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Rapid Manufacturing Technique used in the Development of a Regenerative Pump Impeller

Francis Quail¹ Matthew Stickland² Thomas Scanlon³

Abstract – This paper presents a method of rapid manufacture used in the development of a regenerative pump impeller. Rapid manufacturing technology was used to create complex impeller blade profiles for testing as part of a regenerative pump optimisation process. Regenerative pumps are the subject of increased interest in industry. Ten modified impeller blade profiles, from the standard radial configuration, were evaluated with the use of computational fluid dynamics and experimental testing. Prototype impellers were needed for experimental validation of the CFD results. The manufacture of the complex blade profiles using conventional milling techniques is a considerable challenge for skilled machinists. The complexity of the modified blade profiles would normally necessitate the use of expensive CNC machining with 5 axis capability. With an impeller less than 75 mm in diameter and a maximum blade thickness of 1.3mm, a rapid manufacturing technique enabled production of complex blade profiles that were dimensionally accurate and structurally robust enough for testing.

As more advanced rapid prototyping machines become available in the study in the future, e.g. 3D photopolymer jetting machine, the quality of the parts particularly in terms of surface finish will improve and the amount of post processing operations will reduce. This technique offers the possibility to produce components of increased complexity whilst ensuring quality, strength, performance and speed of manufacture. The ability to manufacture complex blade profiles that are robust enough for testing, in a rapid and cost effective manner is proving essential in the overall design optimisation process for the pump.

Keywords: rapid manufacturing, rapid prototyping, rapid tooling,

NOMENCLATURE

A	Cross sectional area	(m ²)
ABS	Acrylonitrile-Butadiene-Styrene	(C ₈ H ₈ • C ₄ H ₆ • C ₃ H ₃ N) _n
CO ₂	Carbon Dioxide	
CFD	Computational Fluid Dynamics	
CNC	Computer Numerically Controlled	
D	Impeller diameter	(m)
FDM	Fused Deposition Modelling	
HPC	High Performance Computer	
MTON	Metric Ton	
P	Power	(kW)
Q	Volume Flowrate	(m ³ /s)
RM	Rapid Manufacturing	
RP	Rapid Prototyping	
RT	Rapid Tooling	
TWh	Terawatt Hour	
η	Efficiency	
φ	Flow coefficient	$\frac{Q}{\omega D^3}$
ω	Rotational speed	(Rev/min)

INTRODUCTION

Pumps are the single largest user of electricity in industry in the European Union and energy savings of 3% would result in a 1.1TWH p.a. reduction in consumption or a saving of 0.54 Mton of CO₂ production [1]. As industry attempts to make energy savings and reduce environmental impact, this paper considers the manufacture of impellers to compare the computational predictions with experimental results of a regenerative pump with a view to improving pump performance. The complex flow-field within a regenerative pump represents a significant challenge to detailed mathematical modelling as there is considerable flow separation in the impeller blading [2]-[4]. Analytical models do not describe the flow characteristics fully as they are based on simplified assumptions and experimental correction factors [5]-[7]. The previous theories rely on assumptions not based on detailed measurements or rigorous CFD calculations. The main characteristic of such pumps is the ability to generate high discharge pressures at low flowrates. Although the pump has other advantages the main limitation is its inherent lack of hydraulic efficiency, typically 35-50%. [8],[11].

Notwithstanding CFD being recognised as a good design tool in the initial design stage, the computational results must be validated with experimental data. It is therefore critical to have access to manufacturing methods that can produce dimensionally accurate, small and complex impellers that are robust enough for testing. Prototypes this complex would normally be machined using computer numerical control (CNC) machining techniques.

