



For 40 years Grampian Motors has been servicing the UK motorcycle trade with cylinder rebores, pistons, crankshaft rebuilds and clutch parts. Grampian is steeped in technical know-how, hands-on experience and product knowledge. Report: Rick Kemp.

Pistons and cranks

Jim Nicholson, founder and managing director of Grampian Motors, has taken the company from being a conventional motorcycle shop in Seaforth, Liverpool, to an engineering business which he estimates will turn over in excess of £5m per year by 2014.

As an engineer, Nicholson wholeheartedly concurs with aeronautical engineer and novelist Nevil Shute Norway that “an engineer is a man who can do for five shillings what any fool can do for a pound”!

His five-bob theory includes the following principle – one of many: to provide the right quality at the lowest price, or at least at a price point that will attract the most business.

“We have the occasional retail customer, which is useful for us so that we can see what our customers have to deal with,” says Nicholson. “We had a chap come in for a piston, and remember this is Liverpool ... So I get the piston he wants. I go to the computer to pull up a retail price, which is our trade price plus 50 per cent, put the VAT on, and it’s going to be 80 quid. I’m thinking,



Jim Nicholson and son James, co-director.

if I go out there and tell him the price he’s going to hit me. So I sell it to him at trade price. That’s the problem. You can’t charge that price for that product. The market won’t stand it. You can go to Sainsbury’s and buy a bloody flat-screen telly for eighty quid. That’s why we now have our own-brand Mitaka pistons manufactured in Taiwan to our specifications and sell them at £40.”

Nicholson points out that the price you pay is influenced not only by the production costs, but also by the number of people who have handled the product before you receive it.

In the average 125cc piston there’s about 30p worth of metal. Wages in Taiwan, though higher than in China, don’t contribute a great deal to the end cost. By keeping the supply chain short Grampian keeps the lid on mark-up.

MANUFACTURER RELATIONSHIPS

Another key to Grampian’s success is its manufacturer relationships.

“You have to have a good relationship with the factories to get what you want and not what they want you to have,” says Nicholson. “They can be cute sometimes. We’ll send them a sample OE con-rod kit. They’ll reply, saying, ‘We can make you this and it will cost so much’. But you find that they’re quoting on an 18-roller cage when the original was 19. If the customer doesn’t know the significance, and accepts it, that’s up to him. I dig my heels in because if there is a subsequent component



failure I don’t want my customer saying it’s because it’s only got 18 rollers instead of 19.

“Nine times out of ten the factory will back down. I’d rather not have the product than have something that isn’t right.”

Nicholson doesn’t feel under pressure to stock every product a manufacturer would like him to.

“I know that if the customer can’t get something from me he’ll end up with something of lesser quality, or he’ll be paying a lot more for it,” he says.

Nicholson admits that he can’t source everything at an acceptable price/quality ratio, particularly when it comes to the older road bikes. But he certainly has been able to make some bold decisions that have led to further business.

For example, Grampian had a batch of pistons made for the GT750 Suzuki. This required heavy investment because the pistons are different on each cylinder and the manufacturer required a minimum order of 1000 per piston. When Suzuki stopped producing the crankshaft oil seals for this engine, Grampian was in a position to finance manufacture – again in batches of 1000 minimum orders.

Another development in the Grampian GT750 story materialised when Koyo discontinued the main bearings. Even though Koyo still had the tooling, Grampian turned to their suppliers in Taiwan because it was



quicker (three months rather than 11) and less than half the price to have them made from scratch to an acceptable quality.

GOODS AND SERVICES

Grampian's business is 95 per cent two-stroke, most of it for ten to 20-year-old motocross bikes. Road bikes from the 1970s and 1980s also play a large part. Pistons are the biggest selling items – 25,000 a year.

Nicholson's menu includes Mitaka and Aoki Racing pistons and rings, con-rod kits, seals and bearings, crankshafts, gasket sets, clutch baskets and plates.

Grampian makes clutch baskets from billet aluminium and has the presses and jigs to recondition crankshafts. Grampian can also bore cylinders and fit liners to chrome bored cylinders.

In addition, Grampian sells the cylinder boring machines it uses, the SPS Minibar, which is specifically designed for motorcycle single and multi-cylinder engines. Grampian bought the manufacturing rights, tooling and spare parts when the original company owner retired.

