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Feature interview with
Colin Searle

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INDUSTRY INSIGHT

“YOU’VE GOT TO BUILD IT ON A SOLID BASE...”

The foundations of Ivor Searle’s engine remanufacturing business go back to 1946, when Ivor himself started out machining and providing components for the agricultural industry in response to demand at the time

He bought his first workshop in the village of Wicken, three miles down the road from the company’s present-day headquarters where Colin Searle, Ivor’s son and current Chairman of the company, told *Scots Auto Scene*: “My father was an agricultural engineer, a self-taught mechanic.

He started out with a pretty basic building and he was drawn to the machining from what the agricultural side needed and what his customers were asking him for.”

Ivor built the business with that customer service ethic from 1946 until the time of his death in 1956, aged just 40. Colin himself was five years old at the time, and it would be a further eleven years before he would join the business at the age of seventeen, bringing with him the drive and vision into the business as his father had done back in the beginning.

“I came into the business in 1969 - I actually started in 1967 but I went away to an engine remanufacturers’ in Norwich,” explained Colin, where he found inspiration for the direction in

which the company could go, and began to develop a vision of the company as it exists today.

“It was very relevant to me because it gave me an insight - they were a bigger concern, they employed nearly 20 people and were quite a go-ahead company at the time, so it gave me a vision of where I wanted to get to. I had nearly two years there to give me some basic training. “It wasn’t just the training, but seeing what they were doing there made the big difference.”

Ambition was never a struggle for Colin, who at barely 20 years old had a clear idea of where to take the business his father started. Where he ended up separating from that initial view of Ivor’s was that the initial idea was to grow it into a parts business. “In today’s terms we would have been a factor,” Colin continued. “He was looking at property in Cambridge to actually put his energy into parts and factoring. In a way if he’d have lived it could all have been a very different thing, and my life would have been entirely different.”



Vision and foundation

Combining his newfound experience with what his father had already established allowed Colin to grow the business in new directions. On his return to the business in 1969, he planted the seed of the company of building up a stock of popular engines, which remains its main product to this day - with one key guiding principle in everything since then.

"I've always wanted to be proud of the business - it wasn't just about making a profit but it's been to gain respect from the customer as well as our suppliers. That's the only way I can truly sit here and feel as though we've achieved something. "It's not just a case of making a quick buck - it's always been a case of going forward we need to make profit to stay in business, and have an eye on the fact of no compromise on quality."

Nowadays, Ivor Searle is able to offer next-day delivery on a range of engines, cylinder heads, gearboxes and turbochargers, with an off-the shelf

12-month unlimited mileage warranty on engines and gearboxes and two-year unlimited mileage warranty on turbochargers.

But at the core of that has always been the independence of Ivor Searle as a company, something Colin has worked to over the years: "We've always wanted to stay independent. We've had big vehicle manufacturers here in the past asking if we wanted to do things for them, but we would lose control of the business.

"We've seen it - I've been around long enough to see what happens with other businesses where you do very much get tied in and you don't have the flexibility to run the business your own way."

Meticulous process

On a tour of the company's current facility it is clear that that growth has not taken place overnight. Meticulous care has been taken each step of the way to ensure that the company has not overstepped its bounds or overreached itself.

Processes have been honed and refined since the sixties and through its independence, Ivor Searle has kept control over those processes over the years.

Each one of its remanufactured engines enters the factory as an old core unit, which is stripped and intensively cleaned, with usable parts salvaged and non-usable components - including pistons and gaskets, which must be replaced with new in order to meet the strict BSI AU 257:2002 standard - sorted for recycling and removed.

Engine cylinder blocks, cylinder heads, and crankshafts undergo thorough inspection for any imperfections or damage, and are checked against original manufacturer tolerances, with surfaces re-faced, cylinder blocks re-bored and re-sleeved to original specifications.

Ivor Searle has amassed a great library of specification sheets in its 72 years in business, thanks to its range development department. "It's very much important that we are organised in the way of range development," Colin explained. "We've got to continually improve.

"Those specification sheets need to be for each of those components that we are remanufacturing - we are remanufacturing in whole terms the engine, but each component with the engine needs a specification sheet. It's like a little sub-assembly and that has to be maintained with its own tolerances and how our employees go about assembling the components.

"Surface finishes are crucial but our machinery has always been chosen on a basis that it can achieve the tolerances and surface finishes that we want in combination with the skills of the people who are working here - they need to be trained to know what is right."

Specification sheets are continually developed and updated, with new models and new references being added all the time. Any information on particular engine builds is tested by the development team before being cascaded throughout the factory, ensuring that all operatives are up to date on exactly how to handle a particular engine.