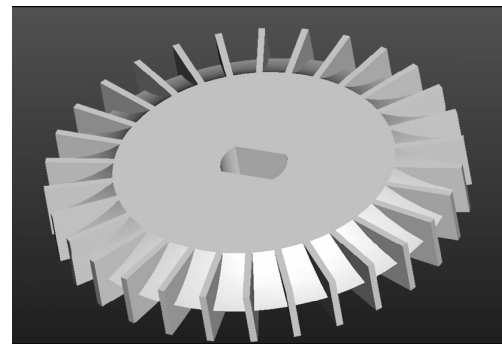


Fig. 1: Regenerative Pump Impeller

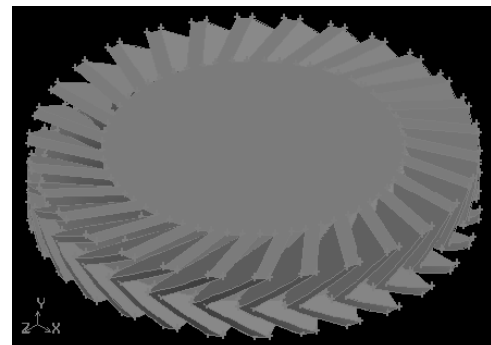


Fig. 2: Chevron Profile Regenerative Pump Impeller

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3D printing, fused deposition modelling (FDM) and FDM in conjunction with RTV process (vacuum forming).

RP is an acronym for Rapid Prototyping while SRP is an acronym for Subtractive Rapid Prototyping. Subtractive Rapid Prototyping is used to describe traditional CNC cutting where generally material is removed from a solid block with a rotating cutter. In the strictest sense Rapid Prototyping applies to both additive and subtractive processes since both create prototypes in a relatively rapid fashion. In recent years, Rapid Prototyping has generally referred to the innovative additive processes which build a model up one layer at a time. This additive process allows the creation of extremely complex parts that cannot be produced by traditional Subtractive Rapid Prototyping machines. RP parts are generally created as conceptual models for designers and manufacturers to evaluate at the product development stage. RM parts are usually made for inclusion in a finished product.

The first method considered producing the blades was with 4 axis CNC. CNC machines can exist in virtually any of the forms of manual machinery, like horizontal mills. A 4th axis allows rotation of machine parts. The part can be machined and then rotated, or continuously spun as it is machined. The most advanced CNC milling-machines, the 5-axis machines, add two more axes in addition to the three normal axes (XYZ). The fifth axis (B axis) controls the tilt of the tool itself. (Fig. 5). In the case of the regenerative pump impeller the set-up and fixture difficulties particularly for 10 or more blade configurations was considered.

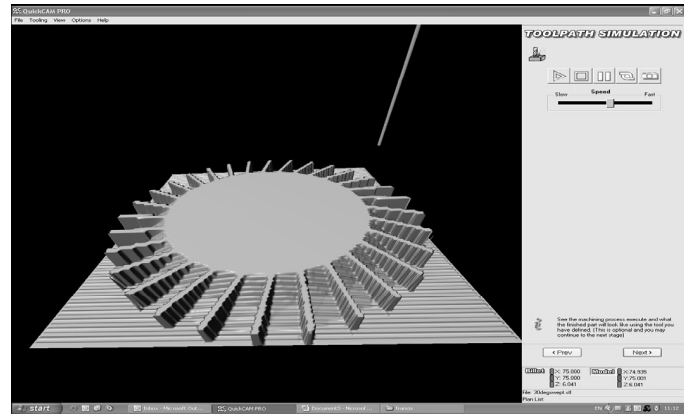


Fig. 5: CAM tool path plot of Impeller

As seen in Fig 6, the Impeller would have to be turned and refixed to allow symmetric machining. The geometry of the impellers that were assessed contained difficult overhangs and interior volumes (between blades), that proved problematic for the four axis machines. The need to machine along a split line then, turn the component and continue machining would introduce repeatability and alignment issues for the operator. This would increase manufacturing time and be a source of possible error and was hence discounted as a production method. [Fig 6]

