

Ground Heat Installations won two awards at the recent Renewables Awards, making them an ideal company to advise other installers on how to be successful in the microgeneration sector.

# Award-winning approach

When Ground Heat installations won awards as both 'Ground Source Pump Installer of the Year' and 'Renewables Installer of the Year' it was a clear vindication of the decision to diversify into the microgeneration sector seven years ago.

At a time when very few other installers were taken any interest in renewable technologies, an unexpected enquiry from a customer to Ground Heat's parent company – M.H. Cragg & Sons – about the possibility of installing a ground source heat pump sparked an interest that has resulted in an award-winning business.

"The whole thing came about by accident for us. A customer who had one fitted phoned us up because it wasn't working. I decided to go and have a look at it – thinking I knew everything – but I had my eyes opened," explained Dave Thompson, Managing Director of Ground Heat.

"I couldn't get my head around how it worked so we spoke to the company that had installed it in Oxford. They didn't have anyone based near here so they invited us down to have a look at what they were doing, showed us how they worked etc, and then asked us if we'd look after the servicing for them in the North.

"The whole thing progressed out of

the servicing really – we got requests to carry out installations. The problem, though, was that we had to travel. We wanted the experience so anyone who wanted a ground source heat pump installed – wherever they were – we would go and do it."

For Dave and the team at Ground Heat, it was a fast learning curve – partly because the renewables industry was in such a fledgling state in the UK that there wasn't a wealth of knowledge and experience for them to draw upon. People were only just beginning to get an understanding of the potential that ground source heat pumps offered, which meant that there weren't any training courses or industry guidelines available.

"We were experienced heating engineers before we started down the ground source route, and we thought that we'd be up to speed and know everything within six months, but we're still learning – every day.

"It became a bit of a hobby for us really – we enjoyed doing it. We built

our own plant room, and we put everything in there in order to get a better understanding of how the different units perform – what they can and can't do."

Every job that was completed provided Ground Heat with a better understanding of how to get the most out of a heat pump – and every problem encountered had to be practically solved on site. This gave them invaluable hands-on experience that is still serving them well.

Having now spent the last seven years in the renewables sector, Dave is well-placed to advise others on the best way to approach the burgeoning renewables market. With the Renewable Heat Incentive set to boost the public interest in all things microgeneration, now would seem to be the right time for anyone looking to diversify their businesses

## 1. Install the technology correctly

"Firstly, I truly believe that you have to be a heating engineer in order to understand how to install a ground source heat pump properly and how to design the systems effectively. That said, it's still going to be a steep learning curve so you have to be prepared for some hard work and to be out of your depth at times. "In reality, working with ground source heat pumps is a straightforward process, but installers will come across new

things, new terminology and new products. The most important thing to do then is to be honest with yourself and accept that you'll do a lot of learning as you go along.

## 2. Grow your business

"Growing your business as a heat pump specialist will also be a slow process – even with the Government's incentives, companies are going to start getting hundreds of installation requests a month. It's largely down to word of mouth and building up a reputation. We were doing installations for three or four years before we started ground Heat as a separate business. "When we first started, there was a lot of travel involved – we were going all over the country to do jobs. That's started closing in as the popularity of heat pumps – and hopefully our reputation – have led to more installations in the area, but anyone starting out will have to be prepared to go where the work is."

## 3. Be a specialist

"Everyone asks why we haven't invested in JCBs etc, but it's a specialist job. For example, we couldn't become drillers overnight no more than a driller could become a heat pump installer. They are totally different skills. For example, if we're doing a solar installation then we get a roofer in. It's better to build



a network of people to maximise each other's specialities. "You might think you can make a few quid more taking on these other related jobs, but, in our opinion, it's not worth it. It's far easier to get in experts and concentrate on becoming experts in fitting a ground source heat pump."

## 4. Work with the manufacturer

"There's definitely a lot of support from manufacturers because they are keen to promote their new products within the sector. It's in the interests of everyone to forge strong relationships because then you'll be able to each other out when necessary. "One of the big challenges is getting the installers to new customers and vice versa – which is definitely an area that manufacturers can help a new business. If you've got a good relationship with the manufacturers, then they'll recommend you to any customers wanting a heat pump installed." >



## 5. Work with the customer

"Renewables don't work on every site but a lot of people are jumping on the bandwagon because they're hearing about 'free energy' or they are seeing examples and making a leap that isn't true. Just because you can make big savings on the energy costs on one house, you can't assume you'll make the same savings on another. Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that because there are lots of factors involved.

"The conversation between the installer and the homeowner has become a lot more varied now – for both parties. There are a number of solutions to solve a problem so the homeowner will need a lot of sound advice to make the right decision.

"If you're putting a ground source heat pump in, you've got to be prepared to go back to it time and time again. You can't just stick it in and go back a year later like you can with a boiler.

"You don't want to walk out the door and leave the customer not knowing how to use this new heating system that they've bought. You have to talk them through how the unit works and show them what it's capable of – it's the only way that they will learn. You need the customer to sign into the idea of a ground source heat pump."



## Westport Lake Visitors' Centre, Stoke-on-Trent

Opened in September 2009, the Westport Lake Visitors Centre is energy-efficient, having been built from straw bales and drawing its energy from water, which is piped down into the mine-workings below the lake.

Ground Heat Installations carried out various installations, including a ground source heat pump using a lake extraction closed loop, an under floor heating system throughout and a solar thermal hot water system.

The installation was unique because of the environmental restraints imposed by one of the main clients, British Waterways. It was essential to minimize the risk of any potential pollutants including site management. For this reason, a specialist drilling company was brought in to install the main connector pipe work from the lake collectors back into the specially designed plant room.

In order to heat the building, Ground Heat Installations fitted its own unique underfloor heating system throughout, controlled by optimizing thermostats. It also installed a solar thermal hot water system to provide some of the building's hot water requirements.

The project was a huge success and was highly recommended in the recent North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership Architecture and Urban Design Awards for its architectural design. It was also 'Sustainable Project of the Year' runner up in the prestigious 'UK Green Building/Council Building' national awards.

