



PRECAST FLOORING
FEDERATION

Bring on the challenge

George Pickard, FCIOB, member of the Precast Flooring Federation sales and marketing committee, reports on the how member companies are dealing with the growing demand for beam-and-block floors.

Over the second half of 2013, we witnessed a dramatic increase in orders for beam-and-block floors in the domestic housing market, an area which had been growing steadily but slowly over the past 20 years or so. What is more, in a survey of clients that I commissioned recently, I was pleasantly surprised to find that nearly all of them were predicting that demand for this year (2014) would be some 10–40% greater than 2013. Of course, all this is against the backdrop of the country's recession during which the industry lost some major players in the material supply chain. Unsurprisingly, the beam manufacturers and the block manufacturers suffered their share of these difficulties too, with some large factories closing and some well-known names leaving the industry for good. As a result of this, it is fair to say that the industry is today leaner and fitter for the experience but while the market continues to grow we are in for a busy and challenging time.

Over the past year or two, members of the Precast Flooring Federation members have not been idle – indeed far from it – and preparation for the upturn has been the subject of lengthy discussion at our committee meetings. With fewer manufacturers around, a surge in demand can create problems since, while the market adjusts, it is almost inevitable that there will be shortages of blocks and associated extended delivery periods. At the same time, members recognise that builders would prefer to use the available blocks to build upwards rather than infill horizontally between beams for flooring and as a consequence have been actively promoting the use of expanded polystyrene EPS at ground floor level.

EPS panels are readily available and hold a number of other advantages including speed of construction, reduced manual handling, fewer vehicle movements both to and from site and on the site itself. These panels have been growing in popularity over the last ten years and are generally no more expensive than traditional block infill and over sheeting insulation.

John Thornberry, managing director of Moulded Foams, says “Working with beam manufacturers, we have projected a growth in the elegant detailing of Tdeck EPS panels. We have invested in a state-of-the art factory at Blackwood with new Tdeck lines added each year. Plans for expansion in 2014 and 2015 are already in place and we are committed to doubling our production over the next two years to ensure demand is satisfied.”

The infill block/EPS panel is only half the story, of course, as the beams are just as important to maintain an excellent service level. Indeed, recent times have seen a hive of activity from beam manufacturers. Not only is existing machinery being overhauled and used more but also new machinery is being installed and commissioned.

For example, Kevin Hall, production director at Litecast says “Back in early 2012 we decided to install a new batch plant in Nuneaton. After extensive research and an investment of £1.7m, we took delivery in November 2012. Today, it supplies both our Highfield and Stratford factories in Nuneaton and is currently working at 40% of design capacity. As far as beam production is concerned, we aim to increase production by a further 20% over the next 12 months.

Meanwhile Hanson has developed New Jetfloor to improve site productivity and provide certainty of compliance with UK building regulations and European standards. According to John Duffy, sales director of Hanson Floors, "After listening to our customers and seeing the change in emphasis in the building regulations to issues like thermal linear bridging, or psi values, we completely re-thought our approach. New Jetfloor consists of EPS infill blocks, which no longer go beneath the floor, but sit between the floor beams with a layer of EPS sheet insulation laid over the top and then finished with 70mm of RC25/30 structural concrete. As with the original Jetfloor, infill blocks are 1200mm long, the equivalent of six building blocks, and weigh less than 2kg, making the floor many times faster and much easier to install."

In short, the precast concrete flooring industry has its finger firmly on the pulse and is poised and equipped to meet demand. Any concerns about beam-and-block flooring are largely short term because, having recognised the healthy upturn in the housing market, manufacturers have restructured, reorganised and reinvested, all of which leaves us in an excellent position to deal with the challenges that the next few years hold.

Precast Flooring Federation

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