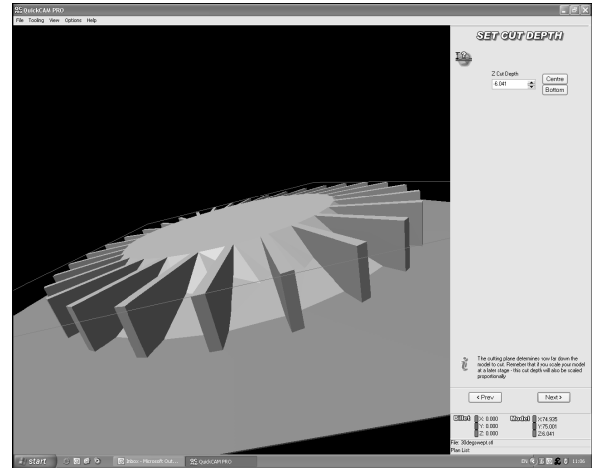


Fig 6: CAM tool split line plot of Impeller

The next category to be considered was 3D printing rapid prototyping technology. A three dimensional object is created by layering and connecting successive cross sections of material. 3D printers are generally faster, more affordable and easier to use than other additive fabrication technologies. Layers of a fine powder (plaster, corn starch, or resins) are selectively bonded by “printing” an adhesive from the inkjet printhead in the shape of each cross-section as determined by a CAD file. (figs. 7, 8)

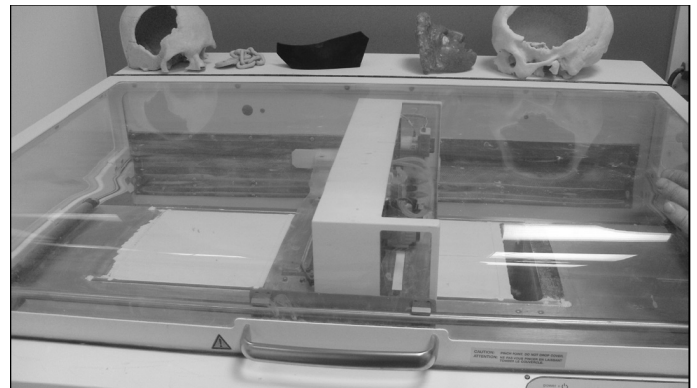


Fig 7 : 3D -Printer



Fig 8: Bonded Shape Impeller Lay down

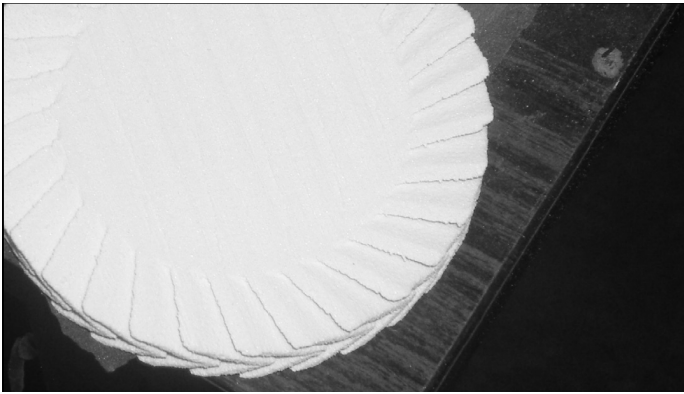


Fig 9: 3D Impeller

The finished printed impeller is then coated with an infiltration material to prevent the fragile structure from crumbling. (Fig 9). Even after coating the specimen proved too fragile to test in the experimental rig.

The next process to be considered was fused deposition modelling. (FDM) systems consist of two movable heads (one for building the part and one for the supports) which deposit threads of molten material onto a substrate (Fig 11). The material is heated just above its melting point so that it solidifies immediately after extrusion and cold-welds to the previous layers. When the first layer is complete, the platform lowers by one layer thickness and the process begins again. The part is easily removed from the platform, supports are removed and the specimen is ready. (Fig 10)

