



Early shift: Brothers and directors Ian (left) and Alan.

It's Miller time

A north-east company has met the recession head-on by embarking on a new stage of expansion. Mike Travers reports

IT'S an early start these days at Miller Plant. On the day of my visit, Ian Miller had arrived at 5am to open up for business . . . only to find his father had already beaten him to it. With a number of important new contracts getting underway and planning permission just received for a one-million tonne quarry it's a packed working day for the family business.

Last year Miller celebrated its 40th anniversary and to mark the occasion it got a recession. Not that there's much sign of it at their rural headquarters deep in the Aberdeenshire countryside; low loaders

and trucks come and go and nearby a crushing and screening operation marks the company's growing involvement in aggregates recycling.

"It's all go at the moment," says Ian who, with brother Alan, represent the third generation of the Miller family involved in the business. With interests ranging from plant hire to transport, earthworks to contract crushing, there's enough to keep everybody busy.

The big current talking point at the Inverurie HQ is the go-ahead, after a year in the planning process, to re-open

the Pitdrichie sand and gravel quarry at Drumlithie near Stonehaven. The company has won permission for the phased extraction over a 10-year period of around one million tons of materials from a site that has remained unworked for the last 15 years. It has also had an offer accepted to open a rock quarry in the same area, again with reserves of around one million tonnes.

"Aggregates supply and recycling is becoming an important part of the business and with a number of wind farm projects



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and road schemes coming up the quarries put us in a good position," explains Ian. "We have been speaking to a number of contractors and they are keen to source materials from us."

Brother Alan, meanwhile, has been finalising the requirements for big earthworks jobs, one of which is to start digging out the footprint for Aberdeen University's £57m Queen Mother Library. Worth around £1m, the works call for Miller to excavate 20,000 cub. metres of material in a dig, load and haul package. "We're reducing the level by about seven metres and working on a very tight site," explains Alan "We'll be using 30-tonne excavators and hiring in a load of tippers with most of the material to be removed from site for landfill capping."

On another landmark project, a fleet of excavators and dumptrucks is being employed as Miller provide earthworks support to Hunter Construction at the new International School in Aberdeen on a job that will keep operators busy for several months.

Days after our meeting, Ian is on the phone to confirm that the company is going on site immediately after being formally appointed earthworks contractor and preferred plant hire provider at the site of Aberdeen City Council's multi-million pound HQ. "This is a major prestigious contract for us and will involve various items of plant and disposal of materials off site. Because of the nature of the city centre site and access issues, the largest item of plant

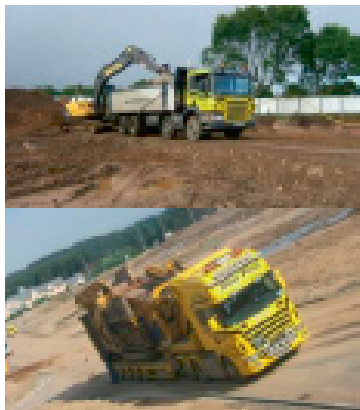


will be a 25-tonne excavator ranging down to five-tonne minis with breakers." Client and main contractor is Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd.

While Miller Plant hasn't escaped the recession, jobs such as these, allied to a flurry of oil-related commercial development, have helped cushion it from the worst effects. "The downturn didn't really hit here until September last year. By January and February things had become pretty dire but we

have certainly seen business pick up since.

"On the hire side, we had to put operators on shorter hours and it's been a battle to get the rates but maybe we're doing not too badly when we hear about the situation for companies in the central belt. They seem to be hiring out at rates that we just couldn't contemplate. OK, in times like these the rates have to come down a bit but not to the suicidal levels we've heard stories about."



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Volvo, JCB and Hitachi and there's a Doosan currently on demo. Extec, now under the Sandvik banner, has been the main source for crushing and screening equipment.

As part of the push to diversify, Miller has also entered the

self-drive market but on a larger scale than most others. "Most people equate self-drive with mini excavators and other small equipment but we're doing it from 13 tonnes upwards. We believe there's a market out there for the bigger kit," says Ian.

Given the current levels of activity, it would seem that


Miller Plant has enough to keep it occupied. Not so. "We're always thinking of ways to add to the business," says Ian. "We believe we're through the worst of the recession. Residential development is picking up again, we'll be creating new jobs at the quarries and there are

some big projects such as the Aberdeen bypass and the Trump and Jack Nicklaus golf courses on the horizon. We'd like to be involved in those."

It would seem that early morning starts will be on the cards for some time at the Miller family.



Digging in: The company starts on its earthworks contract for the Queen Mother Library.



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