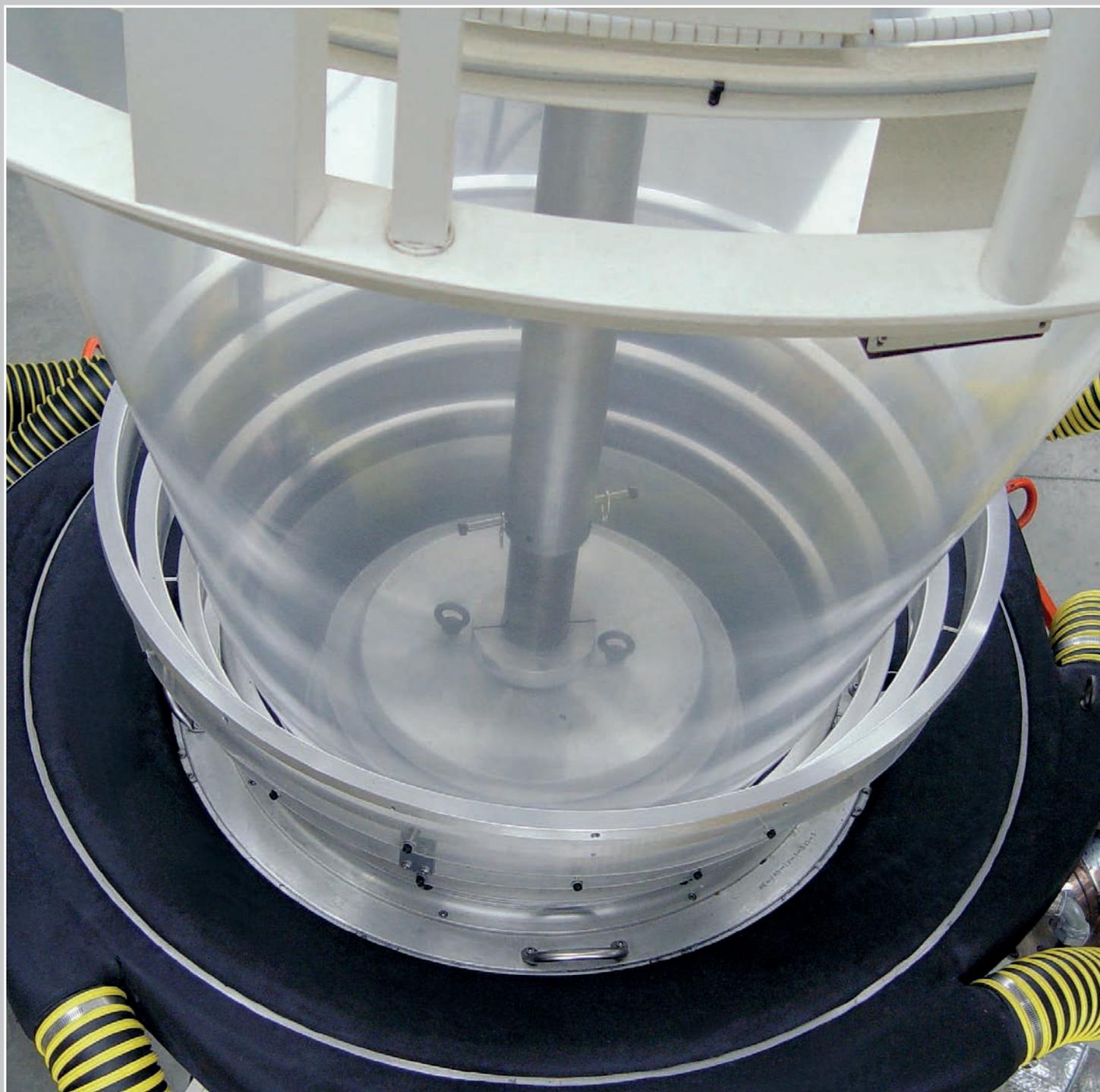


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# Packaging Films

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## Flying high around the globe