Dealers who are serious about their workshop services buy them. The current price is £6250.

Also available are Mitaka cylinder and piston kits for Aprilia RS125 and Cagiva Mito. These cost less than having the original bore replated. This was the criterion when Grampian contemplated having them manufactured in the first place.

The target price was £200 trade, and the only way to find out if trade customers would buy them at that price was to have them on the shelf. This was a high-risk strategy because Grampian had to pay for the moulds and place a minimum order of 1000 to get the price right.

The hope was to sell 500 RS125 barrels and pistons a year. "They sold at 1000 per year from the first year," says Nicholson. "This was down to our customer base, because every time someone rang up for a piston selling a cylinder was easy."

The RS125 sales boosted the Mitaka brand and in 2002 Grampian was able to make further commitment by stocking 60,000 pistons to cater for older two-stroke motocross bikes – six piston types covering about 90 per cent of models.

Commitment of this type produces self-perpetuating business. Owners will keep their older two-strokes running as long as there are

consumables available. The more parts Grampian makes available, the longer there will be a demand.

FOUR-STROKE PISTONS

Despite Grampian having invested more than £100,000 in four-stroke motocross pistons for the more popular Yamaha, Honda and KTM models, Nicholson is not an enthusiast, and feels that their race is pretty much run.

"There are two types of motocross four-stroke," he says. "Those which have had a rod break and totalled the engine and those which are going to have a rod break."

SERVING THE TRADE

While still at the original retail premises in Seaforth Nicholson had decided that there was no future for him in selling bikes, or anything else to the general public. He was more passionate about the engineering side of the motorcycle business. So in 1986 he shut up shop and acquired his present 20,000sq.ft factory to supply the trade.

There is no signage or name plate at the current premises. He prefers it that way. If people have to make an effort to find Grampian, then that cuts out the time-wasters.

The Grampian factory is rather labyrinthine with a mix of old machinery and state-of-the-art engineering hardware. Some of the older kit hasn't been bettered and, in some ways, the factory feels typically British. However, Jim Nicholson isn't about to promote this aspect of the company.

"Made in Britain makes no sense to us," he says. "Take our clutch baskets – we use Yugoslavian aluminium, a Taiwanese CNC machine, and a Czech operator."

EXPORT AND THE FUTURE

Having established the largest piston and crank reconditioning market share in the UK, Grampian turned its attentions to export and has achieved success in Europe, South Africa and New Zealand.

As a trade-facing company, the only promotion Grampian does is to attend shows. The first trade show and a springboard for the company was Motorcycle Trade Expo at the Ramada Hotel in west London in 1988.

Grampian has been an Expo regular ever since, and also regularly exhibits at the giant Cologne and Milan shows.

Grampian Motors has an enviable reputation in the trade. This is a result of the philosophy that if something is worth doing, it's worth doing as near to perfection as can be practically achieved.

Grampian has created and developed its own niche market catering for off-road leisure and competition activities, and for the two-stroke classic and restoration business. All appear to be in rude health at the moment, much of that health a result of Grampian parts and service supply.

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GRAMPIAN TIMELINE

- 1972** Jim Nicholson opens Grampian Motors for business in High Street, Seaforth, Liverpool, offering servicing, repairs and bike sales.
- 1986** Moves to 20,000sq.ft premises at Musker street, Liverpool, to focus on trade sales and services, import and distribution. New business co-founded with wife Jan.
- 1987** Mitaka in Japan produces bespoke product for Grampian.
- 1988** Exhibits at Motorcycle Trade Expo for first time. Increases turnover by 50 per cent over next 12 months.
- 1992** Acquires tooling, stock, manufacturing and sales rights for SPS Minibar boring machines.
- 1996** Invests £350,000 in CNC machinery to produce the Mitaka range of clutch baskets in-house.
- 2008** Mitaka is rebranded as Aoki for European dealers only
- 2012** Jan Nicholson passes away after devoting 35 years to the company. Grampian marks its 40th anniversary. Staff: 11. Annual piston sales: 25,000. Dealer network: 1500 including dealers, engineering and repair shops.



Managing director Jim Nicholson, marketing director Mariana Asensio and co-director James Nicholson.