

# Bakery machinery



## 50 years in the making

Bakery equipment supplier EPP is celebrating its golden anniversary. Here, MD Steve Merritt looks back at how much has – and hasn't – changed in the market over half a century

Some things haven't changed very much at all – it's a somewhat surprising view from Steve Merritt, managing director of bakery equipment supplier EPP, considering he's looking back over the lifetime of his company and, having clocked up 50 years in February, it's hardly a spring chicken in business terms.

When the MD qualifies his statement, however, it becomes clear that it isn't quite as straightforward as it seems – much like the equipment EPP has been selling to bakery manufacturers over the past half-century.

“The dynamics have changed, but the equipment available 50 years ago was trying to reduce the labour content and provide replicable results that were the equivalent of hand-produced products – and that's exactly the same now,” Merritt explains. “The ambitions and desires of bakers then was to produce more with less, to do it repeatedly and produce the same consistency throughout. If you look at photographs of the machinery from 30, 40 or 50 years ago, in terms of processing, it is very similar.”

Merritt's view brings to mind a popular French saying: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même*

*chose* – the more things change, the more they stay the same. What's more, a continental reference is entirely in keeping with the roots of the business and its *modus operandi*. There's a clue in the name: EPP stands for European Process Plant. But for a fuller explanation, here's a potted history:

Godfrey Morris first came up with the vision for EPP while working for UK bakery equipment manufacturer G&R Gilberts of Hackbridge. During the 1960s, his many business trips overseas gave him the opportunity to witness how manufacturers in other European countries

were setting new trends in bakery automation. Sandwich bread production was already reasonably efficient, but Morris saw there was an opportunity for much of the UK baking industry to benefit from the innovations he'd seen. So, partnering with Colin Hall, another employee of Gilberts, he started EPP in 1972 with the aim of improving UK production of flour-based goods in terms of speed, scale, quality and consistency.

It was a humble beginning for a firm with 'European' in its name: Stewart Morris, son of Godfrey and an employee of the company for the past 35



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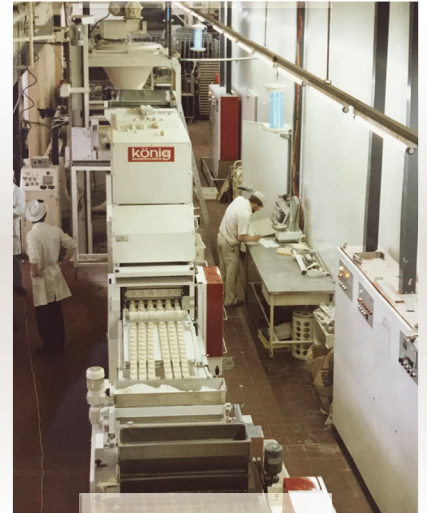
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years, remembers his playroom at home being converted into EPP HQ when he was five years old. Later, having established relationships with manufacturers across Europe, the business set up on Banstead High Street, Surrey, before moving into purpose-built offices and stores in Epsom, where it still operates today.

Morris and Hall sold the business after 25 years to the then general manager Keith Stalker and accounts manager Josie Mitchell, who went on to run the business for a further 20 years. Another management buyout took place five years ago, with Merritt taking the reins (although Stalker and

Mitchell still have shares in the business).

Just as the principles guiding bakery equipment have remained steadfast over the past 50 years, so too has EPP maintained its commitment to its original mission, even with different personnel at the helm. But returning to the question of hardware, what exactly are those changes in dynamics that Merritt referred to?

“The most obvious one is that machinery nowadays is hygienically far superior to that of 50 years ago,” he explains. “Everything was painted metal in those days, and we’ve moved to stainless steel because we don’t want flakes of paint

dropping into our product! Also, people have worked hard to eliminate pockets and traps for flour and dough so it’s easier to clean and easier to maintain.”

That’s not all. In fact, as he warms to the theme, Merritt finds plenty of ways bakery equipment has transformed over half a century.

“The machinery is much bigger,” he says. “Where machinery was doing tens and hundreds, we’re now doing thousands and tens of thousands, so the machinery is bigger, bulkier, wider, longer, taller and the throughputs are a quantum leap forward.”

With the technology having undergone nothing short of a

revolution, it’s no surprise to learn that control mechanisms have changed significantly.

“In the old days, machines were run off cams and levers and things called line shafts,” Merritt explains, “so you’d have a long, rotating shaft down the middle of the machine and everything would run off that so it would work consistently and in time. There were lots of problems with that technology. Nowadays we have servo-driven motors, encoders, electronic communications and control systems. Not only are they far more reliable and consistent, but they also don’t suffer the same wear problems.”

Automation has also been



Machinery over the years, clockwise from top left: Koenig roll plant with step-by-step tray-up system, circa mid-1980s; Koenig install at Roberts Bakery, 1982; modern Koenig industrial head; Collette bowl lift, circa 1972; Gefra tray-up system, Roberts Bakery 1982; modern VMI linear carousel mixing system; modern Koenig Combiline plant; Koenig roll plant – prover infeed, circa 1980



a game-changer. Merritt highlights the elimination of manual handling as one of the key developments of the past half-century. “When I look back at early bread plants that would have been put in 30 or 40 years ago doing five or six thousand tin loaves an hour, that required a lot of manual intervention. It required a lot of hard, physical graft. Nowadays, we have closed-loop systems, robots and pick-and-place machines, so there’s almost no physical labour involved in the process.”

Even more significant, however, is how machinery has gradually evolved to remove the limitations on the kind of bakery products it could

produce. “In the past 10 or 15 years, because machinery is much more adept and flexible, we’re able to return to products that could only have been done by hand previously – products that need to be handled much more gently, those that have higher water content or open texture. It fits in perfectly with the return to artisan-style products we’re seeing in the marketplace right now.”

So, how will machinery in the bakery sector continue to evolve in the future? According to Merritt, the market responds to demand from bakers, and what he’s seeing is the need for more product differentiation. “We need lines that are more

flexible, more capable of handling more challenging and interesting products, and to be able to do that on short runs,” he explains. “If you go back 50 years, lines were pretty much specialist – they came and they could do a job but if you wanted to change anything even slightly, that sort of capability wasn’t built in. Nowadays, building in flexibility so lines can produce a range of weight points, dimensions or shapes is an absolute requirement and I can only see that becoming more so because everybody wants something that’s slightly different and unique.”

Other factors that Merritt sees driving development in the

future are very much occupying bakers’ thoughts at present: energy and labour efficiency. “Machines that stop and start automatically and go into lower energy usage will become the norm,” he says. “Labour, skills and competency will also need to be covered by machinery because we simply can’t find large quantities of people who are prepared to work in bakeries for long hours.”

So, if it’s true that the more things change, the more they stay the same, then at least we can take comfort in future machinery developments dealing with problems that the sector could be facing for quite some time.