Increasing complexity

Of course, engines have changed over the past fifty years, something Colin himself has witnessed first hand: "For many years, Ford, Rover and Vauxhall would have covered 90% of the car parc, and there was a limited number of engines in that range; it might have

been that 50-60 part numbers covered most of that 90%. They were simple engines as well. "It's much more complicated now, there are more parts within an engine - complexity is much greater. Now we're talking Volkswagen, Renault, PSA, Mercedes - the whole lot. It's fragmented much more and within those groups there's many more part numbers - thousands."

Thousands of part numbers is right enough - ask any number of people around the Ivor Searle facility to put a figure on the number of references in its systems and that is the best estimate you will get, giving some impression of the scale of breadth the company is working on. "We probably have perhaps 150 stock part numbers, but within those there are hundreds of part numbers, the breakdown of sub assemblies and everything else like that," Colin continued.

Agility and precision in the range development department has allowed the company to keep up with the pace of change, and serve the car parc as it has grown increasingly diverse. "If there is a change in the first place, the range development department develops the specification sheet with any changes to that specification, and that gets pushed out to the company."

Ivor Searle as an entity is always learning, too. On the day Scots Auto Scene visited, there is a V8 engine out of a modern BMW M5 in range development being stripped down and examined - not a common reference for the company by any means, but with careful dismantling and painstaking investigation, the company is able to gain knowledge and add its specifications to the books; and so it goes for every reference that passes through the doors.

"The knowledge that we have picked up over the years is absolutely crucial within our business to be able to evaluate what we're dealing with, what we're remanufacturing, what is fit for purpose to be remanufactured... to use our knowledge to remanufacture the engine and the components that are there. If there have been issues with a particular way of doing something, well we've adjusted," Colin explained. "No matter how many millions of pounds you had, someone starting today could not replicate what we have here. You need a solid core of knowledge built up through solid-skilled people at the core of it."

Built up investment

Investment in its processes and people has



Colin Searle, with a picture of his father Ivor and Ivor's first workshop in the background

served Ivor Searle well over the years, giving the company the means by which to serve its customers. In the past year alone, two employees have received their 25-year watch. At the time of Scots Auto Scene's visit, Colin is discussing the latest move to keep the factory an attractive place to work. "We're looking at revamping the inside, from an air conditioning and lighting point of view - we want to create a better environment for our workforce.

"It helps encourage the right people to come and work for us. If people come in for an interview, they've got to feel comfortable with the environment. At the end of the day, we're dealing with an old component, which we're producing into a near-new component at the end of it, but some areas it's inevitable that you're dealing with dirty components, like in the stripping and cleaning department. We're just trying to do the best we can within those areas to keep the environment right."

Through investment, Ivor Searle retains its employees in general - but not everyone has been with the company as long as Colin.

"I have two guys who have over 40 years service, but on the other hand we have five apprentices here with us at any one time."

Instilling in those apprentices the same ideology of high quality service, engineering excellence and responsibility and demonstrating to them how the company is prepared to invest in them means Ivor Searle retains talent while customers can rest assured of the continuing quality of the products it produces. As Colin puts it: "We gain 110 years of knowledge every year there's 110 people here. If we lose one or two, and they've been here five years and two years, we've lost seven years - but we still gain 110 every year."

"There's been so much emphasis on training and giving them the tools to do their job, with spec sheets and that knowledge. That's probably what makes Ivor Searle unique -

the range of part numbers that we do that we're producing for OE. We can do it and control that quality."

That ethos is replicated across the customer service and aftersales departments, where staff are empowered to do what they can to support the customer. "Our aftersales team is told to be as helpful as possible - it's not a case of saying to the customer 'that's not our problem, it's yours...'

"It's the same with how they deal with warranties. They're not told to only pay where we have to, they're told if it's our fault, we deal with the parts and labour. Their job when dealing with the customer is dealing with things in a straight matter."

Ivor Searle has built up trust with customers over the years in a similar way to with its employees, which serves all parties involved well. "Our customers are mostly account customers," Colin continued. "It's absolutely critical for us to build that relationship up - they're dealing with a complex product just as we are, and it can be concerning to them if something goes wrong. We try to make it as easy as possible for them, dealing with the garage or whoever is dealing with the problem directly so it takes it away from the factor to resolve matters in an amicable way."

Growing outward

Having established its clear process through its experience in engine remanufacturing, Ivor Searle is now replicating this in new areas. In 2013, the company added remanufactured turbochargers and gearboxes to its offering, keeping that same onus on quality and care as it did so; retaining what components it could from OE, and returning those



All Ivor Searle remanufactured engines have a 12-month, unlimited mileage warranty, with the company seldom seeing a return in over 70 years according to David

A shelf of engines in Ivor Searle's storage - these have been cleaned and re-surfaced ahead of being fully assembled and then painted.

kept to OE specifications, but replacing where required to ensure quality and reliability. 2017 saw the company add a further service - DPF cleaning - with the same quality assurance as with its engines and a 12-month no-quibble warranty.

