

Blackpool-based prescription house Vanalstynes has been in business since 1976, shortly before present co-owner and managing director Colin Evans got his first job in the optical industry.

'I got into optics straight after school when I got a job as a trainee technician working at a small chain of local practices on the Fylde coast. That was in 1978 and, unusually for the time, they had their own manufacturing facility.

'In the early 1980s, I went to work at Vanalstynes, which, at the time, was based in the South Shore area of Blackpool and was doing really well. I eventually became lab manager and there were two partners who owned the company who were fantastic to me. When one of them sadly died, I took on more responsibility and in 1994 I bought a 25 per cent share of the business.'

From that point Evans assumed responsibility for the business while the remaining partner continued in a silent role.

'At this point I developed the manufacturing side of the business and that worked well. I've always had designs on owning my own business so in 2000, myself and my wife, Zoe, bought the remaining portion of the company.'

Since then the business has continued to grow and in 2004 Evans decided to move it to new, specially designed premises in north Blackpool.

'When we took over we had it in mind to expand and moving premises seemed a good way to put my own mark on the company. Practically the existing premises were too small and the advantages of being in a facility built specially to our specifications were clear.'

The building is designed to allow for further expansion through the addition of a second floor in the manufacturing area, something Evans hopes will happen in his time at the company.

The expansive premises allow for a spacious working environment for the 18 members of staff and the establishment of different departments within the lab.

'There are four or five people in the customer service department, which also looks after order entry. We have a stand alone surfacing department and a specialist rimless department. For glazing we have two production routes: one with

Seaside special

Optician takes a late summer trip to Blackpool to see what Vanalstynes has to offer independent practices



two Essilor Mr Blue systems and a Nidek automated robotic line. We do frame and lens packages which can be pre-programmed and put through the Nidek route but we put a mixture of order types through both areas. The Mr Blue route is very useful for high-end or unusual products like high base wraps.'

While day-to-day production is overseen by laboratory manager Steve McLellan, director Zoe Evans works as company secretary and Frank Cope is the full time financial manager.

Extensive reach

The relatively large scale of the business means Vanalstynes reaches far outside of its local area, although practices around the Fylde coast and East Lancashire do benefit from a delivery service. 'Beyond that we use private courier, Hays DX and Royal Mail to serve all over the UK,' says Evans. 'In my time here we have definitely moved to being a national lab rather than just a regional one.'

Vanalstynes is one of few labs that

still produce glass lenses, a service Evans keeps on for the convenience of his clients rather than profit, and other less commonly offered work.

'We have good all round expertise but I would say that rimless is a particular strength. On demand we do all kinds of specialist products like diving masks, cycling wraparound frames and ski masks. We work with several frames companies to provide package deals and can supply Silhouette and Lindberg frames to order, saving time and meaning we can ensure the various components are correct for particular lens designs.'

Overall Evans stresses the importance of service to his clients, all of which are independent practices, saying that Vanalstynes is in the service industry and the aim is to provide the best possible product in the shortest possible time.

'We've built our service up over 35 years and continue to strive for improvement with heavy investment in machinery and technology. As long as the company has been trading, it has been serving the independent practitioner. Since the rise of the multiples we aim to help independent practices to compete effectively and offer clients a more individualised experience.

'Beyond our core services we are also always on hand to help with technical enquiries and look to offer our expertise on lenses in any way possible, hopefully in a way that would secure business for the practice. We do get thank-you notes and phone calls from practices so we must be doing something right.' ●



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