It's been a real bonding experience," enthused operations director Alun Williams (pictured below with a selection of the company's products)



for the product to travel down a conventional 82 metre length of conveyor."

First contact was made with Hartness in February 2006. And, within 10 days of this, two engineers from G&J had been sent to the manufacturer's headquarters in South Carolina to inspect the GlobalFill machine.

Finished product was then leaving the line by October 2006. "It's a phenomenal achievement to have finished all this work within nine months," enthused Williams.

"Most of this was done by our own staff. We hired a handful of outside contractors to help install our tank farm system and we were working seven days a week to get everything finished."

Because of such a reduced timescale for the installation, G&J required equipment suppliers that could offer high quality products coupled with a sound level of understanding and cooperation.

"If we had used any other manufacturer, we probably wouldn't have been up and running by now," insisted Williams. "Hartness really made it easy for us with its service and high level of cooperation."

Williams also singled out special praise for end-of-line equipment supplier Ocme, which installed a shrink-to-tray packing system with an output of 60 cases per minute. "This is also one of the most professional companies that we have dealt with," he said.

Inspection systems on the line were supplied by SIK, while capping equipment came from Zalkin of France, which Williams describes as "probably the best capper manufacturer in Europe."

Out of the two lines installed one is used solely for premium branded products and one is dedicated to own brand products.

The output of the lines is such that G&J still has enough spare capacity to soak up any



extra future demand. At present the lines are being worked on a two shift basis for five days a week.

And in terms of packaging, Williams still sees glass as the mainstay of the market.

"We source our glass from a number of companies including Allied, Rexam, Quinn and also from abroad in some cases," he explained.

"However, we do see potential with PET, and always keep alive to any market changes."

Because of space restrictions in the makeshift warehouse come bottling line, there is not enough room for automatic palletising, which is instead done by hand.

However, the whole bottling operation, with the addition of automated end-of-line palletising equipment, is set to be relocated to another site in Warrington by the end of 2007.

So the future looks bright for G&J, and as Williams confirmed, despite some upheavals the company is back on the path to success.

"We've had a tough time, but come through and we are now a stronger unit," he said.

"What we've achieved is exceptional and it has been a real bonding experience for everyone involved."

More information from Hartness International, 1200 Garlington Road, PO Box 26509, Greenville, South Carolina 29616, USA. Tel: 1 864 297 1200. Fax: 1 864 297 4486. Web: www.hartness.com

TFB



Own brand leader

G&J Greenall has been making gin since 1761. The Greenall family business is now a major distiller and bottler of gin and vodka for all sections of the drinks industry.

There are a number of renowned brands which are distilled and bottled in Warrington in partnership with leading drinks companies.

G&J is also the leading own label supplier of gin to the major UK supermarkets, including Sainsbury's, Asda and Morrisons. In addition, the company produces the Greenall's brand of gin, which is exported to 50 different international markets.

Ironically sales growth has been up by five percent since the fire in 2005. "Our sales team deserve a lot of praise," explained operations director Alun Williams (pictured left). "They kept all of our major customers on board, and as a result there was no loss of employment at the plant."