

the target is £36 million. But Mr Holmes is setting out an ambitious growth plan, targeting £50 million turnover by 2011.

"We'll also be improving our margins, both net and gross," stresses finance director Ian Gorbould. Margins are currently between 3.5 and 4 per cent, but Mr Gorbould's target is to achieve 5 per cent. This, he says, will be done through a mixture of good housekeeping at head office and increased efficiency on site. Just by shopping around, for example, he has managed to take £150,000 off the annual insurance bill.

Piling is still the largest division. Seven years ago, it was turning over £5 million, but it is now pulling in £13.5 million a year, boosted in part by the strong housing market which lies at the heart of Van Elle's activities.

But in the past two years, Van Elle directors have increasingly focused on civil engineering, as a safeguard in case the housing market should stall. With projects for the Olympics limbering up at the starting line, this is a well-timed strategy.

"We see major opportunities in the south-east – particularly with the Olympics and the Thames Gateway, and the retail and leisure developments going on there. It's quite an exciting time," says Mr Holmes, who is running the piling division until Andrew Sneddon, from Expanded Piling, joins the company.

But Mr Handley emphasises that the company will not be chasing trophy projects. "We'll only do projects on which we can make money," he says.

The Midlands-based company works all over the UK and will be launching an office in the Republic of Ireland next spring. Mr Handley says that the company would have liked to have been there five years ago when Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy was truly roaring. But, there was a lot of work to be done to establish the brand in the UK first.

While Van Elle is expanding its boundaries geographically and technologically, there is one area that the company has decided to pull away from: subsidence repair. This was once a key part of Van Elle's operation, but now turns over a paltry £0.5 million annually.

"Over the past three years, we have shifted away from insurance-related works," confirms Mr Holmes.

Mr Handley blames two factors: the compensation culture which has taken a stronger hold in the UK in the past few years, and the chaos of the insurance sector.

"Five years ago, if we'd ruined someone's lawn, we'd have dug it out and put a square yard of turf back in.

Now people want compensation," he says.

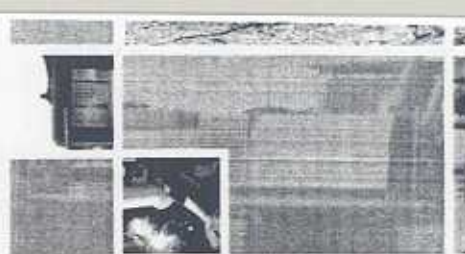
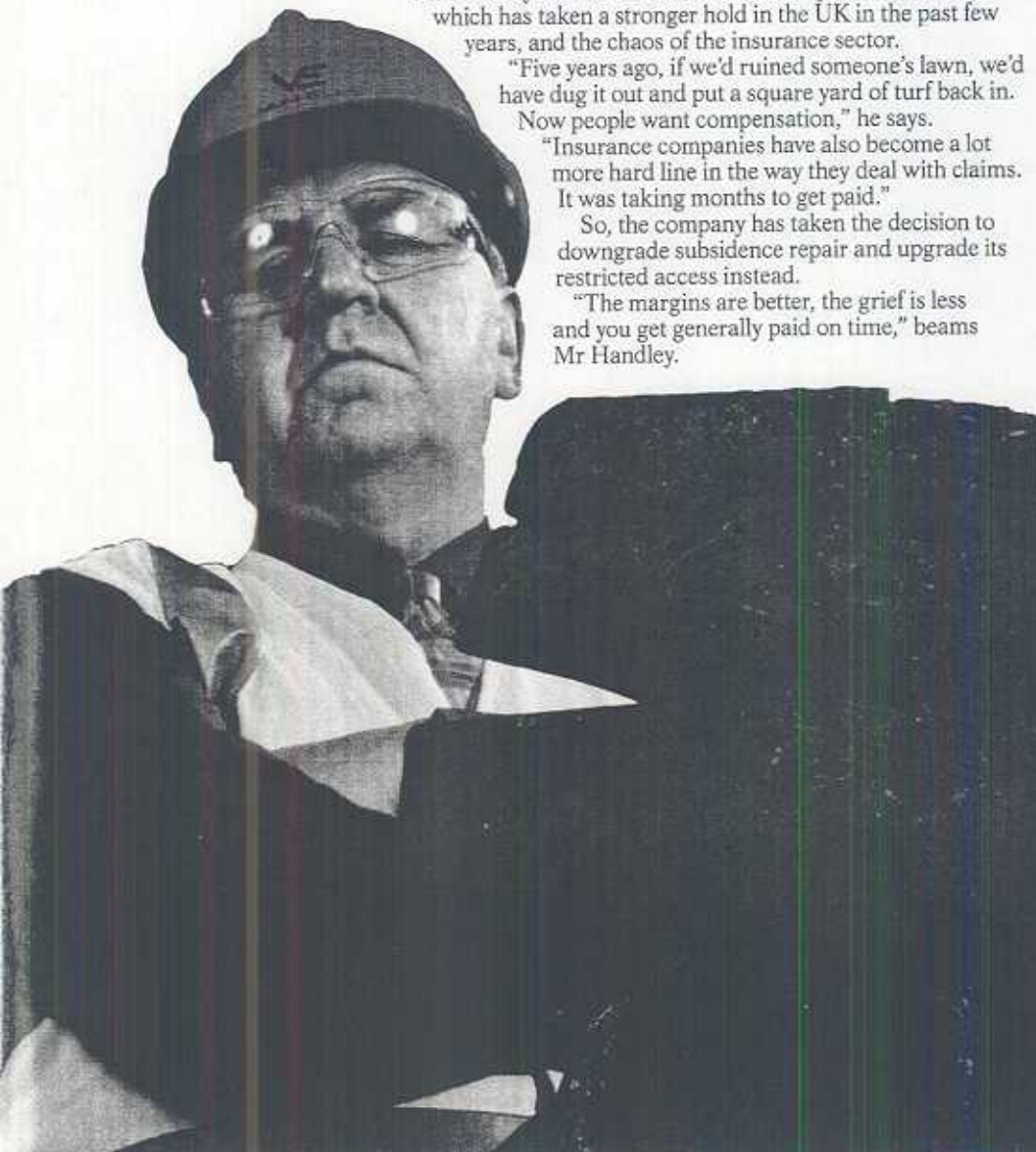
"Insurance companies have also become a lot more hard line in the way they deal with claims. It was taking months to get paid."

