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connections

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A photograph of two men standing in front of a white van. The man on the left is wearing a grey suit and a purple shirt, with his arms crossed. The man on the right is wearing a dark suit and a pink shirt. The van has 'WT JENKINS LTD' branding, including a logo and the website 'www.wtjenkins.co.uk'. The van also has 'HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE' written on the side and a license plate 'DU11 VGL'. In the background, there is a brick building and some construction materials.

LEADING LIGHTS

Liverpool firm WT Jenkins has carved out a niche in street and public realm lighting // page 26

CONTRACTOR PROFILE // WT JENKINS

COMPANY: WT Jenkins

BASED: Liverpool

FOUNDED: 1971

MAJOR PROJECTS: Liverpool One shopping centre, Manchester Metrolink

STAFF NUMBERS: 27

TURNOVER: £3 million

“We do what it says on the tin”

Now under new ownership, Liverpool-based WT Jenkins has carved out a niche in street and public realm lighting, which has seen it take on a number of prominent projects in the north west

By Nick Martindale

On the northern edges of Liverpool, along the Liverpool-Leeds canal, lies the town of Maghull. It's home to the high-security psychiatric Ashworth Hospital, and formerly to Frank Hornby, the man behind both Dinky Toys and Meccano. It's also the base for WT Jenkins Ltd – an electrical contractor specialising in the supply, installation and maintenance of floodlighting, street lighting, traffic signage and public realm lighting – which is now run by Tony King and Steve Murray.

The joint ownership is a new departure, following a management buyout that was completed in 2013, and which saw founder Bill Jenkins leave the business he started up in 1971 as a conventional contractor. Neither owner, however, is new to the business; Tony has been with the firm since 1988 while Steve joined in 2000, with a remit to build up the firm's health and safety credentials, having undertaken the Nebosh qualification. This remains an important aspect of the business today, with the company gaining a number of H&S qualifications, including NQA accreditation.

“Last year was my 25th anniversary,” says Tony. “I came in as a company supervisor working on the tools alongside three other guys and over the years that has increased to a staff of 27. In 2000 Steve joined us, as a go-between between myself and the managing director at the time, and in the long term that enabled the managing director to exit and myself and Steve to become a full partnership.”

Unusually, both owners are also time-served electricians; something that they believe is crucial to understanding the market in which they operate. “We’ve got Keith Martin and Mark Sherrington as contracts managers too, and between the four of us we’ve got over 100 years’ experience,” says Tony.

Specialist subject

The business was originally based in retail premises in Anfield, but moved to Maghull in 1995 because, as it became more specialised in street lighting, it found it needed a yard to store lighting columns and lanterns. By that time the move into street lighting and traffic signage was already established. This specialism began in 1984 when the business secured contracts to floodlight the Pier Head buildings and Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral, as part of the city's regeneration programme. “We’ve actually lit the Anglican Cathedral twice,” says Tony. “That kind of thing doesn't happen very often.”

Today, WT Jenkins carries out a range of projects for its 35-strong client base, mainly through contractors such as Balfour Beatty, Carillion and Laing O'Rourke, focusing solely on street lighting and related works. It turns over £3 million a year.

Recent projects include a £1.5 million contract to light all public areas in the new Liverpool One shopping area, the Rocket flyover from the M62 to the city's university district, the Churchill Way flyover in the city centre, and local landmark the Everton water tower.

“That was a fantastic achievement, purely because of the way it was lit and the access that we needed, because none of it could be done from the inside,” says Tony. The company is





Steve Murray

Tony King

'No one is saying we're out of the woods, but things are markedly improved compared with how they were in October last year'

also carrying out NHS maintenance work at Alder Hey Hospital and Ormskirk District General Hospital.

A major focus for the past four years has been the Manchester Metrolink tramway, working with The M-Pact Thales (MPT) consortium consisting of Laing O'Rourke, VolkerRail and Thales UK. This has involved all electrical works on the new station platforms – including on the new line out to Manchester Airport – but also the regeneration of both Oldham and Rochdale town centres.

