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Oh what a tangled web we weave

With the UK, Ireland and several other European economies now officially in recession, it is pleasing to find one sector of the equipment business that is still performing positively. The spider lift, once a niche and specialised item of equipment, is well on the way to becoming mainstream. And even in the current crunch climate the sector is still doing quite nicely, thank you very much.

Cranes & Access investigates.

Conceived in Denmark in the late 1970's, the first spider lifts began to surface elsewhere from 1982 when the originator Falck Schmidt started exporting. It then took the best part of a quarter of a century before they became an established niche machine. However, over the past two years its increasingly appreciated 'jack of all trades' capability has elevated it into an almost 'must have' machine particularly for owner-operators looking for a single platform capable of a wide variety of work.

In spite of their growing popularity spiders have never sold in big numbers. But demand is steadily increasing, driven by a diverse range of end users, creating excellent utilisation for rental companies which also benefit from good hire rates and return on investment. Total sales in the UK and Ireland are still modest, at around 250 or so last year - but as more and more users realise their benefits, this looks set to grow significantly.



Sadly, Max Access (or BG Crane Sales as it was originally known) which introduced the first spider lifts (Falck Schmidt) into the UK has recently gone into administration and looks set to be liquidated. But the remainder of the UK spider industry appears to be in surprisingly good health.

A tale of two parts

The sector is roughly divided into two - articulated up to 20 metres - although with new machine launches this is now nudging 21/23 metres - and larger units from around 25 to 50 metres - most of which are straight boomed models with articulating jibs. The 10 to 23 metre working height machines are predominantly Italian-built with the

likes of Hinowa, CTE, Platform Basket, Bluelift, Oil&Steel as well as Nifty being the major players. The larger models are primarily provided by Omme, Palazzani, Worldlift Industries (Falck Schmidt and Denka Lift) and a few Cela machines. One company not mentioned is Teupen which has probably the widest range of spider machines ranging from 12 to 50 metres and over the last few years has been responsible for raising the awareness and capability of the larger spider platforms into the mainstream market.

Teupen has been producing tracked spider lifts since 1987 and has a reputation for being a premium brand. From 2005, the marque has been distributed in the UK and Ireland by Chesterfield-based Ranger Equipment/The Spider Lift company. In an effort to diversify the company has recently added to the range of products it offers, with Dino trailer and self propelled platforms and now Aichi scissor and boom lifts. (See Ranger Equipment story on page 23). "Teupen spiders have a reputation for being able to do jobs that others cannot," says managing director Steve Hadfield.

"A new branding will promote the new platforms available from Ranger Equipment and The Spiderlift Company will cater for all Teupen rentals."

Dino trailer platforms were distributed by another quietly successful spider lift specialist, Grimethorpe-based Promax Equipment, until the opportunity to distribute Bil-Jax trailer and lightweight platforms presented itself mid last year.

"Dino was not a great success for us due to its high purchase price, particularly with Niftylift having such a stronghold on the UK market," said Promax director Shaun Day. "We replaced the Dino with the Bil-Jax platforms which are fantastic machines and far more suitable for us. They are very well made with a good price."

A Bluelift C14/6.5



CTE Traccess 170



A typical spider situation

User to dealer

However it is spider lifts that Promax is best known. The company was formed in 1993 as a timber and steel installation contractor and at one point employed 28 steel erectors. During its contracts, the company needed access equipment and purchased a number of machines for its own use. However, when it needed a platform that could go through restricted openings and still offer a decent working height it purchased an 18 metre platform height Platform Basket RQG 18 spider. This was 10 years ago and those who used it thought the platform was fantastic. It created a lot of interest particularly with its 11 metre outreach.



Stairs? No problem for a spider lift

"We decided to do more with the spiders and had the opportunity to either hire or sell the Platform Basket machines in the UK," said Day, "finally opting to sell and becoming the official Platform Basket dealers from 1999 onwards. We also continued with the steel business until 2004."

So Promax has been distributing the Basket RQG range of spider platforms for the best part of a decade, but it is over the last two years that it has seen the most change.

"The completely redesigned Basket 1575 - a 15 metre tracked platform launched in late 2007 - was a completely fresh design carried out under the direction of the Platform Basket director of engineering, Carlo Molesini," said Day. "This showed that the manufacturer was listening to dealer and customer feed-back and was willing to make changes."

Featuring a simple, single-lever, track-widening system, it gave the Basket 1575 increased stability whilst travelling, but retained its ability to pass through a single door way in its narrow setting. A longer track length was also introduced to reduce ground pressure resulting in less damage to surfaces as well as reducing the excessive longitudinal



A rough terrain Falck Schmidt?

rocking movement, something which is often experienced on short track machines particularly when tracking over ridges or the break point of ramps on trailers. The new track system also provided increased ground clearance, to help avoid roots and debris catching the undercarriage when travelling over poor terrain.

Fixed spider legs

The new cranked outrigger leg design on this unit is a blend of the full spider lift outrigger and the simpler straight fixed outrigger, allowing greater ground clearance to be achieved for setting up on slopes, without the cost and complexity of spider legs. Other features included a simple operating system, ideal for short term hirers and those less familiar with spiders, a fully independent fly jib even with the full 200kg cage capacity and a maximum outreach of 7.5 metres.

Last year the 18 metre version - the Spider 1875 - was introduced. Weighing just over two tonnes, not only does it offer low ground pressures, but it is also easier to tow and transport. If a greater outreach is required there is an 8.5 metre outreach option which weighs just 2,350kg.

