

**Date:** 05 June 2026

Leeds Manufacturing Festival

## **Leeds Manufacturing Festival Awards celebrate Yorkshire's next generation of manufacturing talent**



The Leeds Manufacturing Festival Awards returned this week, with a rollcall of some of the brightest talent in West Yorkshire's manufacturing and engineering industry. Apprentices, graduates, rising stars and mentors, as well as employers and manufacturing leaders, were all recognised for their contribution to the sector.

Held at Leeds Beckett University on 4 June, as part of Leeds Manufacturing Festival, the awards celebrate inspiring people and businesses that are helping to shape manufacturing's future at a time when the sector continues to face skills shortages and recruitment challenges.

In this year's awards ceremony, the Apprentice of the Year trophy, sponsored by Enginuity, was presented to Ben King of Kirkstall Precision Engineering. Judges were impressed by Ben's "remarkable journey from a chip shop worker to an award-winning CNC machinist and WorldSkills gold recipient", as well as his significant contributions to innovation and productivity.

The Large Employer of the Year Award, sponsored by E3 Recruitment, went to iconic Pudsey-based woollen fabrics manufacturer AW Hainsworth. Judges praised the firm's commitment to employee development, wellbeing and long-term career progression.

Presenting the trophy, Callum Good of E3 Recruitment said that AW Hainsworth had "raised the bar" in every sense. "With 63 employees on personalised development plans, a mental health strategy backed by serious boardroom investment, multi-skilling programmes transforming the



shop floor, and leadership pathways that take people all the way to director level, this is a business where development is not a perk, it is part of the culture," said Matt.

The special Manufacturing Ambassador award was presented jointly to Dawn Helsby, early careers development officer at Schneider Electric, and Kshamya Mittal, a data analyst apprentice with the company.

Judges described Kshamya as "a remarkable young woman with a great career ahead of her", while Dawn was praised for "consistently going above and beyond her role" and for "creating meaningful pathways into industry".

The Mentor of the Year trophy, presented by Next Gen Makers, went to Elisa Henderson, early careers co-ordinator at clean water technology company RSE Control Systems. Elisa was chosen for her "exceptional leadership" and the real impact she has made in supporting development and growth. "Her work stood out for the way she created opportunity, built confidence and helped others progress, making a meaningful difference to both individuals and the wider organisation," said the judges.

Meanwhile, environmentally sustainable soluble cleaning products manufacturer Solupak was named SME Employer of the Year, an award sponsored by Leeds City College. The business was described as "going beyond" simply employing people. Solupak "invests in its workforce, creates opportunities for development, champions inclusion, and demonstrates that people are at the heart of long-term success," judges said.

Ben Wilson, managing director of MPM and spokesperson for Leeds Manufacturing Festival, said: "One of the most encouraging things about these awards is the calibre of people being recognised. Looking across this year's finalists and winners, you can see talented individuals at every stage of their careers making a real impact in their businesses, whether as apprentices, graduates, rising stars, mentors or leaders.

"For a long time, manufacturing has faced a challenge in attracting the skilled people it needs, but what we're seeing more and more is talented young people recognising the exciting opportunities the sector offers. These awards showcase exactly the kind of talent helping to shape the industry's future."

Other Leeds Manufacturing Festival Awards winners included Graduate of the Year, Nava Yousef of Ionix Advanced Technologies; Rising Star, James Jones of Leeds Welding Company; and Caroline Burrows of Sound Leisure, who was named Manufacturing Leader of the Year.