

The Crafter – flexibility, consistency and a small foot print

In October this year, machinery distributor IWM demonstrated a Soukup Window Machining Centre at W12 which garnered considerable interest from visitors. That machine has now found a new home in Westfield, East Sussex, in the workshop of bespoke window and stair manufacturer, Woodbase Joiners.

Simon Bartlett, MD of Woodbase Joiners, was initially looking to replace the company's existing tenon cutter and spindle moulder with more sophisticated, digitally-controlled versions. He knew that window centres, which could do the job of both, had been around for years but felt they were inappropriate for his needs due to their considerable footprint, relative complexity and price. Also, the window centres available were fairly rigid in what they could do – and as a bespoke manufacturer, Woodbase Joiners needed more flexibility from any new investments.

By chance, Simon received a mail-shot from Ian Brown, MD of IWM, which included information about a window centre produced by Czech manufacturer, Soukup, called the Crafter that seemed "too good to be true".

The Soukup Crafter, with its own native software and tooling solutions, represents a significant step forward in window and sash window manufacturing offering the flexibility, speed, consistency and accuracy needed by small- and medium-sized businesses such as Woodbase Joiners.

The Crafter is a compact window machining centre that comprises CNC controlled tenoning and profiling shafts. It requires one operator to stay in front of the machine and control the machining process. The machine with is controlled by an industrial PC Beckhoff with 12in touch screen in Windows CE environment, designed for industrial applications. The window machine has been successfully linked to the professional joinery software Klaes and recently also to Joinery

soft.

The UK series of machines is specially designed for manufacturing British windows. It is the only machine on the market optimised not only for casements but also for sliding sashes. The horizontal milling unit can easily provide the typical horns on sashes or trench slots for pulley stiles.

With its high output rate of up to 50 windows per shift with only one operator, a unique ability to produce the horn detail for sliding sashes and a low price, the Crafter was exactly what Simon felt his business needed. "I knew that if Ian Brown was involved then the machine would be of good quality."

However, Simon was keen to see the machine for himself. Luckily a Crafter had been installed two years ago in nearby

Haywards Heath for bespoke joinery firm, Wood & Wisdom. Simon was already visiting the workshop to view the company's new briquetting solution when he caught sight of its Soukup Crafter, and promptly asked for a demonstration. Simon saw the Crafter used to produce a sliding sash in around four or five minutes.

Simon was impressed by the practicality and speed of the Soukup machine and could easily see how it would fit into his business. However, it was important for him that, Darren White, his workshop foreman, appreciated the machine's capabilities too: "It was important my foreman was on board – if he hadn't taken to it, I wouldn't have bought it."

Simon took his foreman to Wood & Wisdom to see the machine in operation for himself. One of the key points with



Simon Bartlett (left) standing beside the Crafter with Richard Blackman (right), co founder and joint MD of production at Woodbase Joiners



One operator can produce up to 50 windows in one shift



The Crafter's small size makes it perfect for smaller workshops



“The Soukup Crafter represents a significant step forward in window manufacturing – offering the flexibility, speed, consistency and accuracy needed by small and medium sized businesses”

the Crafter is that it is relatively straightforward for an experienced joiner to get to grips with as the processes are essentially what the traditional methods are, but with less manual operation. It is crucial for any business that when integrating a new machine that it enters seamlessly into the present process to minimise workflow issues and for operators to feel comfortable with the new introductions.

The procedures before installing the Crafter were time consuming and involved four different machine processes to create one window frame. The planed-up material would require setting out on the bench before mortising on a chisel mortiser and crosscutting to length and tenon cutting on a conventional single-end tenon cutter. Components would then require profiling on the spindle moulder to

create rebates, frame mouldings, cill bevelling, weather seal grooves and capillary grooves. All this required as many as eight or nine different set-ups for the frame and the sashes before those components are ready for gluing and assembly.

Not only were these operations and set-ups labour intensive, they were also prone to inconsistencies and mistakes, even when undertaken by a skilled joiner or machinist.

The Crafter does all these jobs but with only a 2x2m footprint, and with a consistency that cannot be matched by hand. The machine does not require extensive training other than what is necessary to acquaint the operators with its easy-to-use operating software.

Simon says IWM's customer service is superb. A Soukup engineer was sent to

install the machine and two weeks later Ian and Mr Jaroslav Soukup, MD of Soukup Window Systems came to iron out any teething problems the company was having. “Jaroslav and Ian know this machine inside and out, every nut and bolt. They asked us to write out a list of any problems or queries we had, no matter how small, and went through them with us one by one. After only six hours, they left leaving us feeling comfortable with the new machine.”

One of the main problems facing Woodbase was lead times, Simon reports a few instances where he had been forced to turn down work due to the time required to deliver on time. So other than the flexibility and consistency offered by the new machine, Woodbase now benefits from being able to engage more customers. As

a high-end joiner, the company had never needed to invest in marketing before, having always relied on word-of-mouth and reputation to drive custom. But now that the Crafter has given them more scope, Simon is looking to start a marketing campaign in the near future.

IWM is a specialist in providing wood-working machinery for the furniture, joinery and staircase manufacturing industries. Ian summarises why he believes the Crafter has experienced such impressive success in the UK: “It fits the customers' needs exactly, it is as simple as that. Its size and productivity are just what the small- to medium-sized businesses need to progress, and the Crafter is designed specifically for the UK market.”

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The Crafter is able to accommodate a wide range of timber thicknesses and produce single or double tenons



The Crafter features an industrial PC Beckhoff with 12in touch screen



Timber is cut to length and tenoned in one pass

Photographs by Paul McCreery