



The team at Wisbech (l-r): Tim Farrow, Gwynfor Evans, David Goodale, Andrew Holloway, Sean Stanfield, Reuben Johnson, Jonny Hall, Ludmila Ferreira, Peter Newman, Marcus Scott, Andrew Ratcliffe, Ben Baynes, Daniel Notley, William O'Neill, Claire Schofield, Gary Lucas, Lee Norman, James Britain, Joel Faulker, and James Woolway.

BRITISH MANUFACTURING ENDURES

Stocks Ag's revival exemplifies the importance of strategic investment and innovation in British agricultural manufacturing. **Daniel Hodge** visited the Wisbech site.

When James Woolway acquired Stocks Ag in August 2020, he knew he was taking on more than just a company – he was inheriting a long-standing and respected legacy that had slowly stagnated through lack of investment and innovation. Situated in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, Stocks Ag has proudly manufactured specialist agricultural wheels since 1977 and later, applicators. However, by the time James stepped in, the facilities and machinery had barely progressed beyond their original setup, with outdated equipment and crumbling infrastructure reflective of decades without meaningful investment.

"When we took over, everything here dated back to the 1970s or 80s," James recalls. "Machinery was antiquated, the buildings were in disrepair, and there hadn't been meaningful product innovation in years."

A challenging road

Determined to restore and revitalise this British manufacturing business, James undertook a sweeping series of improvements, both infrastructural and strategic. "We immediately began modernising the site," he explains, and the scope of the initial work helped to illustrate the amount of work ahead. "We had to install new wiring, new plumbing, lighting, central heating, air conditioning, new IT systems, pretty much everything on site needed to be changed or updated. It was a gargantuan task, especially in the midst and wake of Covid-19." Despite the significant investment at this stage, James emphasises that these were fundamental changes that dramatically improved working conditions and morale.

Modernisation wasn't restricted to quality-of-life upgrades. Crucially, Stocks Ag has invested heavily in new manufacturing equipment, introducing robotic welding

technology, precision laser cutting, and advanced press braking – upgrades that have profoundly transformed the company's manufacturing capabilities.

"Previously, we couldn't produce products efficiently due to outdated equipment. With the investments we made in new machinery we have brought more production in-house, which has helped reduce costs and substantially improved quality control," James adds. Tim Farrow, technical director, adds that by having product design and manufacture performed in house, the R&D process has been significantly streamlined: "If there's something we want to look at, something new we want to test or trial – we're not waiting around on other people to make it happen. We can do exactly what we need to do, when we need to, and that has been crucial in designing new, and redesigning old products."

Another significant challenge James faced was transitioning Stocks Ag from traditional paper-drafted designs to modern CAD-based systems. "Nothing had been 'designed to be made' before," he explains. "Our products had been historically designed on paper, with little thought given to how efficiently they could be manufactured. Redesigning products with manufacturing efficiency in mind was transformative. It allowed us to dramatically reduce assembly times – from around five hours per unit to less than an hour in some cases. This alone created substantial cost savings and increased our overall productivity."

Continuing to innovate

This revitalisation extended beyond mere machinery. Stocks Ag has clearly recommitted itself to innovation. Previously reliant on legacy products – like the popular dual wheels and applicators known by farmers nationwide – Stocks Ag embarked on a period of intensive product development. Newer, more efficient applicators such as the updated FanJet and



Stocks Ag's technical director, Tim Farrow and sales manager, Sean Stanfield.

TurboJet models exemplified this renewed focus, driving significant interest from both domestic and international markets.

"Customers can now see we're actively developing products again," notes James. "That's been a huge draw. Our products are tailored to modern agriculture, addressing today's challenges like soil compaction, precise application of inputs, and adaptability to diverse farming operations."

Stocks Ag's approach has combined traditional strengths with innovation. For example, the company re-engineered its wheel ranges to suit contemporary agricultural demands – heavier loads, higher speeds, and greater efficiency. Such adaptability has helped Stocks Ag reclaim its position at the forefront of agricultural wheel manufacturing, gaining traction in markets traditionally dominated by European competitors.

British pride

An essential factor in the revival of Stocks Ag has been its strong identity as a British manufacturer. "There is undoubtedly growing demand for UK-made agricultural machinery," sales manager Sean Stanfield explains. "Farmers increasingly value British engineering for its quality and reliability. For us, flying the Union Jack on our products isn't just marketing – it's about being part of a movement."



