

New storage and packing facility at AC Hulme & Sons' Hoaden Court, Kent

Joanna Wood reports

The final outing of the year for the East Kent Fruit Society proved to be very popular. The visit to AC Hulme & Sons at Hoaden Court near Ash, Kent to see the packhouse facility built in 2020 and a new block of long-term DCA (dynamic controlled atmosphere) cold storage built in 2021, attracted a big turnout. JD Cooling Ltd, following the successful completion of the new refrigeration and DCA storage facility at Hoaden Court, sponsored the event and provided a welcome barbeque.



An internal view of the new fruit stores designed and constructed by Wealden AM.

Tom Hulme introduced the business to his visitors. AC Hulme & Sons is a family-run mixed farming company that has been operating in East Kent since 1946. The company farms approximately 4,000 acres, supplying some of the UK's foremost retailers as well as local markets, farm shops and other outlets. The farms operate from three principal locations in Canterbury (Merton Farm), Hoaden (Hoaden Court) and Wingham (Brook Farm) and grow and pack a diverse range of produce, including apples, pears, cherries, apricots and plums, arable crops, potatoes, hops, and suckler beef cattle. The fruit enterprise comprises 500 acres of orchards, supported by 8,500 tonnes of on-farm cold storage and a grading, packing and direct sales operation, all based at Hoaden Court.

Hoaden Court was purchased in 2008 and was originally known for cherries, but a request by Lidl, their main customer, switched the focus to apples and pears, which have been a great success. Tom admits to having some natural advantages on the site, with light loam-over-sand soil ideal for top-fruit. John Guest, who's known the farm for over 30 years says, "Where Tom and some others in East Kent win over orchards in areas with shallower topsoil, is the ability to consistently deliver yields 25 per cent higher than growers with less advantageous soils".



The newly constructed DCA fruit storage complex at AC Hulme & Sons' Hoaden Court.

AC Hulme & Sons grow the early-cropping variety Robijn, which can be harvested in August, along with Cameo, Braeburn and Cox, which still makes up 15 per cent of the farm's output. Gala accounts for 50 per cent of the crop, and Conference pears are another mainstay.

Tom grew up on the farm but spent 12 years working in banking before returning to play his part in the business in 2011.

This experience gave Tom an understanding of business economics and has certainly made him a strategic thinker, which has informed the major changes he's made since his return. Realising that standing still was simply not an option in the competitive world of fruit growing, expansion and investment in new facilities, whilst considering sustainability, were all crucial elements necessary for success. Finding experienced senior staff to join the team to make all these facilities work efficiently was also essential. The rapid growth of the fruit farm has seen Paul Hamlyn join as farm manager three years ago and, more recently, Tony Frankham as commercial manager and Tracey Briggs as packhouse manager. Teaming up with ProForce to host their seasonal labour camp is another recent development.

Tom emphasised the fierce independence of the business. "We are not in a PO, but we are co-operative with other growers". They have a long-term agreement with Lidl to create confidence for further investment. John Guest commented, "Simplicity is the strength of AC Hulme's marketing model. Most of the fruit goes to Lidl and the testimony of success was underlined when they asked Tom to plant all the land at Hoaden Court with apples and pears for them. The packaging format is simple, with the 2kg pack being the main seller. The



Above and below: JD Cooling Ltd supplied and installed the refrigeration system and the DCA technology.



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Tom Hulme explains the new developments to members of the East Kent Fruit Society.

specification is realistic, which delivers a good quality product to the consumer at a competitive price and a higher net return to the grower. By serving Lidl direct, the cost between production and delivery to the retailer is less". Tom adds that they utilise everything they grow, from 50mm to 85mm apples. The farm maximises the Class 1 yield in the orchard and then maximises this again in the packhouse. They pack imported fruit as well as stone-fruit in the summer as it's vital to retain labour. Training good people takes time.

The East Kent Fruit Society members were given an opportunity to view the new packhouse and hear from Tom and packhouse manager Tracey Briggs. Tracey's move from Newmafruit, bringing her experience of working in a large packing operation, was fortuitous for Tom and the Hoaden Court business. The farm's old packhouse was small but efficient and Tom admitted that the decision to invest in an

expanded new packhouse was a difficult one but was necessary for sustainability. "However, it's worked brilliantly for us," said Tom, also paying tribute to the major contractors for the new CA stores, who included Wealden AM, BMS Electrical Contractors, JD Cooling Ltd and Storage Control Systems Ltd.

Wealden AM were, as with Tom's previous project, project managers and main contractor for the 4,500 square metre expansion of the packing and distribution operation and everyone had to cope with the twin pressures of one of the wettest winters on record and the Covid-19 lockdown, which began four or five months into the project. On top of this, the work had to be phased so that Tom could have access to an existing pre-grader that was within the footprint of the new building until the very last minute in May. To do this the project was completed in two phases, with the



Tom Hulme and packhouse manager Tracey Briggs.

packhouse and mezzanine offices finished first and the chilled pre-grader area and dispatch area following close behind. To everyone's relief the job ran to schedule and was completed on time – a major achievement.

One of the most challenging aspects of the job was ensuring that all the services, including power, water, drainage, air, and data, were buried within the floor, something that Tom was keen

to see to keep the area tidy and uncluttered. He admits that, due to the pandemic, no Dutch engineers could travel to help with installing the old grader that, due to the limited space in the old building, had been limiting productivity even with double shifts. The Greefa six-lane Combisort pre-grader with 22 water channels and four robotic Burg Machinefabriek water tanks as in-feeds for dedicated bagging and packing lines will help future-proof the business. End-of-line robotics are planned to improve efficiency in the future. ◆



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