

PITA Meet South 2017 Report

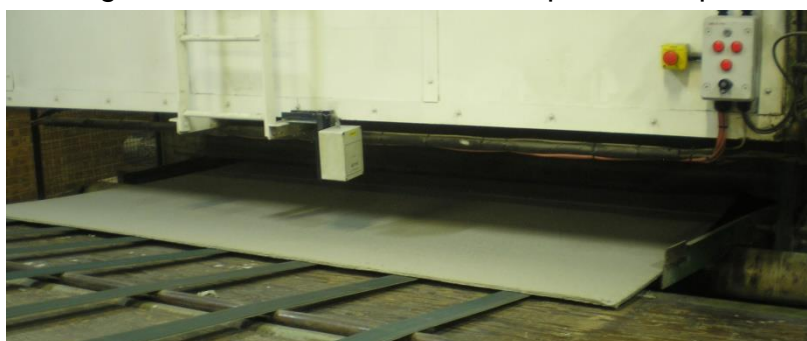
This year's visit was to the site of Sundeala in the beautiful village of Cam, Gloucestershire. It is an example of what we in the UK do so well – a small, highly specialised manufactory which, as far as this island is concerned, is unique, having no competitors. The main product is softboard of around 8-15mm thickness, which is used primarily for pin board / noticeboard applications, made from a furnish of ONP (Old Newspapers). A secondary product, very much the baby of the current owner, is shotgun wadding, more of which later.



We were taken through the entire process on this site, which dates back to the eighteenth century. We started with the reason for the site of this mill – the water source. The River Cam is reasonably small, but the mill is situated such that a fall of around 2-3 metres was designed to power a waterwheel. There is no longer a wheel *in situ*, but the company still has control of a sluice gate, which they use to control flow, and we were informed that a little further down the river someone has a waterwheel in place which is still used. An example of having to get on with your neighbours. A more immediate neighbour (or should that be tenant?) is an otter, which has made its residence at the mill, hence Sundeala takes extra care of the water quality.

Each week the company fills a couple of tanks with water from the river, and this is used throughout the process for a whole week, being recycled continuously during that time. At the end of the week it is discharged to a holding lagoon which, periodically, is pumped out by an external contractor.

The process begins with slushing of the newspapers, after which the furnish is dewatered slightly using a drum thickener before being pumped to the machine house. Here it is fed to one of the two 'headboxes', and in turn one of the two vat formers is filled. Dewatering from the vat is by suction, assisted by pressure from a ram, the result being a thick mat which, on the day we visited, must have been 20-30mm caliper. This was fed to a transfer belt, after which the second headbox discharged to the second vat and the process repeated. Next came a platen press,



then a drier, after which just before stacking of the raw-finished boards, they were trimmed to size (around 8ft x 4ft) by saw. Offcuts, trimmings and dust were all collected, to be reused in the process. Nothing was wasted.

Forming and pressing leaves a very rough surface, so the boards are then transferred to another building where they are fed into a machine that smooths both surfaces using a belt sander. This produces a smooth, soft surface, somewhat akin to felt.

For some board this marks the end of the process; it is stacked on a pallet and sent to external customers for further processing. But for other board the company goes further, and instead of ending with the 'raw material' stage they produce a whole range of end products, ready for the customer to use. So in one building there is a stock of numerous high quality fabrics, and a gluing machine; the board has adhesive applied to one surface, then a fabric, which is smoothed by hand. This board is then sent to a neighbouring building where it meets some of its uncovered brethren, for framing – wood or metal is applied to the four raw edges and lo, a pin or notice board, ready for use, is produced. Other board goes to yet another building for laminating with a ceramic or metal surface for writing or magnetic applications. Also, here the board could be die-cut to different shapes for specialist notice boards – we saw a rabbit on a wall, another option being a train. So unlike for most paper mills, Sundeala produce both a raw material and final product, ready to be sold either to merchants or direct to final customers.

The softboard can also be laminated onto chipboard, after which it is cut to size and is sold to Tata Steel as a packaging material (the chipboard providing strength and rigidity, and the softboard a pliant surface to prevent damage to the steel material). Yet another specialist laminate sees greaseproof paper laminated to the Sundeala board.

As mentioned previously, the company also makes gun wadding. This is a small cylindrical pellet, die cut from the board that is then waxed. The blanks, after die cutting, are fed back through the manufacturing process. A recent purchase of a new waxing machine should see the amount of product made rise rapidly; the company has significant plans in this area!

So the visit ended, and we were back at the warehouse from where we had started (the group being too large to be housed in any of the meeting rooms on site). It has to be said, this is an example of what we in the UK do best; highly specialised, almost bespoke, manufacturing. What was particularly heartening was the obvious care the company takes with the environment, particularly the river. The atmosphere on the site was also very friendly; the workforce is small (around 60) and is dedicated to making this company a success. So we left – within 50 metres of the



site we were back to civilisation, a main residential road. However, it was just a shame we never got to meeting its nearest neighbour – the otter.