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NEW HEADQUARTERS

IMPRESSIVE NEW HEADQUARTERS

There are few landlords who would allow the incoming tenant to drill more than 30,000 holes in the roof of a brand new building immediately after it's been finished, but that was just one of many examples of close co-operation during the construction of Berry Gardens' impressive new headquarters in Redwall Lane, Linton.

On paper, the scheme to provide a new 200,000 sq ft chilled store, packhouse and office accommodation for the growers' co-operative looked far from straightforward. Main contractor Civils Contracting Ltd was asked to design and build both the shell for the landlord and the extensive fit-out for the client at the same time, while project manager Page Surveyors was engaged by both landlord and client.

Planning permission was never going to be easy either, given that, in the words of project manager Duncan Pierce, "it's a building you can almost see from space sat in a green field just below the Greensand Ridge".

But despite the challenges – including the

holes to allow BeBa Energy UK to provide a groundbreaking, one Megawatt solar PV system on the brand new roof – the state-of-the-art building was finished early and handed over on time and on budget.

As Duncan Pierce explained: "The co-operation and the give-and-take was extraordinary. From that point of view this was a dream project from start to finish, and in my view is an example of how things should be done."

Paul Medhurst, Managing Director and joint owner of Civils Contracting, which came in for particular praise from Duncan, agreed with the verdict. "We smiled at the start of the project and we were still smiling when we finished," he said. "The contract stayed in the drawer – I don't think anyone even looked at it, as nobody raised any issues throughout the progress of the job."

The planners were smiling, too, thanks to some win-win value engineering by Civils at the start of the process. "This was a big building on greenbelt land on a hill," Paul explained. "We realised that by

dropping the building another five or six metres into the ground, we could lower its profile significantly to considerably reduce its impact on the landscape.

"At the same time, we used specialist techniques to engineer the spoil we took out and turn it into suitable foundation material that we could re-use for the building, essentially equalising the cut and the fill," he explained.

"In essence we use a big cake mixer and add the right ingredients to the spoil to mix it up before compacting it, spreading it and testing it. It's a highly specialised approach that involves lots of laboratory testing but has a number of advantages.

"It meant we didn't saturate Redwall Lane with lorries taking spoil away or with other lorries bringing in the new material we would otherwise have needed. It also meant we didn't send anything to landfill or quarry anything out of the ground, which is environmentally a much better approach."

As well as encouraging Maidstone Borough Council planners to back the scheme, roughly halving vehicle movements and protecting the >>



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BG3

NEW HEADQUARTERS



BG4



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<< environment, dropping the building into the ground in this way knocked around 10% off the cost of the shell, saving Alan Firmin something like £1 million, Paul said.

It wasn't only the foundations of the building that involved 'chemistry', in Paul's view. The success of the complex project itself relied on "a real chemistry between all those involved – the landowners, planners, architects, contractors, specialist sub-contractors, client and everyone else who played a part".

That chemistry produced a new building that has more than impressed Berry Gardens CEO Nick Allen, who first put the idea forward in 2015, when he was Financial Director of the company, then based across the road from the new building at Ware's Farm.

"Business was booming as part of an upturn in soft fruit, with 10% to 15% growth year on year, and so I knew we would be at capacity within two or three years. We were in an old building that had been developed and expanded in piecemeal fashion and was a bit of a rabbit warren.

"It was inefficient, the technology was outdated,

particularly in terms of the cold storage, and so we knew we needed to up our game and create a purpose-built new facility that would allow us to streamline our processes," Nick said.

The other issue was that the head office team, including the marketing, accounts and other support staff, were all based in a different office in Tattingbury Oast, Five Oak Green, which the company knew was far from ideal in terms of building team spirit.

A few short years later, and having recently been appointed CEO, Nick looked back on a successful project that had delivered a high-tech, energy efficient building, streamlined production and brought the entire team under one, solar PV-covered roof.

"It's amazing that we held a leaving do for Nicholas (former CEO Nicholas Marston) on this very spot in 2017 and now we are sitting here in a brand new, purpose-built facility that has exceeded all our expectations," he said.