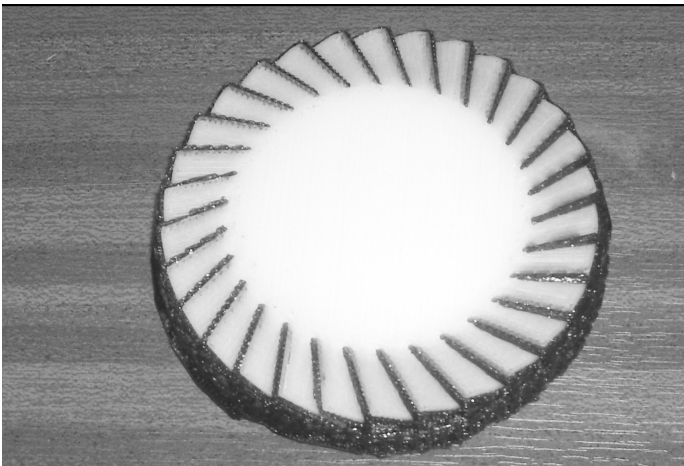


Fig 10: FDM Completed Impeller

The technology was developed by S. Scott Crump in the late 1980s and was commercialised in 1990. The FDM technology is marketed commercially by Stratasys, which also holds a trademark on the term. [9]

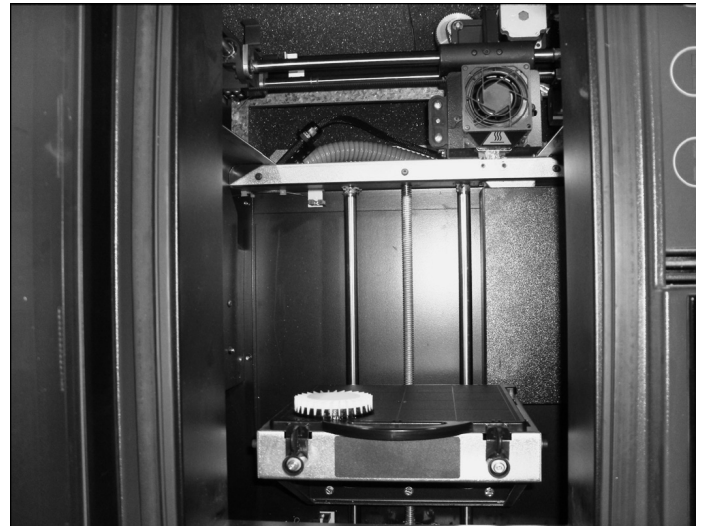


Fig 11: FDM Machine and completed Impeller

Several materials are available with varying trade-offs between strength and temperature. As well as acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) polymer, the FDM technology can also be used with polycarbonates, polycaprolactone, polyphenylsulfones and waxes. A “water-soluble” material can be used for making temporary supports while manufacturing is in progress. Marketed under the name WaterWorks by Stratasys this soluble support material is actually dissolved in a heated sodium hydroxide solution with the assistance of ultrasonic agitation [9].

ABS, $(C_8H_8 \cdot C_4H_6 \cdot C_3H_3N)_n$, is a common thermoplastic used to make light, rigid, molded products such as golf club heads, (due to its good shock absorbance). It is a copolymer made by polymerizing styrene and acrylonitrile in the presence of polybutadiene. The proportions can vary from 15 to 35% acrylonitrile, 5 to 30% butadiene and 40 to 60% styrene. The advantage of ABS is that this material combines the strength and rigidity of the acrylonitrile and styrene polymers with the toughness of the polybutadiene rubber. The most important mechanical properties of ABS are resistance and toughness. A variety of modifications can be made to improve impact resistance, toughness, and heat resistance. The impact resistance can be amplified by increasing the proportions of polybutadiene in relation to styrene and also acrylonitrile although this causes changes in other properties.

The FDM part was produced and run on test. However the impeller blades broke apart and after close inspection it was observed that the extruded material had small voids across the blade thickness. This was due to insufficient material lay down as a result of the relative blade size. (Fig 12)

Of the processes described, only the FDM process was able to produce a specimen for direct use.