So, the company has taken the decision to downgrade subsidence repair and upgrade its restricted access instead.

"The margins are better, the grief is less and you get generally paid on time," beams Mr Handley.

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Richard Holmes, (left) Van Elle



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 , of the traditional methods of pile and
 s, managing director of Abbey Pynford.
 site in Chesham, Buckinghamshire, is a
 . The total value of work for Abbey is a mere
 is is erring on the side of caution with this
 rship.

th a small one because the next will be
 when we get it," he says.

ve so far found working side by side so
 ss's optimism is understandable. He didn't
 tion of the next "big" project but hints that
 oucestershire.

on points where the ground has been
 over the small site. A standard crawler



crane with a 12 m-long vibrating poker was used to bore into the ground. The holes were filled with an inert aggregate then the poker was reinserted to firm up the columns.

"The longer you keep the poker in the ground the tighter the aggregate will interlock together," says Nick Hodder, commercial director for Abbey Pynford. The columns of tightly packed aggregate provide the support for Abbey's slab, a cheap and quick alternative to conventional piling.

Vibro is not exactly new on the scene, having been launched in the 1970s. Nor is it a viable solution for all ground types.

"It's horses for courses. If you had a soft, peaty, organic soil

you'd struggle with that stone column. If you pile outwards and the integrity would be poor," says Hodder.

The advantage of using Housedeck is that the airflow under the slab can be controlled. "The void in under the house. Martyn Singler for Keller, describes how it can contain contamination.

"We will be building a capillary break. The vibro treatment will be through untreated. And to avoid strip foundations could break into that ground, we will use a slab which can then sit on top of the capillary removal and it's also cost-effective."

With clay soils the system offers the advantage that it can be moved around as they go along when the designers are working along.

Abbey had to trim the platform to a standard 225 mm-thick reinforced concrete top. But this was only after the ground was treated. The metres of treated ground now sits on top of the need for driven piles.

"It was good for the client because it was a fast and quick solution," says Mr Kiss.

Housedeck grew out of a piling technology that can cover all the different ground types. It used to take weeks; now the same sized slab, for a house, would take half that.

The new package covers design, drainage, and concrete, and can save valuable time for the client, says Abbey, although that was not the case for originally. Now with more than 10 years of experience, the company has launched a spinoff, Commercial, for larger commercial projects of up to six metres.

"It's a theme on a theme," says Mr Hodder. "Thicker slabs and bigger piles are used to support the house. What they like about it is it's a one-stop solution."

"More and more clients are looking for a one-stop solution with one warranty. And that's exactly what's on offer."

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 'Clients are looking for a package with one subcontractor'

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 Abbey Pynford

