



Party time as Fruit Machine Company marks 50 years in city

As she stood in front of an original 1963 fruit machine, Helen Nelson recalled her first day working at Bell-Fruit.

"When I first started we used to come down the production line and play the games," she said. "It's been fun working here. I've seen a lot of changes over the years."

Helen joined Bell-Fruit Manufacturing, as the firm was known then, as a 15-year-old administrator after leaving Cottesmore Girls School, in Lenton, in 1968. Fast forward 45 years and Helen, now 60 and living in Beeston, is its longest-serving employee. She said:

"It's always been like a family. There weren't many people at first, but it's grown and grown."

The company threw a party for around 200 employees at its headquarters in Leen Gate, Lenton yesterday, to celebrate the anniversary, with some dressed in 1960s clothing for the occasion. Videos of life at Bell-Fruit over the years were screened, while a specially recorded video of Deal or No Deal host Noel Edmonds singing Happy Birthday was also played. The TV show is among the host of games adapted for Bell-Fruit's machines that are played in pubs, arcades, bookmakers, and motorway service stations up and down the country.

The assembly area at the factory was also taken over by games of a different variety for the day, as staff queued up to play crazy golf, basketball, and take part in Space Hopper races.

BELL-FRUIT GAMES

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John Lowton started out on the production line at Bell-Fruit 33 years ago. The 58-year-old, of Woodthorpe, is now the company's operations director. He said:

"My older brother, Bill, was working here at the time and he said I should come along. My first job was testing the machines and I've progressed from there over the years. My younger brother, Dave, and son, Sam, now also work here for our other company, Mazooma Interactive Games. People ask me how I can stay at one business that long, but it's always changing. The games industry is always reinventing itself. I'm proud we've reached this milestone."

At the height of its manufacturing pomp in the 1970s, Bell-Fruit had around 800 workers going through the doors of its factory at the former tannery in Leen Gate. The company is now based across the road from its original site, and owned by Austrian gaming giant the Novomatic Group.

Bell-Fruit managing director John Austin, 65, of Hucknall, first joined the company in 1969 and has spent three spells working for the company. He said:

"I first joined as a design draughtsman, making fruit machines and manufacturing jukeboxes. This is a major milestone for our company, whose association with the city of Nottingham goes right back to the very beginning of the business. Our workforce is incredibly loyal and long-standing. More than 22 per cent of our employees have been here over than 25 years."

Of the future, he added: "We're now starting to see a real move towards digital machines". Technology is always changing and the next big thing is games online and on mobile phones. It's something we are looking at."

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