



Sashes on screen

If you're versatile and forward looking, it seems to be a good time to be a small- to medium-sized timber window maker in the UK.

According to these businesses, they're being boosted by the rediscovery of wood windows by both consumers and specifiers. Private new build, social housing and replacement markets are all being drawn to a greater or lesser extent to timber thanks to its combination of performance, environmental credentials and fashion appeal. The fact that estate agents slap a percentage on the price of houses with wood windows is helping, too.

Giving SME manufacturers added impetus, they now have access to a growing range of increasingly advanced manufacturing, design and business management technology that previously would have been the preserve of the bigger players. So, not only is the market moving their way, they can serve it better and more efficiently.

One window manufacturer that is benefiting is Radstock-based Somer Joinery. Established 16 years ago with two machinists and a couple of joiners, it now has 10 machinist/joiners on the shop floor, with Mark Grantham and, until recently, founder Mike Milverton, handling management and sales. And the business is still growing. In fact, it's been so busy, Mr Milverton had to rethink his retirement plans!

Flexibility and new technology are helping the mid-sized timber window maker capitalise on a buoyant market.

Mike Jeffree reports

The company specialises in bespoke joinery, supplying mainly trade customers, but also bigger building developers, such as Persimmon, plus local builders and architects. It also occasionally takes on specialist orders from consumers. Most of its work comes from regular customers and, said Mr Milverton, it has never had to advertise.

As far as Somer is concerned, the market shift to timber isn't about to slacken. Demand for PVCu windows is clearly on the wane, with some councils now actively advocating dropping plastic in favour of wood and, while economic uncertainty may have led to a dip in orders from larger building companies, this has been offset by a lively refurbishment market. Mr Milverton has also detected a growing trend to replace aluminium windows and restore more traditional timber sliding sash. "The market is definitely not slowing down," he said.

In terms of attention to detail and finish, the way Somer operates hasn't changed much over the years but, to meet demand, work practices have had to evolve. At the outset, joiners machined and assembled product com-

ponents. Initially, this wasn't a problem, but as business grew it could cause bottlenecks. Now the machinists stay on the machines, leaving other joiners to assemble items on the workbench. Throughput and efficiency have both improved as a result.

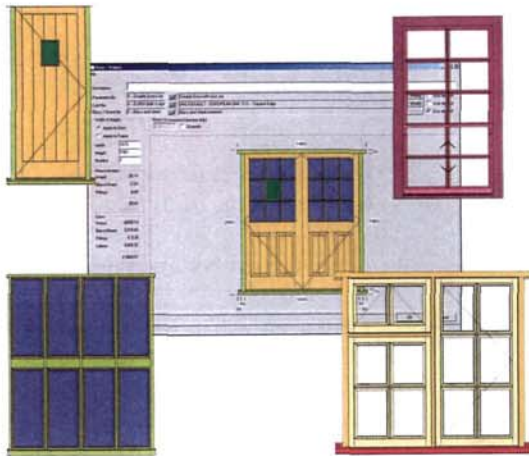
The other area that needed addressing was quoting and paper work. Like many joiners, Somer did the former manually, based on estimates of the volume of timber needed worked out on paper, with labour costs and profit margin added. This was laborious and Mr Milverton worked evenings to finish quotes that couldn't be done between scheduling and customer visits. Consequently that retirement date kept getting pushed back. Meanwhile, Mr Grantham, who wanted to split his time between workshop and admin, was increasingly office-bound.

The company had to find a more efficient approach and evaluated one solution – Joinery Management Software (JMS) from Joinerysoft – two years ago. At the time it decided it didn't need it but, with the workload mounting, this year it took a second look.