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*Atlas Converting Equipment was established in 1976 and specialises in the design and manufacture of primary and secondary slitter rewinders for flexible materials including plain, printed, coated or metallised plastic film, labelstock and paper. At the start of the company's third full year in private hands, »PACKAGINGFILMS« Technical Editor visited the purpose-built production site in Kempston near Bedford/GB, where most of the 200-strong workforce is based and whose colleagues are also mainly located in China, India and North America.*

A management buyout at the company just over two years ago began a new chapter for *Atlas Converting Equipment*. New technology platforms have been launched for the *Atlas* and *Titan* key product lines aimed at the film production and flexible materials converting sectors. Judging by this year's full order book and with 2014 also promising to be equally busy, private ownership appears to suit *Atlas* very well. The new business owners are flying solo, free of any parent company for the first time since 1997 when the *Atlas Group* was first taken over by *Valmet* (later *Metso*) of Finland. It became part of *Bobst* of Switzerland between 2004 and October 2010.

The ability to make decisions quickly is important for a service provider that has to keep in step with evolving technology and one jump ahead in a dynamic market where needs change as customers take on new business and work with new substrates coming on to the film and flexible markets.

The highly experienced management team is making headway in

established and developing markets around the world, both for *Atlas* primary slitter rewinders and the *Titan* range of secondary machines. Customers are turning to *Atlas Converting's* technology to take advantage of the growing need for high-quality slitting and rewinding of packaging films. This is making a particular impact in the populous regions of China, India and Brazil – especially fruitful markets for *Atlas's* business.

All the company's efforts are focused on catering for customers who are looking for improvements in productivity, automation and reliability. Targeted product development is supported by the latest 3D-CAD design systems, FEA (finite element analysis) capability, demonstration centres for machine testing and material trials, and vibration measurement and analysis. There is global, regional and local customer service and support and secure, web-based remote machine connectivity for 24/7 backup.

A three-times winner of the prestigious »Queen's Award for Export Achievement«, the company believes its success and expansion has made it a world leader in slitting and rewinding technology for the global converting industry. Among its claims, *Atlas* was the first company to have designed and installed the world's largest film slitters at 10 metres (393.7") wide, in the USA, Italy and China; the first company with the fastest primary film slitters running at up to 1500 m/min (4921 fpm); more than 200 *Atlas* film slitters are in production worldwide exceeding 6 metres (236.2") in width; and 2 metre (78.7") wide *Atlas* slitter rewinders have the largest share

of users in the global labelstock industry.

*Atlas* and *Titan* both provide bespoke solutions for automated roll handling systems with turnkey systems available including conveying and robotic palletisation to meet customers' specific requirements.

*Atlas* has always generated considerable business for its slitter rewinders (more than 6 metre/236.2" wide) in the BOPP film production industry in China. It also has strong markets in Russia and the Middle East. The *Titan* range competes effectively on a global basis in both mature and developing markets for flexible packaging materials.

*Atlas Converting* has a strong engineering department, which thrived under the stewardship of *Bobst* according to Sales and Marketing Director STAN BRAYCOTTON, and new technology has since become the backbone of a service-driven company. He says: »Today, we see ourselves as a service company that builds machines. Since the business has been owned outright by the management, we've redeveloped the technology and produced the next generation of equipment. *Atlas* and *Titan* have always been leaders in innovation. Now back in private ownership, we've started as we mean to go on.«

Minimising the carbon footprint is high priority. The new *Atlas CW* series primary slitters have integrated Bluetooth technology which helps to provide a much more environmentally friendly and sustainable slitting and rewinding solution. This is quite unique in the slitting and rewinding business. Bluetooth eliminates much of the electrical cabling. In a single primary film slitter, as much as 80 km (49.7 miles) of wiring is no longer required and this has also eliminated over 6000 termination points. Cumulatively, this will be helping to achieve enormous benefits for the environment. This also reduces the potential problem with the hardening of cables, and generally gives operators a tidier and less hazardous work environment. There is also no longer any need for underfloor trenches for electrical cables. Safety of the machine is also increased by integrating a safety PLC, which reduces risk and further reduces cabling. Re-

**Busy production floor at Kempston, Bedford/GB.**





moved safety relays also reduce the electrical burden.

The latest design enables electricity to be regenerated in the unwind section, to help reduce the overall level of energy consumption; and the more the winder is used, the greater are the savings. The hydraulic system is set up to allow for »power on demand«, and in the work environment, noise is reduced considerably because direct drive motors are much quieter.