Bringing the team together has been hugely successful. "It's boosted communications across the team, got everybody engaged and resulted in the

non-operational staff becoming far more passionate about fruit, something that was, to them, previously just a product," said Nick. "If you can generate an emotional attachment to what you are selling, it can transform the business, and that's what has been happening since the team came together at the end of 2019."

After looking at a number of sites and exploring many options, the company found themselves back where they started, looking at a green field site owned by Alan Firmin Ltd opposite their existing base.

"It had a number of advantages," Nick explained. "We already had good transport links and we were close to our growers, which allows us to rapidly cool fruit soon after it has been picked. Our import supply chain routes are good and as a farming co-operative we wanted to stay in a rural area rather than on an industrial estate, which simply wouldn't have worked for us.

"Naturally it took a while to get planning permission, but once the building was redesigned to give it a lower profile, Maidstone Council proved supportive. It is highly rated from an environmental

point of view, we have one MW of solar PV on the roof, a biodiversity site behind the building and two 'green walls'."

Berry Gardens Supply Chain Director Duncan Mills added: "We organise litter sweeps with Linton Parish Council, we've invited local people to visit and there is more landscaping to come. Alan Firmin Ltd, our landlord, is committed to planting thousands

of trees on the site and we will soon be even less visible."

Duncan recalled that when parish council chairman Bernard Cresswell first visited the company to talk about the plans, he told them: "We want you to disappear". "He wasn't being rude," Duncan explained. "He just wanted the building to have as little visual impact as possible. He has since

written a very supportive article about the finished scheme."

The impressive building, which measures 150 metres by 100 metres and has an additional 4,000 square metres of mezzanine floor space for the office staff alongside new canteen and welfare facilities, is also designed to be 'zero waste to landfill'.

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CROWNING GLORY

While the technology inside the ground-breaking new Berry Gardens building at Redwall Lane is impressive, the technology on the outside is equally state-of-the-art.

The building's crowning glory – literally as well as figuratively – may well be the solar PV system, the largest in Kent to take advantage of innovative technology that is set to increase its performance by a significant margin.

The 993.85 kW array designed and installed by BeBa Energy UK to serve the head office, packhouse and cold storage facility benefits from the latest developments in solar, making it the largest optimised system in the county and one of the largest of its kind in the UK.

While most solar PV installations group rooftop panels into 'strings' of up to 24, a combination of smart hardware and software used at Berry Gardens allows the panels, manufactured by JA Solar, to operate independently of each other.

The optimisation technology, developed by SolarEdge, ensures that one dirty or below-par panel does not affect the performance of the rest

of the string.

BeBa Energy UK director Shaun Beattie, one of the UK's leading commercial rooftop solar developers, has calculated that the SolarEdge technology will give the 3,614-panel, one MW system a 6.6% increase in performance.

The installation, which generates enough solar energy, to run 237 four-bedroom homes for a year, has already proved its worth, delivering more power than the building uses even under commercial load, with the excess being sold to the National Grid.

"We decided to install an optimised system at Berry Gardens because the building has a state-of-the-art monitoring system that will allow the company to make full use of the additional data it generates," said Shaun.

"It has also helped to future-proof the system, because as energy storage comes on line in the next few years, the business will have the right level of historical data at its fingertips to allow it to make an informed choice on the use of new battery technology."

Shaun paid tribute to the team that delivered the building, again praising the co-operation that was the hallmark of the project. "It was also very clear that the team at Berry Gardens was fully behind solar PV and totally invested in what we were doing," he said. "This was no tick-box exercise to boost Berry Gardens' green credentials but something they believed in passionately. It was a pleasure to work with them on the project."

The solar project follows a smaller, 80 kW solar PV system developed for Berry Gardens by Shaun in 2014, and has made a huge difference to the growers' co-operative's carbon footprint, taking an estimated 292,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere in a year.

"The fruit industry knows how important it is to be environmentally aware, cut carbon emissions, reduce costs and achieve energy security," said Shaun.

