



Profiting from change: the growth of Hepworth Acoustics Limited
by Peter Hepworth

Peter Hepworth, founder and Managing Director of Hepworth Acoustics, gives a glimpse behind the scenes of this increasingly successful acoustics consultancy.

The heat was intense in an entirely enjoyable way. I sat in the shade watching the sun reflect off the Mediterranean as I kept an eye on the sound level meter and made notes for the survey of road traffic noise in a British army base in Cyprus. Not, I felt, an unpleasant life, and not what I expected when I had first set up my own independent acoustics consultancy. That had been in 1990, and my first office had been in the spare back bedroom of my home. That time working in Cyprus is now over ten years ago, the company has grown considerably since then, and the range of work we undertake is even more diverse.

To some extent, the history of Hepworth Acoustics reflects the changes in aim and emphasis of UK government and EU noise management and environmental legislation over the last 15 years. When I first founded the firm in January 1990, it was still the era of British Coal, and we were initially involved in a large number of public inquiries relating to opencast mining sites. Not so long after that, British Coal was privatised and our involvement in many of the opencast schemes came to an end as the new owner decided to use their own consultants. The focus for Hepworth Acoustics moved from mining to highways, with, again, a lot of involvement in public inquiries. I developed a real enthusiasm for acting as an expert witness – the necessity for solid preparation, the requirement for accuracy, the need to appear ‘cool under fire’ – an enthusiasm I have retained to this day. The involvement with highways schemes in a variety of capacities continued until the mid-1990s, when the UK government policy changed, and Hepworth Acoustics found the emphasis of work shifting as we became much more involved in acoustics projects related to the leisure industry. We

were commissioned as the acoustics consultants on hundreds of themed bar and pub developments from Aberdeen to Plymouth. This was the time when, as we shall see presently, the business began to expand significantly and to acquire the profile which it has today.

Government initiatives, of course, never cease, and two pieces of recent legislation have had a clear influence on the direction the company has taken. In terms of UK legislation, the new sound insulation testing regime which came on stream as a result of changes to the Building Regulations in 2003 has meant that a greater number of our clients are now developers and house builders. In order to deal with this workload, the company has a number of sound insulation testers who have been approved under the Association of Noise Consultants' Registration Scheme.

The European Directive on Environmental Noise has also had a marked effect on the kind of work undertaken by Hepworth Acoustics since 2000. The deadline set by the END of 2007 for the first noise maps has meant that a number of large contracts have recently been awarded for noise mapping work, and there is still much work to be carried out before the deadline. This current workload has built on the experience gained from our first major involvement with noise mapping in 2002, when we carried out the development of a road traffic noise map for Westminster City Council.

The number of people employed in the company has increased significantly since those back-bedroom days of 1990. Indeed, they started growing almost immediately – after a few months of working 16 hours a day doing noise surveys, reports and all the company administration, and with more work still coming in, I became convinced that the company needed to expand. In Autumn 1990, Hepworth Acoustics took on its first employee. From then on, throughout the '90s, the business took on roughly one new employee every year. We also opened more offices. The first move into offices was to Runcorn, followed by a move in to Warrington in 1994. Then, in 1998, we opened an office in Sheffield – at that time, it was staffed by one consultant, soon there will be a team of five staff working there. In the same year, we opened an office in the South East. Originally this office was situated in Horsham. Now it has split in two, with one office in Ashford in Kent and another in central London. In the early summer of 2005, we opened an office in Birmingham, followed in December by a branch in Bristol. It is part of the Hepworth ethos that all of our offices work together as a team, sharing the workload when things get particularly hectic, and supporting each other

where particular specialisms are called for. This ethos is supported by a sophisticated IT system that allows consultants to access all information within the company, no matter where they are located. The IT infrastructure will also readily accommodate the further branches in the UK that are planned in the near future.

This extended network of offices and employees did not even appear to me a remote possibility when I started on my degree in Environmental Studies at the University of Sunderland (in its earlier incarnation as Sunderland Polytechnic). It was in my final year that the acoustics bug began to bite. A module on acoustics was a requirement of the course, and I thought, “Hmm, this is really very interesting.” My degree was coming to an end, the world of employment was beckoning (or looming...) and it seemed natural to look for a job in acoustics. My first employment was as a noise technician with a local authority. I consolidated my understanding of the field through postgraduate studies, and continued working for local authorities for the next six years. After that time, I began to feel slightly restive – not because I did not enjoy working in local government, but because, necessarily, I always seemed to be telling people that they had a problem. By and large, local authorities are involved when something has become a problem, or is threatening to become a problem. I wanted to do something a bit more proactive, and provide solutions rather than tell people that they have problems. I therefore left local government and joined an independent consultancy, where I spent five very happy years before, after long consideration, I felt I was ready to set up on my own. I cleared the back bedroom and Hepworth Acoustics was born.

