



A passion for parts

From a warehouse in Suffolk, ASAP Supplies sends out boat parts all over the world. **Camilla Herrmann** takes a look behind the scenes



Back in 1989 three men in a van full of boat parts set off to tour the boatyards and harbours of East Anglia. Their potential customers were people who fixed boats – a combination of marine engineers and people working on their own vessels. Their aim was to find out which boat parts you needed and get them to you as quickly as possible – hence the name, ASAP Supplies.

Nigel and Peter Edwards and their friend Mark Reynolds were all engineers who had spotted a gap in the market. Parts for maintenance, repair and overhaul of boats were not pretty and not necessarily easy to find or cheap to buy in a chandlery, especially if you had an older boat and needed advice on exactly what you needed. From Day 1 their focus was always on providing advice and getting it right, preferably first time.

The van full of parts needed back-up in



The original ASAP van back in 1989

the form of a warehouse, which was in an industrial estate in Beccles, on the Norfolk-Suffolk border, well placed for the ports of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft and the east coast rivers. Soon, a shop opened at the warehouse. Not long after that, ASAP published its first boat parts catalogue and gradually the company's focus changed from three men in a van to mail order.

Today the company employs 35 staff, still in the same location in Beccles, still selling mostly by mail order, and still focused on getting things right first time. There's a broad customer base, of roughly 50 per cent retail (individuals working on their own boats) and 50 per cent commercial (marine engineers, fishermen, windfarm support craft and some of the larger boat builders) – although the company is careful not to develop too great a dependency on any one client. Fairline Boats was a customer, but when it went into administration last year the impact on ASAP was relatively modest.

Innovation has always been a key part of doing business, so unsurprisingly once the internet came along, the website became the most important way for customers to buy. A couple of years ago the ASAP management decided that a catalogue was no longer needed. However, it seems this may have been one area where ASAP wasn't right first time and in January 2017, the 16th edition of the ASAP catalogue was published.

"So many customers requested our catalogue that in the end we felt it was the right thing to do," said business

development director Cheryl Gill. "We gave ourselves six months to put it together, working entirely in-house. In the end we had one person working on it full time and one part time for seven months. But the customers need it and love it. I'm told some of them even read it in the smallest room..."

The customers need and love our catalogue. Some even read it in the smallest room

Prices are no longer included in the catalogue because they change so fast – sometime even week by week. So you still need to go to the website, or phone, for the latest prices.

The warehouse includes a vast range of items from tiny clips and screws to complete gearboxes, all in numbered boxes and containers (nothing is sold in retail packs or prettied up, although the smallest items, such as blade fuses, are sold in packs of five for 56p a set). There are no sails, ropes, chains or decorative items: this is all strictly functional. It looks like the kind of place which hasn't changed in 20 years, but in fact the system is constantly evolving. New recruits bring new ideas, and recently there's been a rearrangement so that the most-requested items are the shortest route from the packing area. Every order is picked by one person and packed by another to ensure accuracy.

Deliveries go to locations all over the world, although the company still has a strong customer base in the east of



It's the people who make ASAP what it is. Left, packing in the warehouse; below, a busy morning in the office; right MD Shaun Wigley and business development director Cheryll Gill. The company recently received the Website of the Year award from British Marine, and they are also up for a major customer focus award

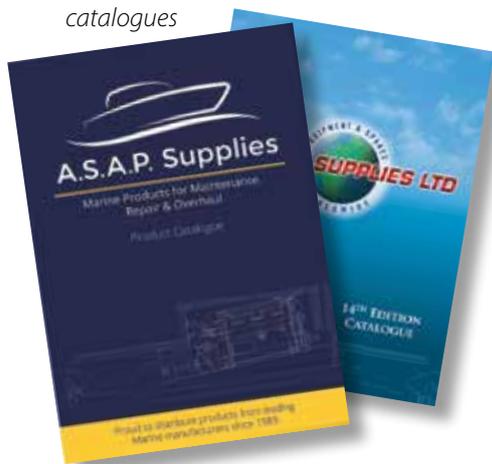


England. The only places where they can't deliver are PO Box addresses and individual boats (they need a marina office delivery address), and countries with trade restrictions. They work with a range of couriers to find the most efficient way to deliver each package.

Despite the unromantic nature of what ASAP sells, there's a culture of passion for customer service, which may be one of the reasons why the company continues to expand. Typically a customer phones or emails for advice before placing an order. Photos of existing parts are welcomed. "We know our customers don't want a breakdown or failure when they are out at sea. If we're not sure about the correct part, we never guess – we go away and find out what's correct. Far better to spend £5 on the correct part than face a £500 breakdown bill, and lose your holiday or, for our commercial customers, your livelihood," says Cheryll.

An increasing number of customers come to Beccles to collect their order. "The trouble is, we weren't really set up to meet customer needs," says Cheryll. "People would come in with a bag of oily bits, plonk them down on the counter and ask for them to be identified and replaced. It was a very time-consuming process."

New and old catalogues



In the end, however, they decided to invest in redesigning the shop and in retraining the technical team. "We pride ourselves on trying to help everyone," says Cheryll, "and actually it's great for our staff to get off the phones and meet customers." The new shop, opened in 2016, has exceeded expectations in generating business.

People came into the shop with a bag of oily bits and plonked them on the counter

In spite of the time spent on customer service, prices are still kept as low as possible. Many of the parts sold are made in the UK and sourced ethically, and ASAP builds long-term relationships with its suppliers.

ASAP seems to breed a particular kind of loyalty. Shaun Wigley joined 13 years ago as a warehouse assistant. In his first week the customer service supervisor left and he was chucked in at the deep end. In 2008, when ASAP was badly hit by recession, the original management left (although Peter Edwards still works with the company) and Shaun became operations director. He brought in Cheryll as a trainer to show him how to do the job. In 2013 he took on the role of managing director, while Cheryll is responsible for marketing and training.

The company focuses on building good long-term relationships with both customers and suppliers... and they see that as a two-way process. For example, they offer a discount on prices to CA members. "And the Cruising Association

helps us," says Shaun. "Its members spend time with us explaining what they need, and that gives us a better understanding of how we should develop."

Since Shaun took over, the pace of change has accelerated at ASAP. One area of improvement is returns: they have moved from a complex procedure to a simple no-quibble returns policy.

But that doesn't mean everything is new. Last year, they brought back the ASAP van – in fact there are now two. It no longer travels from yard to yard touting for business, but it delivers parts along the A12 corridor and is a visible reminder that hidden in an unprepossessing industrial estate is a world-class supplier.

- ASAP offers discounts to CA members of 10% to 20% depending on item. Call +44 (0)1502 716 993 or email sales@asap-supplies.com



If you know of a boating business with a story to tell, let us know and we'll feature it in *Cruising*.