Stocks Ag's managing director James Woolway.



Stocks Ag holds extensive stock and is shipping worldwide.

that supports local manufacturing and the broader UK agricultural industry. We care deeply about that."

The team at Stocks Ag were keen to highlight the importance of a personal, responsive customer service. "We've focused heavily on improving customer interaction. Whether through direct human support instead of impersonal automated systems or detailed product registration that ensures prompt, accurate after-sales support, our goal is always to put the customer first," says James.

Indeed, this approach has resonated well, providing another layer of competitive advantage. Customers appreciate the efficiency and personal care demonstrated by Stocks Ag, particularly in a sector where downtime can significantly impact farm operations.

Yet, despite considerable successes, Stocks Ag remains focused firmly on the future. "We're starting to see real opportunities, especially in export markets," James explains enthusiastically. "Internationally, the Stocks Ag brand already carries respect, but previously, we lacked the infrastructure to fully exploit that reputation. Now, equipped with our modernised facility and rejuvenated product range, we're poised for significant growth."

Recent initiatives, including participation in international exhibitions like Agritechnica, have begun yielding results. "Our presence abroad is expanding, driven by careful market selection and strategic relationship-building," says James. He notes recent successes in diverse markets, such as Japan, Scandinavia, New Zealand, and parts of mainland Europe.

"In essence, we've been rebuilding Stocks Ag from the ground up," James summarises. "It was never just about survival – it's always been about thriving, about setting a benchmark for what British agricultural manufacturing can achieve with vision and commitment."

On the floor

As Stocks Ag approaches its fifth year under James' stewardship, the transformation is remarkable. *Farmers Guide* was lucky to experience a guided tour of the manufacturing facilities first-hand whilst working. The Wisbech facility buzzes with activity, precision machinery hums with efficiency, and employees, some who've seen decades of stagnation, now work within an environment clearly oriented toward growth and innovation.

One of the earliest steps was the advanced laser cutting system, a significant upgrade crucial to the operation. "We used to rely heavily on outsourced

components," James explains. "But now we cut most parts ourselves, significantly reducing costs and wastage." The transition to in-house laser cutting has not only improved the speed of production but also allowed for precision and flexibility that was previously unachievable. Sheets of metal are efficiently nested, minimising scrap and maximising material use – a sharp contrast to the previous reliance on manual gas cutting methods.

A new press brake complemented the laser cutter and was seen bending precision-cut metal into complex shapes swiftly and accurately. "Transitioning from old methods has been challenging," James acknowledges, "but the efficiency gains are substantial and the effect of that mustn't be underestimated."

Nearby, the robotic welding unit was in action, demonstrating another major leap forward. "This robot significantly speeds up production," James remarks. "Tasks that used to take an hour or more by hand now take around 40 minutes, and importantly, with absolute consistency." Despite the automation improvements, he also highlighted the necessity

of maintaining manual welding skills for specific, low-volume tasks that are not economically viable for automation, ensuring versatility in their ability to fulfil customer requests.

The wheel assembly area demonstrated the intricacies of wheel production. James pointed out large stacks of metal centres, which are welded into rims specifically matched to tire sizes and customer specifications. "We maintain extensive stocks of components to respond rapidly to bespoke orders," he notes. "It helps us commit to a fast turnaround and fulfil a wide range of customer orders. It's rare that any two would be the same."

Farmers Guide also visited the painting and finishing area, where Stocks Ag's meticulous approach to finish and quality was on display. "We are able to finish any piece in any colour, whatever the customer wants," added James.

The tour reinforced Stocks Ag's commitment to continuous improvement, evident in its plans for a new, large shot-blasting unit that is projected to cut down material prep time from a couple of hours down to a few minutes. "Every step we've taken is about enhancing our efficiency and quality however we can. The difficult part has been deciding what to do, what to spend, and importantly, where to do it."

Transforming British business

Stocks Ag's story, therefore, is one of vision, resilience, and strategic investment – a compelling testament to the possibilities that are still present within British manufacturing. James' journey from purchasing a struggling legacy business to overseeing its comprehensive transformation embodies a belief in the enduring value of quality British manufacturing. Reflecting on the journey, James is optimistic: "We've come far, but there's still so much more ahead. Stocks Ag has again reinforced its place as a trusted brand. The future from here is very exciting indeed." **FG**



(Pictured clockwise from top left): The new laser cutter, press brake, painting room and robotic welder.