"Solar PV is ideally suited to fruit growers as their peak energy demand is in the summer, when the system produces the greatest amount of

'free' electricity. Solar PV installations also make commercial sense, with the payback period on this scheme being less than six-and-a-half years."

With the planning process always important, and having played a critical part in the Redwall Lane scheme in particular, Shaun pointed out that planners were increasingly keen to promote sustainable development. "The solar PV element was a real consideration in the decision to approve this new building," he added.

"It's also interesting that Berry Gardens is a long-term tenant on the Redwall Lane site, which is owned by Alan Firmin Ltd, which challenges the perception that it can be difficult for tenants to go down the solar route.

"In this case, working with Firmin was very straightforward. The collaboration between the landlord, project managers Page Surveyors, main contractor Civils Contracting Ltd and Berry Gardens was first class and made our job remarkably straightforward."

Duncan Pierce, from project managers Page Surveyors, added: "We did a lot of work with BeBa Energy UK, Civils and Berry Gardens to forecast the energy usage of the completed building so that the size of the array would maximise the return on investment.

"Cold storage and office applications such as this, with a heavy summer load but also with consistent year-round demand, are ideal for solar

PV and give an effective return on investment even without the now-defunct Feed in Tariff. As project managers we were also keen to procure a high quality, safe, timely and error-free installation, and that's what BeBa delivered."

The system will now be part of BeBa Energy UK's 400-system management portfolio, which will ensure it performs at an optimum level for the next 25 years. The Hemel-Hempstead-based company is a well-respected name in solar PV.

"BeBa Energy UK prides itself on delivering carefully researched, tailored advice to companies looking to install solar power, giving businesses the information they need to make a sensible and informed decision," Shaun concluded.

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Bauvill successfully completed the fit-out of the new office space for Berry Gardens at their new site at Wares Farm.

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WORKFLOW AT ITS HEART

Project manager Duncan Pierce explained that as well as more space, greater efficiency and newer systems, Berry Gardens had wanted a building "built from scratch that could be designed with workflow at its heart" - which is exactly what design and build contractors Civils Contracting have created.

"The fruit is delivered at one end, moves straight to the chilled storage area, from there into the packhouse and directly on to the despatch area," Duncan explained. Because the despatch area only needed to be of limited height, the mezzanine floor sits over the top of it.

Page Surveyors had worked with Civils previously and brought the Tonbridge, Kent, design and build specialists in because it was confident the contractor would be flexible enough to contribute to developing the brief while keeping control of the specification and consequently the costs.

Civils Contracting went on to provide the complete 'turnkey' package - after first cutting the costs, helping to solve the planning issue, improving the building's 'green' credentials and halving the number of lorry movements affecting neighbours in Redwall Lane and beyond.

"We pride ourselves as a hands-on design and build contractor that can solve problems," Paul Medhurst explained. "Some companies think 'value engineering' just means getting a couple more quotes for a lower specification, but we have the skills and background to generate clever solutions to all manner of construction problems.

"What is important is that we are a design AND

build company. We don't just ask a consultant to give us a design to build from. We 'own' the design and work collaboratively with design specialists to solve problems and develop cost-effective solutions. Above all we have a passion to deliver solutions in partnership with the client."

The contractual arrangements could have been complicated, with Civils providing the shell of the building and the drainage, external work and landscaping for landlords Alan Firmin while also carrying out the internal fit out for Berry Gardens, but with collaboration very much the name of the game it all ran smoothly. The building was delivered early - "despite horrendous weather", as Paul Medhurst recalled - and fitted out on time.

"It's always easy working with Page Surveyors and this project was no different," he said. "There were no showstoppers and if anything needed sorting it was just 'all hands on deck' to get it done. We're very proud of it, it looks better even than we expected and I understand that the council is also very impressed."

Another potential complication was the impressive, state-of-the-art solar PV system installed on the roof by BeBa Energy UK Ltd.

The 993.85 kW array is the largest optimised system in the county, using technology developed by SolarEdge to ensure that if the performance of any one of the panels, manufactured by JA Solar, falls below par, it does not affect the performance of the rest of that particular string.

