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DISCOVER

# Brown & Holmes takes hold of nuclear opportunities

Becoming Fit For Nuclear helped workholding specialist Brown & Holmes move into new markets, and maintain a strong order book through the Covid pandemic.

Tamworth-based Brown & Holmes was founded in 1939, with managing directors Kevin Ward and Carl Baker – both former apprentices with the company – taking ownership in 2003.

*“We’re primarily known as a designers and manufacturers of complex workholding solutions,”* says Ward. *“We’re recognised for the more challenging stuff that others steer clear of.”*

By the mid-2010s, the company was firmly established in the aerospace, automotive and power generation sectors, and started looking at the Fit For Nuclear (F4N) programme to help diversify into other markets. *“We targeted getting the F4N badge and getting the company set up to be accepted as a worthy supplier to that sector,”* Ward says.

As Brown & Holmes progressed through the programme, they started to win nuclear work from existing clients. Aerospace work for Rolls-Royce developed into long-term work for its submarines business. A longstanding relationship with Kuka also developed as the robot supplier targeted nuclear opportunities, with Brown & Holmes now producing tooling and end effectors for decommissioning projects.

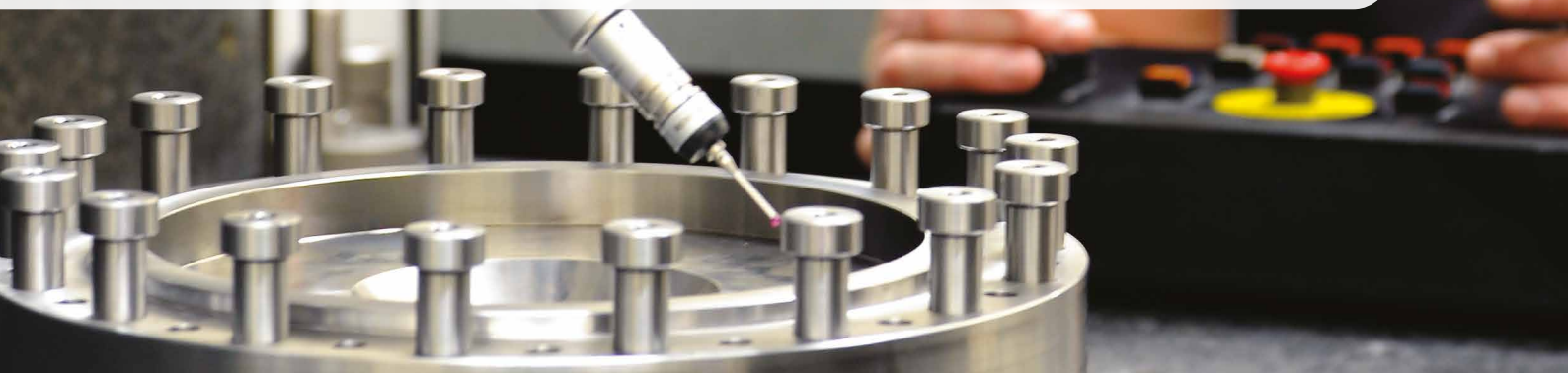
In 2018, QHSE manager Wayne Baker stepped in to lead the company’s F4N journey and take Brown & Holmes through the final steps to granting.

*“One or two of our nuclear customers advised that F4N would be of benefit to us, and we thought it would definitely be of benefit because there was a sector out there that was relatively unexplored for us,”* he recalls. *“We held back a bit where we knew we needed to get the workings in place ourselves, before getting in touch again and getting the granting.”*

One area for further development was around safety culture, with existing practices formalised to meet the high expectations of the sector.

*“We had a very good safety culture in place within the company, but F4N complements that,”* Baker says. *“We looked at enhancing our culture, making sure we put all the documentation in place to support what we were doing. Our employees were very up for it – they’re highly motivated and could see it was an advantage for us.”*

**"Nuclear is something we've cut our teeth on now, and we're very familiar with the quality and documentation requirements of the industry."**



The firms' investment in training for its current staff of 64 included regular toolbox discussions and refresher training in nuclear requirements for workshop staff, continuing work to embed 5S culture, and leadership training for senior managers and team leaders.

The improvements are also helping the company deliver work in other sectors, Baker notes. *"The disciplines we've brought in, we can spin out across the board, particularly the nuclear safety culture because that's embraced in our health and safety now,"* he says. *"It's been a rewarding learning curve for us."*

Working closely with F4N industrial advisor Huw Jenkins, Baker and the team successfully brought Brown & Holmes through the final steps of the programme, with the company granted Fit For Nuclear status in late 2020.

Ward notes that the benefits of the business improvements and the growing nuclear order book were clearly demonstrated when the company's core aerospace work dried up at the start of the Covid pandemic.

*"This business would have been very quiet and in a very different position now without the ability to win business within nuclear,"* Ward says. *"Almost at the same time that aerospace died a death overnight on the back of lockdowns, our nuclear work started to increase. It's been worth every penny that we've invested in nuclear. We've had a lot of successes out of the work we've supplied to the sector, and it's now time to capitalise on it and drive it forward."*

Business development manager Mark Haywood notes that the combination of F4N status and a current customer base in nuclear demonstrates the firm's ability to deliver to customer-specific regulations and standards.

*"The challenges of supplying to the nuclear sector were initially daunting, but it has very quickly become second nature,"* Haywood comments. *"The F4N granting indicates to our team, and also to our suppliers and future customers, that we understand the detail required to supply to a demanding sector."*

Brown & Holmes is now actively pursuing further work within nuclear, and gauging opportunities in areas including small modular reactors.

*"Nuclear is something we've cut our teeth on now, and we're very familiar with the quality and documentation requirements of the industry,"* Ward says. *"We've put all the hard work in, and we want to win more business off the back of that. It's work that's perfectly suited to us. The materials are more exotic than we were using 20 years ago, but we've enjoyed getting used to new materials. Our ideal order would be something that's within our capacity but perhaps pushes us to the edge a bit, to drive the business on."*

The business is also working to expand its technical capabilities. It is a member of the Coventry-based Manufacturing Technology Centre – like the Nuclear AMRC, part of the High Value Manufacturing Catapult – and collaborating on R&D projects around additive manufacturing and other technologies.

Ward sees nuclear as a thriving part of Brown & Holmes, even as work picks up again in the firm's previous core sectors. *"Nuclear is going to be a massive part of this business,"* he concludes. *"We try not to let any part of the market grow to more than 30 per cent of capacity to balance our order book, and we're going to have to grow other parts of the business to keep that balance. We're very proud of the work we're doing."*

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