

# A success story based on ingenuity

The MBE Group has its roots in the early 1970s. Growing out of MBE Fabrications, the initial business, the group now consists of four manufacturing divisions – MBE Fabrications; VHS; Premier Pits and the latest addition Premier Substructures.

**MBE** Originally established to carry out fabrication work for local farmers and businesses, MBE developed into more specialist work for irrigation and effluent treatment equipment companies. The effluent treatment work in particular, involved the fabrication of large watertight tanks, where the quality of welding was all important. These skills laid the foundations for the development of the other divisions. Although MBE Fabrications still undertakes some general fabrication work this side of the business is less important than the other divisions that have grown out of it.

**Premier Pits** The welding skills and the ability to manufacture water tight vessels gained through MBE Fabrications, led the company to manufacture and install its first vehicle pit in 1977. Traditionally vehicle pits were constructed 'in situ' from either reinforced concrete or bricks and blocks. These soon deteriorated to become eyesores with mechanics often having to work in several inches of water. Keeping pits watertight was always a problem in the Lincolnshire Fens, with their high water table. To resolve this, Premier Pits used the welding expertise gained in the manufacture of effluent treatment tanks to produce the first pre-fabricated steel pit. Since the first pit, which was little more than a simple tank, the company has turned the manufacture, transportation and installation of vehicle pits into a science.

The company now uses computer design models that make complex structural calculations based upon specific ground conditions and local requirements. A comprehensive range of working pits and testing pits is now available for virtually any type of heavy vehicle. Although they are all manufactured around a basic design and come fully fitted out with lights, sockets and pipes, the

pits can be adapted to suit special needs with numerous options available. Being watertight, they have a significant positive environmental impact as oil and dirty water spills can be collected easily instead of being allowed to escape into the ground.

Such is their success Premier Pits have supplied Heathrow Airport, Stansted Airport, several national bus companies and many large truck operators as well as a wide range of smaller operators.

**Premier Substructures** The experience gained manufacturing and installing vehicle pits was found to be readily transferable to wider below ground applications. In recent years Premier Pits have, for example, successfully manufactured and installed lift pits, machine bases and baggage handling pods. To build upon this it was decided to establish Premier Substructures as a separate division working with the wider construction industry. The principle of prefabrication is well developed in above ground construction, where it has led to considerable time and quality benefits. However, below ground level there has been very little progress towards prefabrication. The Premier Substructures approach will lead to considerable time and cost savings, as well as making it easier to make more accurate estimates for below ground construction.

**VHS** VHS designed and built their first vegetable harvester in 1986. This was a very simple machine where the cutters placed the individual vegetables or lettuces into a cup system. Over the years this has been built upon to the point where VHS can now design and build mobile packhouses costing over £150,000 each. The mobile packhouses allow for the cutters to place

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individual vegetables or salad products on to various cup systems that transfer them into an enclosed and covered packing area. The produce is then graded, wrapped, labelled, packed into boxes and placed on pallets ready for shipping straight to the blast freezers. All this is carried out while the machine is moving at 60 metres per hour along the rows. Road speed is 18mph. The machines are used in the UK during May to October then shipped to southern Spain, where they are in operation between November and April, ensuring that most products are on the supermarket shelves throughout the year.

The development of harvesting equipment for brassicas, carrots, courgettes, sweet corn, asparagus, lettuces and other salad crops has taken the company into quite complex mechanical handling and engineering. This often involves installing engines, gearboxes and power trains. Everything from simple harvesters through to mobile packhouses has been developed 'in house' over the years and is now supported by sophisticated computer design systems.

More recently VHS have diversified into supplying equipment for the full crop growing cycle. This has led to the introduction of seeding and planting equipment as well as specialist baby leaf harvesting machines.

