

Built Better

Chase is a story about how opportunity met an engineer with a passion for cricket. How a drink in a bar led to creating bespoke machines and beautifully simple solutions. And how Chase went from being sold out of the boot of a car to winning awards.

Dan Swaine and his wife Julie Swaine took over the ownership and the running of Chase in 2007 from ex-England superstar Robin Smith, having worked for the company since 2005. They promptly invested their life savings in new machinery and secured a willow contract with JS Wright, effectively safeguarding British bat manufacture in what is unfortunately a declining industry.

Sounds like a predictable parable - couple takes over company. Invests in it. Makes it a success. But this is only half of a somewhat unlikely story. Chase's biggest asset is Dan himself, who comes from an extraordinary engineering background; he is the product of a seven-year MOD apprenticeship working on the Trident missile project. It's little wonder, then, having worked with nuclear warheads, that Dan's approach to

bat making is mathematical and scientific and practical.

"It's in need of a service, the bearings are a little rattly," Dan admits, referring to a bat knocking-in machine he invented 10 years ago, which he describes as the lifeblood of the factory. To us it's just a combination of air rams, worm screws and some wizardry in a box we don't understand. It runs



solidly from dawn till dusk in its soundproofed box dishing out 6,000 hits in a 45-minute session – the equivalent of about five hours of knocking-in by hand – and its muted thumping provides the soundtrack to the factory floor.

Knowing what we now know about Dan's background, we feel conflicted. We're fascinated that he either invents or modifies all of his own machines, but would we be disappointed if he didn't? Either way, we're impressed. It's Dan's expertise in designing custom solutions that distinguishes him from other bat makers.

We head over to another machine that rough-shapes clefts of willow into blades. It has a double-head spindle motor and spring-loaded heads and is by all intents and purposes a giant router, "but a bit more dangerous," Dan grins. "I don't know whether I'm nervous exposing this machine too much," he muses. "I'm worried about people copying it."

We can't blame him for being precious – at its most basic level it's intellectual property, which deserves to be protected. His knowledge of engineering – being able to look at a tool that does one thing and customise it to do another – is an almost irreplaceable attribute in this business.

Personal touches to machines are all over the factory. A sander made from scratch; retro-fitted hydraulic clamps; custom-moulded carbon fibre plates for the pressing machine that was originally bought from Salix but tweaked to suit Dan's requirements.

As Dan discusses how he carries out the servicing on all of his machines to keep running costs down, the conversation strays onto economics and his advocacy of English bat making. "Despite costs, I'm adamant we should be making more bats in this country, [it's] very disappointing. I was gutted to see some manufacturers going abroad." It's a complicated subject and despite it being a rather sad but inevitable consequence of



Dan explains the machine that he's modified to do the rough shaping of the Chase bats, using a finback shape. It's brilliantly simple, using two spring-loaded cutting heads that follow a predetermined template – a giant router by all intents. Just don't get your hands caught, he jokes!

globalisation, he and Chase are proof that with some clever thinking manufacturing in the UK is still a viable option.

Before our visit is over, we ask Dan what made him make the jump from servicing warheads to making bats. "A beer in Basingstoke" came his unflinching response, fully prepared as we were for it to be a complicated one. While obviously confident in his convictions, it represented perfectly Dan's humble and self-effacing character and therefore that of Chase's. As he says on the company website, Chase may not be able to guarantee your wicket but they can guarantee your willow.



This knocking-in device in its soundproof box is in constant use. Designed by Dan, this bespoke machine provides the equivalent of five hours of knocking-in by hand in a fraction of the time. This unique bit of kit is a real feather in the cap for Chase with every bat made getting strapped in for preparation.

Invented ten years ago, this machine could be described as the lifeblood of the factory. Running solidly from dawn till dusk in its soundproofed box, it provides the soundtrack to the factory floor.



On the press is another clue to Dan's engineering past; rather than using old bits of carpet to rest the blade level, as witnessed in many bat factories, we find a carbon fibre mould to hold the blade in place. Each model in the range has its own custom mould to fit its specific shape.

