

COMPANY: W Wright Electrical
BASED: Sheffield
FOUNDED: 1978
MAJOR PROJECTS: Robin Hood Airport
STAFF NUMBERS: 86
TURNOVER: £6.5 million

Steely determination

Forged in the heart of Sheffield's industrial past, family firm W Wright Electrical has grown to become a multi-million pound business employing 80 people, on the back of both public and private sector work

By Nick Martindale

In the heart of Sheffield's old steel district, to the north of the city, lies W Wright Electrical & Mechanical. Home is a former Firth Brown Steels stable building that housed ponies used to transport steel around the factories. Managing director Bill Wright bought the building from Sheffield Development Council in 1996.

"We gutted it," he says. "We had to totally refurbish the building inside and out."

Like much of the area in which his business is based, Bill himself is steeped in Sheffield's steelmaking past, having originally trained as an apprentice electrician in the steel works. After completing his apprenticeship he worked in contracting.

"The work was at heavy steelworks, in big projects such as mines and quarries," he recalls.

That was back in the early 1970s, but already it was a sector in decline, and the turbulent times of that decade meant his career in that area of the industry was shortlived.

"I was made redundant from work in the steel sector and went to work for a business doing maintenance for small engineering companies that didn't require a permanent electrician," he says. "I rose to contracts engineer and it was

quite a good job, but then a lot of these small engineering firms shut down because of the recession."

In 1978, Bill took the decision to start up on his own. "The company was shrinking and it didn't need a contracts manager," he says. "If I was going back on the tools I wanted to do it for myself." Initially this was as a sole trader, supported by his wife Sandra, who today is the company's finance director.

"About three months in I took on my brother-in-law, John Willmott [now the company's engineering director], as an apprentice straight from school," he says. "About two years later I took another one on, and it grew from there."

Most of the work back then was through builders, taking on grant jobs to upgrade electrics in houses as part of bigger renovation projects, as well as working with some smaller

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£6.5M:
 The company's turnover for the most recent financial year

> Engineering director John Willmott



engineering firms on the back of his previous contacts. In time, this evolved into schools, hospitals, prisons and factory units, and the operation became a limited company in 1988.

Finding its feet

The business continued to develop, to the point where Bill came off the tools in the mid-1990s. By that point it employed around 15 people; today the figure is 86, including 19 office staff. "We've probably got 40 electricians, and the rest are plumbers and pipefitters and apprentices," he says.

Most of its work is in South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire, but they also venture as far afield as Newcastle and Wolverhampton. Much of it is in the public sector, including schools, town halls, libraries and hospitals. But there's also a wide range of private sector work, both through main contractors and as a main contractor itself, including fire alarm systems, door-entry systems and emergency lighting. "We work with some large builders, such as Henry Boot, including a large aircraft maintenance hangar at Robin Hood Airport," says Bill. "That contract was probably worth £1.5 million, about four years ago. We've also done theatres at local hospitals, nursing homes and factory units."

The business was forced to make redundancies during the downturn, says Bill, although some of those affected

have since returned. But the market in South Yorkshire, in particular, remains tough, with fewer signs of an upturn than in other parts of the country. "It's still very competitive," he says. "The margins are very tight and you've got to show the customer you can offer the service, as well as a competitive price. I think it will be a number of years before margins in this area get to where they were before the recession."

Bill remains wary of which jobs the company takes on. "We're very selective with the main contractors that we work for – we went through a three-year period where we got hit by a bankruptcy every year," he says. "You've also got to make a profit, or you're endangering your company, and we have a responsibility to probably 60 families." But the business's strong balance sheet – it has grown organically through its own profits rather than borrowing – saw it through the worst of the recession, he says, and meant it could avoid the fate of many of its rivals.

"Some contractors had very little cash to start with, did a lot of negative tendering and as a result are no longer in business," he says.

If there was a positive to come from the downturn, it was that it enabled the business to further develop the mechanical side. "I had a few plumbers and pipefitters on the books, but it really expanded about four years ago when

40:

The number of electricians W Wright Electrical has on its books

quality mechanical engineers became available," explains Bill. "That accounts for about a third of the turnover now."

Turnover has also now returned to pre-downturn levels, hitting £7.5 million in 2013 and £6.5 million in this current year. "We could probably manage £9 million," says Bill. "We have the resources and the finances for that." The maximum size of contract the business would take on depends in part on the length of time it will take, he says, but it's just done a £1.5 million M&E project in 26 weeks.

Industry figure

If the name Bill Wright is familiar, it's probably due to his other roles in the industry, in particular as national president of the Electrical Contractors' Association in 2005-6 – a post he took after chairing the ECA's contracts and commercial and legal committee. "Now I sit on the labour relations committee and am joint chairman of the North East and Yorkshire Joint Industry Board (JIB), and I sit on the national board of the JIB," he says. "It's all been very positive for us, and it was quite an honour to be asked to be national president of the ECA."

He's a passionate believer in JIB – all his operatives on both the electrical and mechanical sides of the business are fully employed on JIB terms and conditions, although he's less happy that this has created an uneven playing field in the current market. "The rates we pay are at the top of the industry," he says. "But there are firms out there taking on people who are bogus self-employed. It means the market rules; when there's a shortage of work then people take advantage of the labour, and when there is a shortage of labour the labour will demand high pay, so it's bust and boom. With the JIB it's a continuous process."

This, he says, has affected how the business positions itself; it's never moved into renewables on the grounds that it wouldn't be able to compete.

But the business has benefited from a loyal workforce over the years, partly as a result of paying JIB rates. "I've got three employees who have got gold watches for 25 years' service and we have another three who have been working for us for 25 years, but have left once and come back," he says. There's also a strong family element; his son Christopher is a supervisor in the firm, as are two of his nephews.

Apprenticeships are another important part of the business, and the firm takes on some apprentices every year. "The vast majority stay with us at the end of the apprenticeship," he says. "If we have a lot of large projects we'll take on more, because for the first 12 months you have to be very careful where you put them."

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> Finance director
Sandra Wright




"We also try to mentor the apprentices by putting them with a supervisor or a senior electrician."

There's no shortage of people keen to become apprentices in South Yorkshire, unlike in other parts of the country, but he does have concerns over the government's proposed changes to the funding. "It's determined it's going to come in, but there will be a massive drop in apprentices as a result," he says. "The big businesses will take the administration of it in their stride, but the small contractors that employ the vast majority of apprentices will not want that. We're large enough to carry on, but whether I have a year off taking on apprentices as a protest is another matter."

Look to the future

Having survived a number of recessions – he rates the most recent as the worst – Bill is wary of putting figures on future growth. "If things improve then we will expand with it, but in today's market you can't plan too far ahead," he says. "You hear firms saying they're going to increase turnover, but you've got to finance that, and if you're using anybody's money except your own then you're paying interest on it. We've always used our own money and we've never taken a lot out, and that's why we're still here. We had a big enough cushion for bad debts not to have a big effect."

He's also adamant that retirement is not on the agenda, but with John some 10 years younger than him there is a natural succession plan in place. His daughter also works in the construction industry as a qualified supervisor, he adds, although not for the business.

Like many from this part of the world, Bill is not one to crow about his own achievements, but he has every reason to be pleased with how things have turned out. "I think we've got a very good reputation," he says, choosing his words carefully. "There are a lot of companies our size that are no longer here. In some, the founders have retired and handed it over to somebody else and it's not worked, and some have been bought out and then shut down years later. But we're still here, even after the recessions we've had." 

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