

# Life for Tools

Don't you just love that moment when you finally reach that motorway junction, turn off and suddenly find yourself surrounded by, well, things? When we say things, we mean there are suddenly people walking on pavements, there are shops, houses, pretty villages, farms...not just a Nissan Micra struggling to get up that motorway incline in the fast lane and an Audi A4 virtually sat in your back seat.







happily, we've left our friends in their Audis and Nissans behind on the M6 and M42 and we're now winding through pretty tree-lined lanes, which are punctuated only by equally pretty hamlets and villages. We're heading for Alcester in Warwickshire, and more specifically for the new UK home of Seco Tools. The company has established a reputation as a leading manufacturer and supplier of carbide cutting tools and associated equipment. The Swedish-headquartered company's operations are truly worldwide, with 40 wholly-owned subsidiaries and a large number of agents and distributors providing coverage in more than 50 countries.

Seco production is also international, with manufacturing units in Sweden, Germany, Italy, France, Brazil, China, Japan, Australia, USA and UK of course, as well as local workshops for special tools in most markets – making Seco one of the few truly global companies in this line of business.

This is specialist and extremely impressive stuff as well. Seco manufactures the tools that manufacture some of the most advanced and impressive machinery and transport in the world, from planes and motorbikes through to precision manufacturing equipment.

The UK home is based on an industrial estate just outside Alcester, and our first sight of the facility immediately raises our eyebrows – in a good way. The new Seco home stands out from its neighbours with its perfectly manicured and tendered grounds and striking wooden façade – no doubt a nod back to the homeland with its Scandinavian styling.

The reception space is no less impressive, dominated by a stunning birch ply and glass spiral staircase – designed by Walter Jack Studio – and fantastic matching timber reception desk, as well as a full height window at the back of the space that looks directly into the manufacturing heart of the company.

We are met by Wyde Interior Architecture's Maxine Bennett, who leads us through to the spacious and bright Oasis café/restaurant, where we take a seat and talk tools – well, tool manufacturers to be specific. 'We first became involved (with Seco) a couple of years ago,' Maxine begins. 'We were thrown headfirst into it when a meeting was set up here with ourselves and the contractor, to see how we would get on. By the end of the meeting they had decided to use us to drive things forward.'

'Richard (Jelfs, Seco UK MD) made the decision to take two industrial units here and turn them into one new facility. They were





just up the road from here in a typical 60's building – it was very cellular with a huge production facility at the back, although there was a little bit of design in there as they are a Swedish company.

'They knew that they had to move to better facilities and they really wanted bring in as many customers as possible. Their business is all about their customers – and they also need to bring those customers here to train them how to use their tools.

'This is all about precision engineering and they wanted the new offices to reflect that. Everything had to be very precise and very well thought out – and they wanted to get a design team on board who could reflect that. There's also a real family spirit here. Anyone who comes here gets offered a full cooked meal, there's food, drinks, fruit – they want to look after their customers and also their own sales staff who might be on the road much of the time but will often drop in. It's about being as much an academy as anything else I suppose.

'We spoke a great deal about agile working here – and Richard really embraced that. We want people to get away from their desks – they can now work down here, they can work outside, there's WiFi throughout; they want an active, engaged workforce who see the business as a family.

'Nothing here has been done for the sake of doing it. Everything is very well thought through – even down to the coffee, which actually has the lowest environmental impact. They are a local supplier who has their own plantation and some of the money goes back into that local community. You'll also notice that the car park at the front has been replaced with a meadow. They want it to be part of the local landscape – to improve the look and feel of the landscape here. Instead, they've bought another piece of land further along the road and turned that into the car park. Richard really is the catalyst for all of this. We wanted to use materials that would last throughout the space – inherently, if things last then they become more environmental.'

Maxine tells us that the conjoined units (which very definitely do not now resemble, either inside or out, 'normal' industrial units) provide approximately 37,000 sq ft, which is roughly divided 50/50 in terms of office and manufacturing space.

