

THE HIGGINS GROUP CELEBRATES 50 YEARS OF POTATO SUCCESS

by Richard Shepherd-Barron

The Higgins Group was established by Michael Higgins (now today's Chairman) at Finningley, near Doncaster, in 1959. Today this company is a major European independent potato supply organisation with operations in Yorkshire, Norfolk, Scotland and France.

However, Michael does not have a background in farming or the potato world as his family were originally involved in coalmining in Yorkshire. He left school at 14 and joined **British Rail** as a delivery boy.

In his spare time he learned shorthand and typing skills with a view to becoming a newspaper reporter, but then joined the **National Coal Board** as an office boy. National service in the **RAF** intervened for two years where he was a clerk. In 1953 he joined **Sheffield City Police** and then moved to the Doncaster area. However, he suffered some hip problems which brought his police career to a premature end and he started work with a local company of potato merchants as their "in-house" book-keeper. He became deeply involved in sourcing and purchasing potatoes across Europe and developed a great depth of knowledge of this industry.

One day he read in a trade magazine about a man called **Eddy Apthorpe** who had started pre-packing potatoes in 10lb Hessian sacks and delivering directly to homes in the London area. As milk was delivered daily door-to-door in the late Fifties, Michael thought this was brilliant idea and here was an opportunity that could work for him. So, with the able and enthusiastic assistance of his wife and brother-in-law, he rented a garage in Doncaster and started his new life as "The Potato Man", using an Austin A40 van, bought with the help

of a small loan. Soon, the new business was handling up to 25 tons a week in 5lb polythene bags and expanded its activities by renting a larger warehouse. They then became involved in supplying crisping potatoes to local crisp makers and by the early Sixties were supplying the huge **Meredith and Drew /United Biscuits** group. Michael went to a great deal of trouble to research the quality of potatoes, even to obtaining information from Cleveland, USA, as to sugar levels for crisping potatoes.

In 1962, Michael bought **Bury Farm** near Finningley and started growing potatoes under contract for his large customers. In 1970 the first store for 1600 tonnes was completed and this was followed four years later with a further four stores for the United Biscuits and then Walkers Crisps contracts. Michael expanded the farming activities by buying land and taking on new tenancies. Today, they have some 1800 acres in Yorkshire, growing mainly combinable crops plus carrots, but they also have 450 acres of



David Higgins, Group Managing Director.

potatoes.

Younger members of the Higgins family have joined in the various businesses over the years: **David Higgins** trained as a qualified accountant and is now Group Managing Director, **Karen** worked in the company for a number of years specialising in the procurement of pre-packed potatoes and is still a shareholder/director and **Kevin** runs the farming operation. The Board has three non-family members: **Stephen Uttridge**, Commercial Director, **Graeme Byers**, Technical Director and **David Thompson**, Finance Director.

The 80 acre site at Finningley includes the modern head office facility and also stores that can hold 30,000 tonnes



Kevin Higgins, Farms Director.

(with "state-of-the-art" computerised control systems). Just over 100 full time staff are employed within the Group with around 20 seasonal workers at peak times. There are no plans to increase the storage facilities at Finningley as Higgins feel that the availability of good storage in other parts of the country is a considerable help in keeping down transport costs by having the storage nearer both growers and customers.

Many major food processing companies are numbered amongst Higgins customers and these are guaranteed product security and vendor



Michael Higgins, founder and Group Chairman of the Higgins Group.

assurance. Their size enables them to supply their customers with a year round flow of potatoes which is vital for continuous production. David Higgins commented that they very much feel their customers to be "partners".

Higgins specialise in supplying potatoes to the processing industry, an impressive 300,000 tonnes plus per year. In 2008, they entered into a three year sole supply contract with **Heinz Frozen Foods** at their Westwick plant in Norfolk. This will run at over 100,000 tonnes a year with a total sales value to Higgins in excess of £40 million. Another major customer is still Walkers (part of the **Pepsico** group) and this relationship continues to go from strength to strength with further exciting opportunities in the future. Such long term supply contracts include on-site potato handling



Steven Uttridge, Commercial Director.