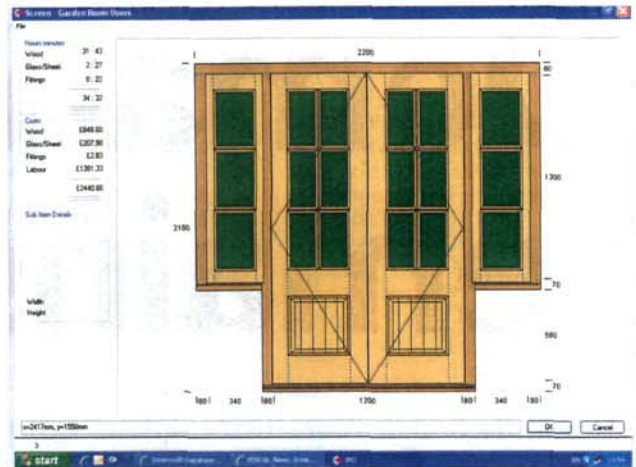
Launched in 2004, JMS was devised



Opposite and left: one of Somer Joinery's latest projects; all the external joinery for a farmhouse conversion



Left and above: customers can be shown details of design, fittings, glazing and timber type on their JMS quote and the different aspects can be changed quickly on screen, with the cost amended accordingly



to help joiners design and quote. Diagrams show customers precisely what they're getting, including timber, glass and fittings used. Once the spec is approved, the resulting quotes can include special instructions, individual terms and conditions and finishing touches, such as company logos.

Designed for bespoke joinery, the software enables users to amend sizes, change the timber, move transoms, add glazing bars and switch furniture, adapting the quote with each alteration. It also provides cutting lists, timber requirements, glass sizes, machine output, delivery notes and invoices.

Somer eventually decided to purchase the whole JMS package which, besides the modules for designing casement and sliding sash windows, includes others for doors and doorframes, screens and bill of materials preparation.

An area where the software has made a big impact is cutting list preparation and formatting. "It saves time and the lists are more useful in machining," said Mr Grantham. "Instead of having several sheets of paper you see an overview – all the information you need in a concise form."

Since using JMS, he added, shop floor operations are faster and smoother. Having all production information in the cutting list means staff don't need to come back to the office to clarify jobs. The software also speeds up

output by showing horizontal and vertical markings on the list.

A fortnight after installing JMS, Somer was asked to quote for a farm conversion involving £50,000 of windows, doors and screens.

"All the windows were different sizes and needed to be quoted in different timbers," said Mr Grantham, "but I produced a quote in 15-20 minutes, rather than the six or seven hours it would have taken previously."

Quick quotes

He suspects they won the order partly due to the speed and clarity of the quote. "We were over £2,000 more than others, but were able to give the customer pictures confirming styles and sizes of all windows and doors, plus fittings and timber used," he said. "What the customer sees on the quote is what they get – and it's no longer on the back of a cigarette packet."

The JMS system also helped Somer meet the customer's request to deliver the windows in batches, with its tracking facility keeping tabs on items through different phases of a project.

The company now uses the software to order timber and glass, with print-outs faxed direct to suppliers. The result is further streamlining and all components arriving in the plant on time. "We finished some windows this morning and had the glass ready so

the products could go to the customer without delay," said Mr Grantham.

Somer is also using the JMS Screens module to quote for conservatories, such as a £35,000, 30m-long design.

According to Mr Grantham, the installation of the software has come in the nick of time. Somer has just recorded its highest monthly turnover and order volumes are still rising. Among its other recent prestige projects was £42,000 of joinery for a farmhouse conversion, including a dramatic stair light the height of the building. The order was won through regular client, Crabb Construction, but involved working closely with the project architect MJW and is expected to lead to more contracts working directly with the latter.

Thanks to the impact of the software, Mr Milverton has finally been able to realise his retirement dreams, while Mr Grantham is able to divide his time between quotations, production and planning for Somer's future. He sees the bedrock for development as continuing to combine the flexibility of a medium-sized producer with the capabilities of the latest technology. In the next few years, he may even look at adding an element of mass window production to the company's capabilities, particularly for casements, possibly with investment in some form of CNC machining centre. With builders waiting up to 16 weeks for deliveries of bulk orders from some bigger producers, he sees an opportunity to step into the breach.

In the meantime, Somer recently completed a window contract for the Duchy of Cornwall. "We've done a few jobs for them, but this was the first where we've used the JMS system," said Mr Grantham. "I couldn't say whether the prince saw the quote though!" ■