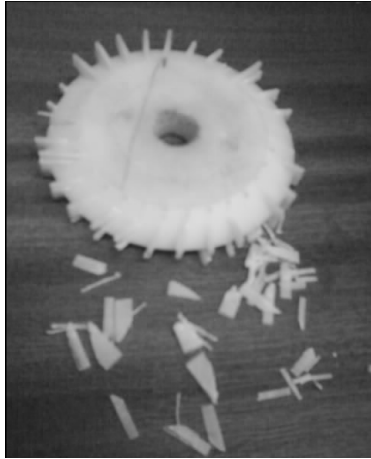


Fig 12: **Failed FDM Impeller**

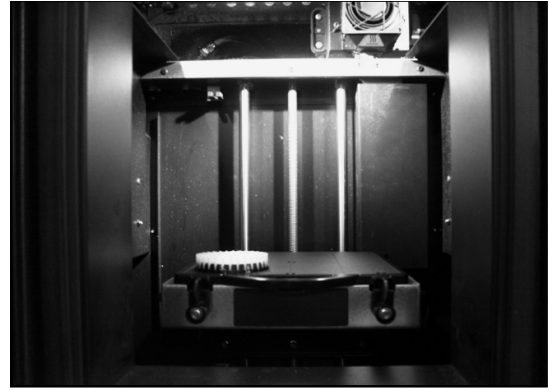


Fig 14: **FDM pattern**

The first step is to produce a pattern using any of the available RP processes (FDM in this case) (Fig 14)

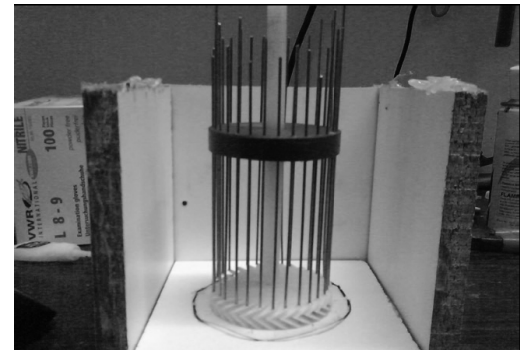


Fig 15: **Gated / vented blade.**

The impeller blade with a chevron profile shown here, is prepared by adding venting and gating to the pattern; this is needed as the vacuum is imposed during casting to allow air to escape (Fig 15).

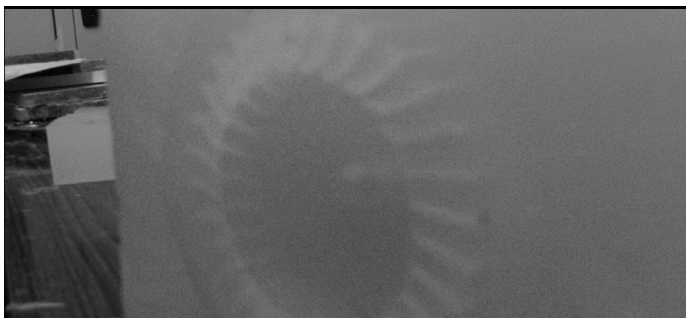


Fig 13: **RTV mould containing Impeller**

Vacuum Casting is widely used for producing accurate silicone tools for casting parts with fine details and very thin walls. Vacuum castings are precise replicas of the patterns, dimensionally accurate without blemishes with all profiles and textures faithfully reproduced.

The main difficulty till this point had been producing impellers with such small dimensions that could be produced mechanically strong enough to survive the fluid loading within the running pump.

The vacuum casting process includes the following main steps:



Fig 16: **Suspension and parting**

The pattern is fit with a casting gate and set up on the parting line, and then suspended in a mould casting frame. The pattern needs to have adequate mould material on all sides and still have the parting line identified to facilitate removal (Fig 16).



Fig 17: **Mould pouring**

Once the two-part silicone-rubber is de-aerated and then mixed, it is poured into the mould casting frame around the pattern. (Fig 17)

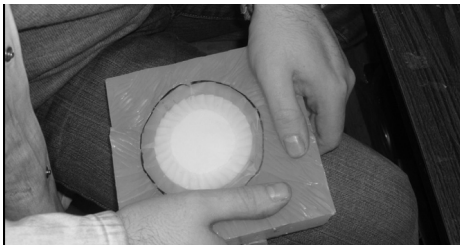


Fig 18: **Pattern removal**

After curing the mould inside a heating chamber; the next stage is the removal of the pattern from the silicone mould by cutting along the parting line and then closing and sealing the mould; (Fig 18)

The computer-controlled equipment mixes and pours the resin inside the vacuum chamber. As this takes place in a vacuum, the mould is filled completely without leaving any airpockets or voids. The MCP vacuum casting requires initial investment in a vacuum chamber with two sections.