"The solar PV plans meant that even before the building was officially handed over to Firms, the

tenants were asking for permission to drill just over 30,000 holes in the roof so that BeBa Energy UK could fix the 3,614 panels," said Duncan Pierce.

"It could have been a legal and logistical headache, but Michael and Paul Firmin were great to work with and BeBa Director Shaun Beattie did a great job of reassuring the landlord that the mounting system would not affect the building's warranty. "It was just one example of the way the project ran smoothly from start to finish - I wish more projects would run this way."

The solar installation has meanwhile already proved its worth, meeting 60% of the building's power needs in May, according to Nick Allen, and, during the day, delivering more power than the facility can use even while under commercial load.

JD Cooling Group won the tender to supply the new natural cooling system that has future-proofed the business' refrigeration needs by providing an efficient, state-of-the-art system for the nine-metre high, rackable cold storage facility and chilled intake and storage areas.

The £3m installation, designed to be both expandable and flexible, saw JD Cooling supply two ammonia/glycol chillers delivering 1.6 Megawatt of cooling via a secondary, food-safe glycol system. This serves a series of ceiling mounted coolers and roof void air handling units to supply conditioned, filtered air to the automated packhouse via insulated ductwork and fabric air socks.

The primary refrigerant, ammonia, delivers around 20% greater efficiency than man-made refrigerant alternatives and has zero GWP >>

BGS9

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<< (Global Warming Potential), which makes it future proof in environmental terms.

Further environmental benefits come from the low-energy, highly efficient and compact-sized adiabatic air cooler units that reject the heat from the cooling plant. JD Cooling also provided the cooling for the offices, canteen, and IT requirements of the new facility.

Commenting on the "very efficient and highly controllable" refrigeration system and the impressive solar PV installation, Duncan Pierce

said the Berry Gardens project had not just been a good example of collaboration but had been "a road map for how buildings of this type could be done in terms of energy efficiency, control systems and design".

Nick Allen, who praised the "amazing job" done by Page Surveyors and by Civils, said the new building had "felt like home very quickly" and had provided a spacious, well-designed and efficient working environment with three times the amount of refrigerated space. The business is now

planning to install rapid chill cells to halve cooling time – something that couldn't have been done in the old building.

Welfare facilities for the 100 strong operational team – rising to 150 at peak times – have also been improved by a project that has transformed the Berry Gardens operation.

"We are looking to the future – well beyond what we can foresee now – and this building is designed to allow us to take advantage of that future," Duncan Mills concluded.



TRIBUTE PAID TO FIRM'S FOUNDER

There was some sadness attached to the Berry Gardens project when **Derek Page, who founded what is now Page Surveyors in 1992, died just after the building was handed over.**

Derek, Duncan Pierce's father-in-law, had worked closely with Berry Gardens for more than 15 years and represented the company's interests during the Redwall Lane construction, alongside Duncan, who was looking after the project on behalf of site owner Alan Firmin Ltd.

"It was slightly unusual for one firm of project managers to represent both parties in such a situation, but the collaborative nature of the project and the fact that it was procured as a design and build contract meant that it actually ran incredibly smoothly," said Duncan, who joined the firm in 2000.

"There were times when we had to balance the interests of both parties within the practice, and some lively internal conversations inevitably ensued, but both clients were very happy with the way the contract proceeded and with the end result," he said.

"Derek had built up a great working relationship with Berry Gardens and played a key part in advising the company on its move to the new building. He had been unwell previously but had recovered and was well when work started in January of 2018.

"In the summer of 2019, though, he fell ill as the project was drawing to a close. He finally retired at the impressive age of 80 and he had his leaving do on 27 September in the new building, just 11 days after it opened. He died on 18 October, but was at least able to see his clients enjoying the new facility he had played such a large part in delivering."

Berry Gardens CEO Nick Allen paid his own tribute. "This project really was led by Derek. We had worked with Derek for 15 years or so and he did as fine a job on this occasion as he had in the past."

After moving in on 16 September, the company spent a few weeks setting up and was fully operational in the new premises by the end of October. "We're really firing on all four cylinders now," Nick added.



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BG12



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