There are now two main sections within Hepworth Acoustics, and a huge diversity of work undertaken. The consultancy section continues to provide the bulk of our core business and is concerned particularly with environmental and building acoustics issues of all kinds, from highways to factories to schools to residential to nightclubs. The work is not all problem solving either, it is refreshing to work on projects where the end result of the acoustic design will be an enhanced acoustic experience rather than the avoidance of a problem. We continue to provide expert witness support to clients at public inquiries, as, for instance, at the inquiry into the Worthing-Lancing by-pass – an inquiry which required two members of staff to be present for almost a year. I am also delighted with the way in which we are increasingly becoming involved in projects early on in the development stage, fulfilling my desire when I left local government of moving from fault

finding to problem solving. A case in point is the recent work which Hepworth Acoustics has carried out with Living Ventures, owner and operator of The Living Room group of restaurants. We have carried out the acoustics consultancy work on all of the new developments carried out by Living Ventures. One particular project I have in mind that demonstrates the problem solving aspect of our work is the development of The Living Room York. This is a 165-seat restaurant, 250-capacity bar, with live music, in the new Merchant Exchange development by the riverside, next to the Ouse Bridge, and directly below several storeys of loft-type apartments. The acoustic design, therefore, had to be capable of meeting the requirements of the planning consent and of providing sufficient soundproofing to avoid noise complaints from the residents. Working closely with the architect, developer and contractor, we were able to ensure that the design specification was followed closely throughout. The result is one which Jeremy Roberts, Living Ventures Commercial Director, is delighted with, "The success of York speaks for itself," he has said. "We've been open for more than a year now with no complaints and have enjoyed a consistently positive relationship with our immediate neighbours." The benefits of building in acoustic design from the beginning make good business sense.

On the basis of a wide range of projects and jobs like these, the consultancy side of the business continues to thrive and grow.

There is another side to Hepworth Acoustics, though, and that is the noise mapping division. Hepworth Acoustics has always been interested in using the best of what has been available in noise prediction software packages, with varying degrees of satisfaction. In 1996, however, we were attending an InterNoise meeting in Liverpool, where we encountered the LIMA software. We were soon in conversation with its developers, and consequently Hepworth Acoustics became involved in marketing the LIMA software in the UK until 2002. We continue to use the LIMA software for a variety of projects. The software is extremely effective when dealing with highway schemes or looking at industrial developments, and we use it daily for these and other areas of potential noise impact. The main function for which LIMA was developed, however, and its primary use for us, is in the area of noise mapping.

I have already briefly mentioned the noise map that was carried out of Westminster City Council's area. Now, with the first deadline of the European Community's Environmental Noise Directive approaching,

Hepworth Acoustics are currently involved in three of the Noise Mapping England projects. We see this as being an important and growing aspect of the company's work. To this end we have substantially increased our noise mapping team, together with the necessary software and hardware, and are investing in research on noise-mapping issues.

The Environmental Noise Directive is a huge undertaking, with enormous repercussions for the acoustics industry. As from 2007, noise maps will be required for all urban areas with over 250,000 inhabitants, as well as for all areas close to major roads, railways and airports. From these noise maps, noise action plans to attenuate noise levels will need to have been drawn up and put in place by July 2008. Following on from this, by June 2012, noise maps must be produced for all urban areas with over 100,000 inhabitants, with concomitant action plans to be in place by July of the following year. These noise maps are being created all over Europe, in every EU member state, but it is in the UK that the effect is likely to be felt most markedly, given the density of population. Once the noise maps have been drawn up, and the action plans carried out, the UK should be a significantly quieter place. It is a great privilege that Hepworth Acoustics is playing its part in that process.

The company has come a long way since its inception some fifteen years ago. We now have six offices covering most of England. We have expert personnel who are specialists in their fields, ranging from building acoustics to noise mapping software. We have worked on projects from the north of Scotland to the south west tip of Cornwall, from the west coast of Wales to East Anglia, as well as in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and we are increasingly undertaking work in Europe. In fact, we have been involved in a project measuring noise from a gas pumping station during the night in Poland in the middle of winter. Not entirely by chance, I was too busy to carry out that study personally...

The future is increasingly bright for the acoustics industry, as environmental issues take on an ever more central role in governmental, trans-national and global policies. Hepworth Acoustics looks forward to developing its expertise in all aspects of acoustic design and noise management, and making its contribution towards the creation of environments in which noise nuisance is held to a minimum, and in which you could, on occasions, hear a pin drop...