

# Pop-Up Paul

How do you know when your new, niche product has made it mainstream? When the world and his dog starts launching very similar products. Mark Darwin visits push-around scissor lift manufacturer, Pop-Up at its new premises and chats with one of the main driving forces behind the design and success of the product and as well as being the current PASMA president, Paul Gallacher.



Paul Gallacher

It is said that the best inventions are simple and that they are born out of necessity. The Pop-Up push around scissor lift certainly ticks both of those boxes, taking the complexity out of low level access. And if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Youngman, Eazzi Lifts and several other low level access manufacturers are impressed.

## But how did it all start and who came up with the initial idea?

"It was 2004 when the three current Pop-Up directors were at the Northern Scaffold Group (NSG)," says Gallacher. "We were selling the

Eiger alloy towers but realised that a better low level solution was needed because of the Work at Height regulations. After looking around at the competition, we launched our own podium platform but it was not able to achieve our objective of getting to the correct working level, easily and quickly. We realised that a powered electric platform might be the solution, but after looking at and dismissing a mast-type AWP, the idea of a baby scissor lift came to mind. The design just happened, because it had to be light enough to manoeuvre, narrow enough to go through a normal width doorway, be low cost to produce and easy to use. And have a working height of between 3.5 and four metres."

"We wanted a low cost, high performance product - the 'Hoover' of low level access," he adds. Nothing difficult there then!

A design was agreed that satisfied all the requirements but it had to be produced at the right price. NSG already had overseas production experience after closing its UK aluminium tower production in 2001 and outsourcing the manufacturing to the Far East, so China became



Plenty of Pop-Up stock



Pop-Up's new larger premises in Deeside

the obvious choice for the new lift.

"We had found that customers were not too bothered where the product came from so long as it did the job and had the right quality. The name was something we used to describe the product from the start of the design - something that allowed people to 'pop up and down'."

"The first platforms arrived in October 2005 and we decided to concentrate our efforts in the UK, so we emailed tool hirers to see if they were interested in the product," Gallacher explains. "The first units were unveiled at a private showing and were an instant hit and platforms were initially hired to facilities management companies primarily for maintenance work. However the machines are now proving themselves in construction, installing services and fixings at that critical 3.5 metre to four metre ceiling height. Customer feedback also indicated the need for an extra height machine, hence the Pop Up+ which has an extra metre of height and now accounts for about 20 percent of sales.

The machine's stabilisers give users a 'comfort blanket' and it is built for abuse finding a lot of work in shopping areas, offices, ground floor atrium etc."

While there will be some sales to end users, Gallacher maintains the Pop-Up remains a rental machine, with the hire companies its shop window.

"The platform is the safety officer's friend, with no risk to main contractors if they are used on site rather than ladders and other forms of low level access. And because of the ease and speed of use, workers can achieve up to 30 percent more productivity," he says.

The Pop-Up was launched in January 2006 and initial sales estimates

were 250 in the first year and about 500 in the second. In fact it sold more than 1,000 in the first year and the company claims that there are now 5,000 units in use. Gallacher thinks the basic design was right first time, so that only minor improvements have been needed, becoming obvious through using the platform. Buffer wheels on the corners have been introduced which reduce damage to walls and door frames when moving the machine in tight spaces and there is also a modified hand rail option allowing the operator safe access to work above suspended ceiling tiles.

## Awards

The platform has also been recognised within the industry. In 2006 it was awarded the 'HAE Best Product' and in 2008 was the 'HSS Best Performing Product of the Year'. HSS now has about 500 units all painted in its blue and yellow livery. According to Gallacher, utilisation typically runs at over 75 percent with one customer achieving 99.6 percent!

But what of the influx of machines into a market that until recently Pop-Up had to itself?

"We don't mind competition so long as it is a good standard of product. Obviously if they are 'copying' our design it is flattering, but we are not complacent and will continue to develop the product."

As if he hasn't enough to do with Pop-Up, Gallacher is also president of PASMA - the aluminium access tower association - although his two year tenure is due to end this year and he will pass on the position to Roger Verallo of Euro Towers.

"My role is more like an ambassador, communicating the PASMA message to members and promoting the association to a wider audience as well as overseeing the management

of the organisation. The association is going from strength to strength and is at a critical stage of its development. Its aluminium tower training has been growing rapidly from 20,000 a few years ago to 50,000 last year. However, no-one was trained in low level access last year. This is a huge training issue and an area that needs addressing. As with operating all equipment, common sense is essential, but over-reaching is a major problem that needs stamping out."

Currently there is no manufacturing standard for low level access products. The PASMA technical committee is currently working on introducing a standard which should be ready later this year or early in 2010.

Gallacher is aiming for all manufacturers of low level equipment to produce inherently safe equipment, which he says, is not necessarily the case at the moment. Even in some UK-designed and built products, there are instances where the platform is too high for its footprint and there is no consideration for misuse. He believes that safety must be built in to every product.

Gallacher is not short on industry experience. Having just celebrated his 50th birthday he has spent 30 years in the scaffolding/access business, oh and selling ice cream.

"My first job was with electricity supplier Norweb in the customer services department. I applied to be a salesman, but at 18 and with no experience was turned down. To gain experience I took over a round selling Italian ice cream, before working for Deborah Scaffolding as a

trainee manager. When the company was taken over I moved to Cheshire Scaffolding as a sales rep for the Easyspan aluminium tower and was promoted to manager after a year."

"With more depots being opened I was promoted to be area manager before working for Ladder Hire and Scaffolding in Handsworth, Birmingham, which was owned by TV presenter Adrian Childs' father. This is where I first came across the Eiger Tower products - which are still part of the Pop-Up range - as well as edge protection, roofing and cladding."

Cheshire Scaffold entered the aluminium tower sales business in about 1994/5 but wanted to develop nationally. Thinking that its name was too regional, it changed its name to the Northern Scaffold Group (NSG). There was then a management buy-out of NSG in 2003 and three directors - Adrian Blomeley (finance) Nigel Woodger (managing) and Gallacher (sales) split from NSG and set up Pop Up in 2005.

Now living in Bramwell, Stockport, Gallacher is one of a rare breed - a Manchester United supporter who lives in the area and who actually goes to watch them at Old Trafford! But why support United?

"I had distant relation - Johnny Aston who played for United between 1938 to 1954 and also played 17 times for England - so had a connection with the club," says Gallacher. "I was fortunate to have watched George Best and Dennis Law at their peak. I also went to the European Cup Final last year in Moscow to see United win 6-5 on penalties. I am now a huge fan of Chelsea's John Terry (who missed



The new handrail gives easy access into ceiling voids

the critical penalty that would have won it for Chelsea.)"

So were you a football player when young?

"No I was more into basket ball, captaining the Manchester Boys team for three years. I also like swimming, squash and golf."

"I love the market and the industry and am still hands-on with the products, demonstrating the

machines on site and talking to customers and end users,"

Pop-Up now has 12 dealers covering Scandinavia, Germany, France, Denmark, Australia and South Africa. However, the majority of sales are in the UK where Gallacher thinks there is still huge potential."

"There are still two million ladders and steps in the market so we have a lot to go at!"



### Favourite:

- Gadget - iphone
- Music - Cold Play, Elton John
- Soul Music - Nayo
- Books - Autobiographies Roy Keane, Michael Parkinson

The new premises has more than enough space for its aluminium products