"It's one word, but that doesn't give you the whole picture," says Steve, who has just taken over as Electrical Contractors' Association regional chair for the north-west. "We've just done a line that had 14 stations and platforms. It's a massive beast. We've had to almost split the company in half. Mark is the project manager and half the crew are over there and Keith has a similar situation over here."

The business has won 11 awards for its work on the scheme over the past four years, at MPT's supply chain awards event, around quality, safety and innovation, as well as an individual contribution award for Mark.



Peaks and troughs

The Manchester Metrolink project has been a welcome boost for the business in the wake of the economic downturn, which came hot on the heels of a record-breaking year in 2008. Much of this was on the back of the Liverpool One project, which also played a part in helping the city's successful bid to become the capital of culture for that year.

"We nearly doubled our turnover," recalls Steve. "It was great; all local work and everyone was happy, and as such we had a bigger workforce with 30 staff. But all of a sudden we found ourselves struggling." The company initially moved to a four-day week in a bid to avoid making redundancies, he says, but eventually had no choice but to do just that. "Over a

11:

The number of awards WT Jenkins has won in four years for its work on the Manchester Metrolink tram project



> Projects manager Keith Martin has been with the business for nine years

two-year period we lost six men," he says. "But we kept 20-odd people employed throughout the recession." The business has also remained Joint Industry Board (JIB)-affiliated throughout, paying its staff at or above the rates set out by the body, and company founder Bill Jenkins remains on the JIB council today.

The economic environment of the past few years has been tough, but there are now signs that things may be improving. "The amount of work in the order book today is demonstrating that," says Tony. "There are lots of possibilities of jobs that we're in with a real shout of getting. No one is saying we're out of the woods, but things are markedly improved compared with how they were in October last year."

The infrastructure work in the roads building up to the Runcorn bridge over the River Mersey is one such possibility – the company has already picked up two sections – while the Wirral Waters project is again moving forward after years of delay, largely on the back of foreign investment.

Much of the company's success is built on its reputation for getting the job done properly, says Steve. "We're very much a people business," he says. "We believe that people like to deal with people and if you gain their trust and do a quality job with minimal fuss, they will want to deal with you again. We don't tell people one thing and do something else, we start from being honest. We do what it says on the tin."

Both Steve and Tony are keen to stress the company's open-book approach to pricing too. "We like to say to people 'this will cost us X and we want this to do the job'," says Tony. "Our competitors won't do that; there's a fear of doing that. But we don't like to look for extras. For us, it's all about repeat business and working with the same people, because people move from business to business. You can't buy that."

'Metrolink is one word, but that doesn't give you the whole picture. We've just done a line that had 14 stations and platforms'

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Recovery mode

Today, the business employs 27 people, of which 21 are on the tools, including two apprentices – one undertaking a conventional electrical apprenticeship and the other, who will be joining in June, taking on the Highway Electrical NVQ Level 3 qualification in street lighting. This is a requirement for anyone working in the sector from later this year.

"It has been a slow burner for years and it's now come to the point where you've got to have a certain number through the qualification by October," says Steve. "We will put all our guys through it as of now, so in 12 months every operative will have a street lighting NVQ."

Having survived the economic downturn, neither Tony nor Steve is ready to get too excited about an upturn just yet. "If the opportunity arose we would like to increase turnover to £4 million or £5 million, but we would want it to be gradual," says Steve. "We wouldn't want it to be too sudden because, more than anything else, this business needs to be sustainable. I'm not sure we'll ever get back to where we were in 2008, but if we get to half of that then I'd be happy."

Caution aside, however, there is a growing belief that the economy in general is improving, and with it the prospects for future success.

"Recessions come in cycles so hopefully there will now be a period when the company thrives, particularly on roadways and regeneration of town centres," says Tony. "We are getting more enquiries and more tenders out and there is a bit more money around. I can see an upward curve for the next five to seven years. If any company can plan further on than that, they're doing better than us." 📍

» Nick Martindale is editor of *Connections*