"We're still a relatively small company," Colin said. "Because we're pretty hands-on, we can adapt quickly, decisions can be made quickly."

Relatively small it may be, but these days Ivor Searle is doing big things. Having expanded its current facility at Soham from an initial 10,000 square foot building to two sites and a total floor space of 70,000 square foot, the company is now outgrowing even that space, and selling its products all over Europe. While around 15% of its business is now overseas, what is clear is that it hasn't lost its roots. Colin explained that his son Andrew is Production Manager in the business, while daughter Katie looks after Finance and Costings. His grandson, Jack, recently joined as one of the company's five apprentices, meaning the business is now in its fourth generation of the Searle family.

"It will continue with that commitment to hard work, fully from management throughout the whole workforce," Colin continued. "With other businesses, if there's lack of drive or investment, they perhaps don't see a future and if they don't they have no future. It might well be that we shall diversify in the future; in the mean time we have to deal with what's in front of us, but always with an eye on what's ahead."

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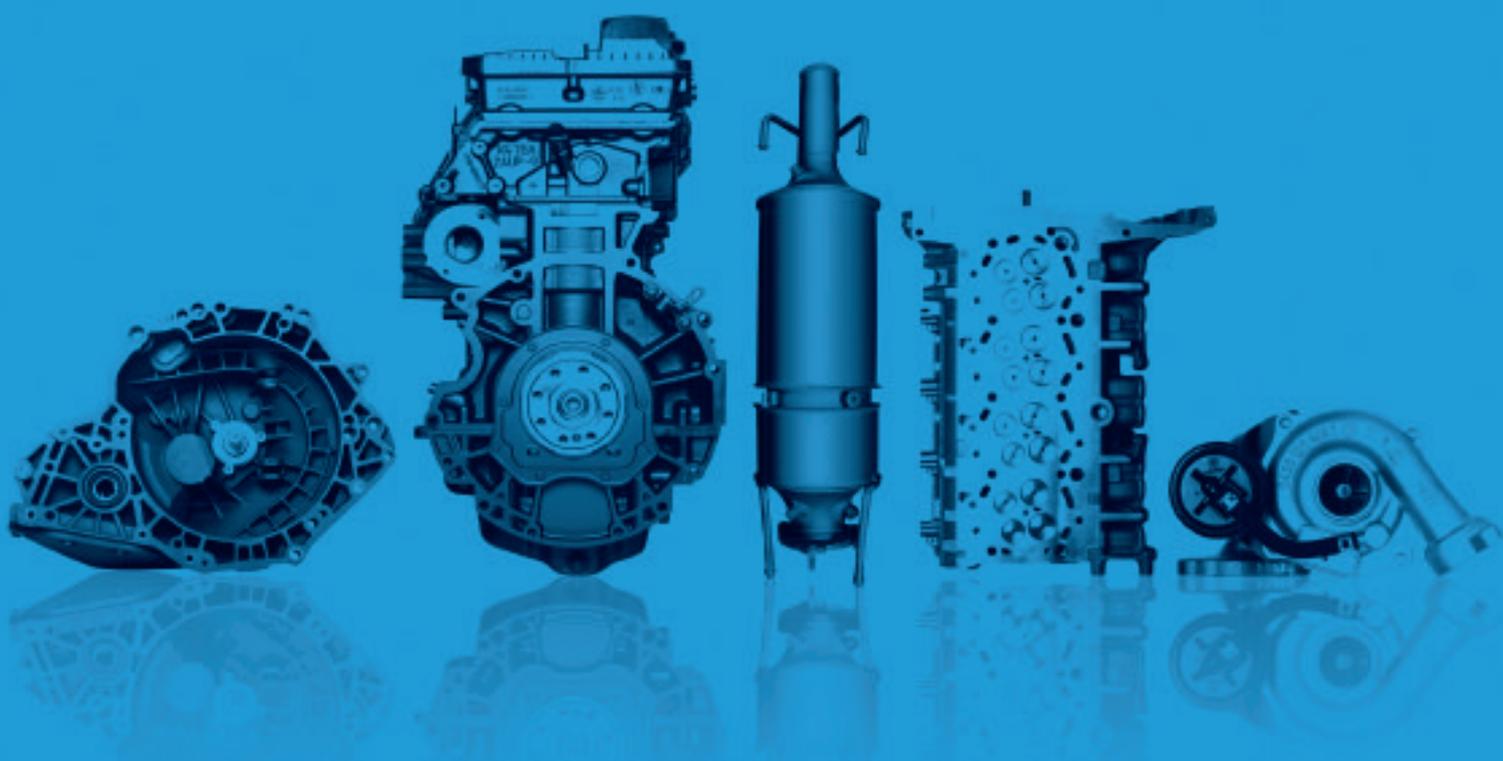
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