We move on talk about the scheme throughout that office side of the facility. 'The Seco logo is extremely colourful,' Maxine continues. 'Each coloured square within the logo represents a different metal – the darker the colour, the stronger the metal. We've looked to replicate that throughout the







►►►►scheme. Then, for this space, we've purposely used green – which is not one of their colours. In other words, the rest of the space represents what they do for a living and here people can get away from that – they can have a chat, eat, drink – even play table tennis if they want.

'Another thing that Richard asked for was a building that wasn't afraid to be industrial – a building that was real and honest. We didn't want any suspended ceilings or those elements that you so often find in an office building. We simply embraced that – embraced the fact that it is an industrial building – and hopefully made it look pretty good too.

'When we first saw the buildings – as they were – they were simply two empty, completely open sheds. I immediately thought we could do something pretty fantastic with them – that we could create an amazing office space.

'Pulling the two buildings together was quite difficult because they are set back from each other and on different levels. The little bridge and the staircase have, however, enabled us to bring them together. You can't see the join – unless you're an engineer, as they keep telling me!'

We move back through the café/restaurant space and up the amazing spiral staircase to a bright, open exhibition/demonstration space which

shows off Seco's expertise and products. Maxine tells us that the space is known as the Town Hall and is also used for major company announcements, presentations and, when Seco hold one of the regular seminars here in Alcester, as a large breakout area.

To one side of the Town Hall we find a series of smart meeting rooms, the amazing divisible seminar room and, opposite all this, an impressive variety of Vitra's finest classic seating. To the other side we find yet more Vitra seating, before the environment opens up into the brilliant double-height office space.

At this point we are joined by Richard Jelfs, who is happy to spare some of his valuable time and escort us through the rest of the facility. As we walk through Richard tells us a little more about the philosophy that underpins this facility. 'We have around 120 people here in the UK, of which around 50% are field-based. That's great, but what's missing is the camaraderie and the collaboration. Of course, providing you have a wireless network, you have a great deal of flexibility in the way you work if you're out in the field or working from home. One of the thoughts we had when it came to the design of this building is; how can we give that flexibility to people but in a collaborative environment? We want this to be a place where people really want to be. Also, if you're invited to a party in

someone's house, where's the best place to be? The kitchen! That's why we've developed these areas with breakout seating, great facilities, good food, drink – this is where people now meet, often on an ad hoc basis. I firmly believe that the most successful companies in the future will be those that collaborate – not just internally, but also with their community and with their customers and clients. To put that into perspective, we had 300 visitors to our old building last year and, in less than six months here, we've had in excess of 1,500.'

With this in mind we walk through the open plan workspace, where we find an even greater variety of both informal and more formal meeting spaces (including a fantastic stand-alone central boardroom), again a bright, colourful and elegant scheme (the use of materials and products here is particularly impressive and includes more timber, more Vitra and sleek werner works storage units.

We're rapidly running out of space here, which is a little ironic as the space we're talking about is incredibly generous – as are its residents. Richard is more than happy to show us around the manufacturing side of the facility, where we find wonders such as aircraft turbines, a giant landing gear and an extremely powerful looking motorbike. If only we had something like that for our impending foray back on the M42! ●

## essential ingredients |

Client • **Seco** | Interior Design • **WyldeIA** [www.wyldeia.co.uk](http://www.wyldeia.co.uk)

Furniture Supply • **Furniture 23** [www.furniture23.com](http://www.furniture23.com) | Spiral Staircase • **Walter Jack Studio** [www.walterjack.co.uk](http://www.walterjack.co.uk)

Systems Furniture & Task Seating • **Vitra** [www.vitra.com](http://www.vitra.com)

Storage • **werner works (through ei2)** [www.ei2.co.uk](http://www.ei2.co.uk)

Breakout Seating • **Vitra** [www.vitra.com](http://www.vitra.com)

Graphics • **Artworks Solutions** [www.artworks-solutions.com](http://www.artworks-solutions.com)