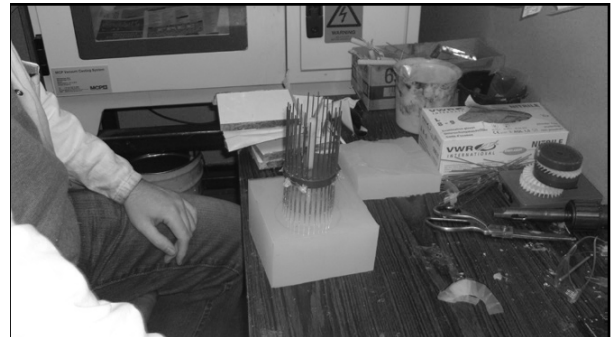


←Upper Section

←Lower Section

Fig 19: **Vacuum casting Impeller**

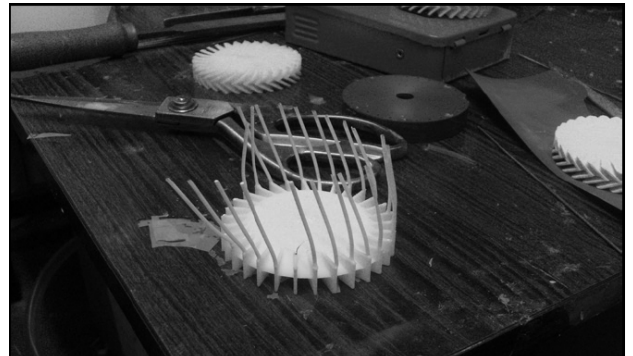
The upper section is for mixing the resin and the lower is for



casting the resin into the mould. (Fig 19)

Fig 20: **Impeller mould**

After curing the part in a heating chamber for 2–4 hours and then removing it from the mould. After casting the resin, the mould is moved to the heating chamber for between two to four



hours to cure the urethane part. (Fig 20).

Fig 21: **Removing gate risers**

The gate and risers are removed from the casting to make an exact copy of the pattern. After hardening, the casting is removed from the silicone mould. (Fig 21)

The introduction of RT technology enabled prototype, pre-production and in some cases full production tooling to be fabricated with significantly reduced time frames.

RESULTS

Ten FDM/RTV manufactured blade profiles were tested and all completed the testing without any failures. The success of the methodology has led to further more complex blade profiles being assessed in the experimental test procedure.

Rapid prototyping techniques are extremely useful in helping the pump designer to conduct preliminary testing on a low-cost prototype. Based on the results obtained, the ability to modify or improve the designs before resorting to more costly fabricating methods has proved extremely beneficial in this current research.

The results have shown that FDM/RTV is a viable and feasible method of producing prototypes for testing. Further refinements of the technique are currently being pursued so that the surface

finish, is enhanced whilst maintaining the accuracy of the parts produced.

Preliminary results demonstrate that the impellers have the potential to improve the pump efficiency [13].

Whilst the process has demonstrated reasonable success in producing viable test samples, the FDM/RTV method several disadvantages. Surface finish and the need for a two stage manufacturing process (FDM then RTV). Limited range of materials available meant that a new method of photopolymer setting will be considered in the future. This will increase the range of materials for selection, improve surface finish and delete the need to use RTV. However the results achieved using the FDM/RTV methodology have successfully lead to the optimisation of the pump in an effective manner. [13]

CONCLUSIONS

As the capabilities of CFD continue to develop, it is to be expected that the uncertainties associated with CFD prediction should also reduce. At the very least it is to be expected that there will be a continuing growth in processing power for the foreseeable future, which will reduce and perhaps remove the geometric simplifications which have to currently be made. The ability to test and validate the models is only possible through detailed experiments. The remarkable increase in the number of commercially available RP and RT solutions since the 1990s by advances in three-dimensional CAD modelling, computer aided manufacturing, computer numerical control and the development of new materials, are the reason this work proceeds. The success of the performance and CFD modelling has corroborated [130], the successful flow visualisation studies on the pump [10], [12].

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