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Woodbase Joiners Limited blends craft and technology to drive business growth

WOODBASE JOINERS LTD

Summary

Woodbase Joiners Ltd. is a traditional joinery firm that, for the past 30 years, has delivered high quality doors, windows and staircases to customers across the South East. Today, its staircase business is thriving. For the past ten years, it has used Staircon software to design and produce bespoke staircases in conjunction with advanced 5-axis CNC machine capabilities. This combination has delivered competitive advantages in ease of design, quality, precision, and production speed, and in assuring an excellent customer experience.

Woodbase Joiners Ltd. is a traditional joinery business, which has successfully blended craft knowledge with modern technology to gain business benefits and drive its growth.

Managing Director, Simon Bartlett, and co-founder, Richard Blackman, invested for the future a decade ago. After much deliberation, and significant research, they chose a Maka PE70 5-axis CNC router and Staircon software from Elecosoft. Today, this combination keeps the company busy constantly, delivering top quality, bespoke staircases for customers that include architects, interior designers, developers, and private clients.

Smart choices from the start

Woodbase Joiners invested in its digital capability before the last recession kicked in, and has never regretted it. Choosing the right machine was important, but selecting the right software was key to making the new processes work. Simon chose Staircon from an array of potential software

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choices, as he related: "The huge benefit of a CNC machine is its ability to do most of the work you do traditionally by hand, or with less sophisticated machines – but software to drive the process is key. We found a handful of different software packages, some connected to a machine manufacturer, others, like Staircon, which are available to the whole market. We investigated four of them in depth, and Staircon stood out as having more advantages, and fewer of the disadvantages, compared to other systems. It seemed very well-polished and we were well looked after by Elecosoft and their trainers to get up and running."

He continued: "We've stuck with Staircon ever since. I can't criticise it in any way, shape or form. We never regretted investing in it one little bit. Elecosoft has developed, updated and upgraded it many times over the years, and it has done absolutely everything we ever asked it to do."

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Designing success

The benefits of using the software become apparent early in the design process, as Simon explained: "With Staircon we can design something on screen directly from a set of dimensions provided by architect or builders, or those taken on site. You can draw the staircase out quickly, and work out exactly how it will fit in the space – but, the brilliant bit is that, if you think it won't quite work, you can easily take a tread out of the bottom part of a flight and add to the top end, add a winder, and do all the things you used to do longhand with a calculator and sketchpad, or on the drawing board, until everything works out. In the pre-Staircon days, it was a time-consuming process, requiring a significant depth of embedded skills, to know what to do."

Turning vision into reality

Woodbase has seen how hard staircases are for customers of all kinds to properly envisage and understand. Simon explained that "The one thing people struggle with more than any else is the concept of the staircase. It's a large three-dimensional thing, which you can't live without, and which will be used all the time, so it's vital to get it right – but people simply can't visualise them. I used to do my best when we worked in two dimensions with flat paper drawings – I would show sketches and photos to try and show people what their staircase was going to look like,

and the implications of their design choices – but often it was a real struggle for them to understand."

He continued: "For most private customers who are building a high-end bespoke house, it's the first staircase they've ever ordered – so they need a lot of help and guidance. The benefit of being able to use Staircon to show meaningful images on a screen is incalculable. You can show what you have designed as a 3D representation, manipulate it to view it from different angles, put walls in or take them out, change the timber or paint colour, and swap balustrade styles – it makes life so

easy. You can inform and guide people, help them to understand the options, and to make decisions that they will be truly happy with, even if all they came in with were some Pinterest ideas and cuttings from a glossy magazine. With the aid of Staircon, they feel they have designed the staircase themselves."

> " Staircon is just head and shoulders above others in terms of being easy to use. I think anyone could use it. "

Difficulty in comprehending the intricacies of staircase design and engineering are far from limited to first-build private customers, however. Even architects need to turn to the experts, in order to turn their concepts into a workable reality. Simon related a challenge from a recent project, saying: "In one Central London project, involving some complex dog-leg flights, the staircase design, as proposed by the architect, needed to be supported on steel. The details of this element were undecided when we received the original design, so it opened a can of worms about how things might work. We must have redrawn it three times to help the architect, designer and structural engineer agree a scheme. We have designed the staircase, then the

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steel support components, to enable the steel fabricators to manufacture the components off-site, ready to fit into the building."
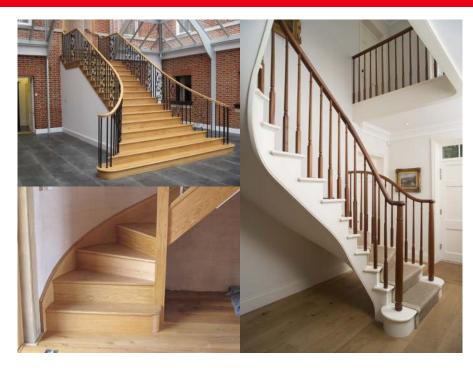
Design changes made easier

Having dedicated software to work with the most exacting clients is invaluable: "We are working with an architect who is building his own new house, so he has very specific ideas about his stair design. To be able to illustrate properly to someone like that what it is they are describing is extremely useful – and actually often helps you to win the work in the first place."

> **❝ Staircon is fast and, in the hands of a competent user, seems to have no limits. ❞**

Staircon also means that managing the inevitable design tweaks and alterations that occur on every build has become far easier than in the past. Simon said: "On most jobs, there will be several changes to manage. With Staircon we can often make amendments simply and quickly, instead of going back to the drawing board. While other CAD software will help you do that, the beauty with Staircon is how specific it is. You have all the right staircase elements to hand, such as hand-rails, tread styles, balustrades, and to alter the overall rise just takes the click of a button."

Accuracy beyond measure

Joinery is a precise business, and every element of any timber construction must fit together perfectly. Skilled craftsmen have been doing this for centuries – but now, Woodbase can go further: "The precision of today's manufacturing is accurate to beyond any woodworkers' wildest dreams. Now, if you want to work to 10ths of millimetre you can. If you want a riser to measure exactly 174.8mm rather than 175mm, that's what it will be. A skilled craftsman using conventional methods can get close, but now everything is exact, and fits first time. There are endless benefits to producing components on the CNC machine, all enhanced by the support of Staircon. For instance, when working with timber like oak, you might

machine a stair string up, sand it, leave it overnight only to find a big split has appeared in the middle. In days gone by you had to set it all out again, set up the router jig again, and router all the housings out a second time. Today, you can take a new piece of wood, and the programme is there. You just press a button to re-run the string and in ten minutes you're back to where you need to be. How did we ever manage without it?"

Badge of quality

Woodbase Joiners Ltd. displays the Staircon logo on its website. When asked why, Simon told us: "I want my customers to know we are a high-quality, professional outfit. If they click the logo and go to the Elecosoft

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site, it helps convey that. The logo demonstrates that we are a progressive, forward-thinking company that has state-of-the-art technology to do the job as well as it can possibly be done. Showing you have access to a good CNC machine, plus the right software like Staircon, simply sets you apart."

As it looks to the future, Woodbase Joiners Ltd. can look forward to ongoing success in a well-equipped, thriving staircase business. Staircon will remain part of its toolkit, and Simon summed up the reasons why: "Where before there were some jobs we might have turned down, today we will say yes because we know that, with the assistance of the Staircon design software, we will be able to design and manufacture faster, and at the right quality level. In my opinion, Staircon software is just head and shoulders above others in terms of being easy to use. I think anyone could use it, as long as they have a rudimentary understanding of how to make a staircase."

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