Sustainability from the point of view of environmental issues was paramount in the creation of the new technology platforms. »It is fundamental for the design engineers to think that way.«

Global customer service is supported by three main corporate »hubs«; primarily, from its head office operations in Bedford; from the North American subsidiary in Charlotte, NC/USA that has personnel covering customer service, spareparts, sales and upgrades. A demonstration centre is now available for customers to run trials and for *Atlas Converting* to host open days. From its Shanghai/PRC subsidiary which stocks spareparts and provides customer service assistance with the sales department covering China based in Hong Kong. India also has dedicated sales and service engineers based locally.

Some 160 of a 200-strong workforce are employed at the site near Bedford. The team of service and production engineers just recently welcomed three new additions to help meet the demands of a growing business.

There is a flourishing four-year apprentice scheme for mechanical and electrical technicians. With many employees having a 20–30 year service history, »We want to make

sure that we continue this initiative«, says BRAYCOTTON. New recruits join *Atlas* and eventually gain experience from working in different parts of the world. On top of a broad training across the business as well as higher education qualifications, apprentices can expect a rewarding career with the company.

Remarking on the growth and excellent prospects of its customer markets, BRAYCOTTON continues: »China's BOPP film sector is a massive producer of packaging films. *Walmart* and *Tesco* are two of several retail giants now active in China and, largely thanks to them, paper is losing out to plastic film in the packaging sector.« Likewise, India is seeing an expansion of its aspirational middle classes and the »bulge« in the population demographics is working in favour of flexible plastic films for packaging materials.

An end to the current market expansion seems unlikely, says BRAYCOTTON: »Because no matter how serious the economic downturn, people still need to buy food and in fact possibly eat more at home, which helps to expand the market for flexibles.« Underlining the point, the *Atlas* order book is the strongest it has been since the early 1990s. Orders are now being taken for machine deliveries well into 2014. »The plastic film business still has its peaks and troughs, but they are not as big as they used to be. Some of the older film lines are now being replaced but some countries are untapped; Africa for example. Nigeria is a starting point and has recently installed its first film line in conjunction with an *Atlas* primary film slitter.«

Elsewhere, India and South Africa are strategic markets for *Titan* machinery. BARRIE HOMEWOOD, Sales & Marketing Director for the *Ti-*

*tan* product range, explains the company's deepening penetration in certain regions: »Brazil is investing more in OPP film production; Peru has been very good for us, buying several *Atlas* and *Titan* slitters in recent years. In 2012, an order from South America was fulfilled for nine machines, which included three *Atlas* primary BOPP film slitters at 8.3 metre (326.8") wide and six secondary slitters, comprising three *Atlas* CW800 machines at 2850 mm (112.2") wide and three *Titan* SR8 duplex cantilever slitters at 2050 mm (80.7") wide.«

Never to forget the strong foundation built as part of a group, *Atlas* and *Titan* continue to have a good relationship with *Bobst*, BRAYCOTTON says: »We maintain contact with our former parent company and receive referrals for *Titan* slitter rewinders from their customers who buy flexo or gravure printing presses and laminators.«

Machines in service for up to 20 years or more are a strong target market for upgrades in specification and retrofitting of machine parts, which has given *Atlas Converting* an expanding area of business. »This is particularly true for software and control system components. More and more business is coming from existing customers to help them improve productivity for the long established *Atlas* and *Titan* installed base«, says BRAYCOTTON.

An important part of the company's marketing strategy has always been to participate at numerous trade exhibitions every year on a global scale and in 2013 ARABPLAST, ICE EUROPE, ICE USA, CHINAPLAS and the K exhibition are among the fixtures for *Atlas* as well as events in some other parts of the world.

→ [www.atlasconverting.com](http://www.atlasconverting.com)

**Left:**  
Next generation 8.7 metre (342.5") wide *Atlas* CW1040 primary film slitter recently installed at *Tri-Pack Films Ltd/PK*.

**Centre:**  
The new *Titan* SR9-DT dual turret rewinder launched at the end of 2011.

**Right:**  
*Atlas* has well established service and support operations in China.