Later this year, Platform Basket is

set to launch a new 22 metre spider weighing less than three tonnes, which should allow it to be towed behind a Land Rover or similar 4x4. The platform has a 10 metre working outreach with 200kg cage capacity. Other features include a fly jib, 160 degree cage rotation, adjustable two position outriggers, radio control for driving and setting up of the machine and no exposed hoses or electrics which are mounted inside the boom - all features in response to dealer and customer feedback. Larger spider platforms from Platform Basket include a 25 metre and two 30 metre units. Promax also distributes another Italian spider manufacturer - Cela - which has a range up to 38 metres.

The Platform Basket spiders are available with a hard-wired wandering lead controller or radio remote unit

option to allow the users full access around the machine to provide greater all round operator visibility if required, a major benefit for the safe loading and unloading of the machine on uneven or difficult ground.

From truck mounts to refined spiders

CTE UK - best known for its 3.5 tonne chassis truck mounted lifts - entered the spider market about three years ago with the 13.3 metre working height Traccess 135 followed about a year later with its bigger brother, the 17 metre 170. The company is also in the process of expanding the range, expecting to launch a 21 metre version in the near future.

Being relatively late into the market, CTE was able to incorporate features into its compact design asked for by the users and purchasers. These include a jib that locks into position when folded, better boom rigidity during rotation and a stable boom movement.

Umbilical cord

"Both our spider platforms have numerous features that make the machines much easier and safer to use," says CTE UK's Jonathan Wiseman. "The five metre long umbilical cable - stored in a box on the machine - is plugged in whenever the machine needs to be moved on site or loaded or unloaded. The machine cannot be moved if it is not plugged in - a very good safety feature." Both CTE machines are particularly compact - the smaller unit is 3,760mm long and features a quick release basket arrangement which can reduce the length even further. Because of the size of the basket, removing it is really a two person task. The 17 metre platform is just 800mm wide, ideal for most standard doorways or gates. Both models feature a clean boom top with telescopic cylinder located on the underside while the powertrack is routed internally so nothing can get caught and foul the mechanism - particularly useful for tree workers which is an increasingly popular application for spider lifts.



Oil&Steel's latest Octopussy 555



CTE's larger 17 metre spider



Compact dimensions allow easy access through doorways

The Traccess 170 weighs just over two tonnes and with a closed length without basket of 3,760mm is compact enough to tow behind a 4x4 car or pickup. Neither CTE machine has self-levelling - a feature that Wiseman thinks adds complication and cost.

"We aimed for a simple, strong, reliable product with the minimum of electronics to go wrong," says Wiseman. "The 170 has the same operating controls as our truck mounts which give immediate familiarity and the sigma boom is operated by just one lever. Also when tracking on uneven ground, it is possible to partially lower the outriggers so that if the unit were to topple, the legs would support the unit and prevent a fall."

CTE UK opened in Desford, Leicestershire, however, it has recently moved into new premises - previously used by Nationwide Platforms - in nearby Enderby which has 'a good yard and workshops as well as office space and good connections throughout the UK thanks to its central location'.

My spider and me

The spider platform is becoming increasingly popular with the owner

operator, someone who is looking for one machine to carry out a multitude of tasks. This market sector is set to explode over the next few years as the Work at Height directive begins to bite forcing more trades - including painters, window cleaners, gutter and fascia contractors and all manner of tradesmen who regularly work on two or three story homes and small industrial buildings - to leave their ladders and adopt powered access even for relatively short duration work. Small trailer lifts have been the machine of choice for the more progressive in this market, but they can be awkward to locate and to move around the back of a building or inside. A small spider lift can still be towed, but once at the job offers infinitely more versatility.

For most of these trades 12 or 13 metres of working height is ideal, however with the latest 17/18 metre lifts coming in at around two tonnes - light enough to be easily towed - many buyers, especially rental companies, are preferring to trade up to the higher units in order to gain the additional capability, even if the extra height is only occasionally required. With the latest 20 to 23 metre lightweight models coming available it will be interesting to see

how many buyers choose to move up a further five metres.

Bluelift looks for more in UK

Another manufacturer looking to increase its presence in the UK and Ireland is Bluelift. The Italian spider platform manufacturer recently ended its UK distribution agreement with SkyKing.

"Given the potential of the UK and Ireland spider market, we need to find another dealer as soon as possible," says Bluelift's Gianpiero Marti.

No reasons so far been given as to why Skyking and Bluelift parted company, but reading between the lines, Bluelift is looking for significantly more sales in the UK. Last year the company signed dealership agreements with Heli in Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Northern France; Scanmas in Denmark and Scandinavia and Velilla in Spain. This year the company is aiming to increase its presence in the East European market and is looking for a dealer in Russia and CIS countries.

Bluelift is a relatively young brand, but has many years experience building machines for other companies. Its products are innovative, good-looking and well-designed clearly highlighting its previous experience. This year it unveiled another new model, the 14



metre working height, 6.5 metre outreach, 200kg capacity C14/6.5 spider with stowed dimensions close to its 12 metre model. Measuring 4.1 metres long, 0.78 metres wide and two metres high, its size is not dissimilar to the 17 metre CTE and features a similar removable basket reducing its overall length.

Boom function memory

The C14/6.5 features a fully electronically controlled boom movement first lifting the articulated boom before allowing the top boom to telescope. It also features upgraded software and an added Function Memory System (FSM) feature that can memorise the boom movements



Shaun Day of Promax demonstrates the Platform Basket single lever track widening system

and repeat them automatically which could be useful for operatives carrying out extended work in a specific position.

Outrigger set up is fully automatic and should the control system detect any loss of loading on the outriggers, the boom movement

the boom giving added protection from accidental damage.

One feature that is different is its two section telescopic articulated pantograph boom which Bluelift claims is a first on a 14 metre spider. Probably true, however at SAIE, there were two other (admittedly 17



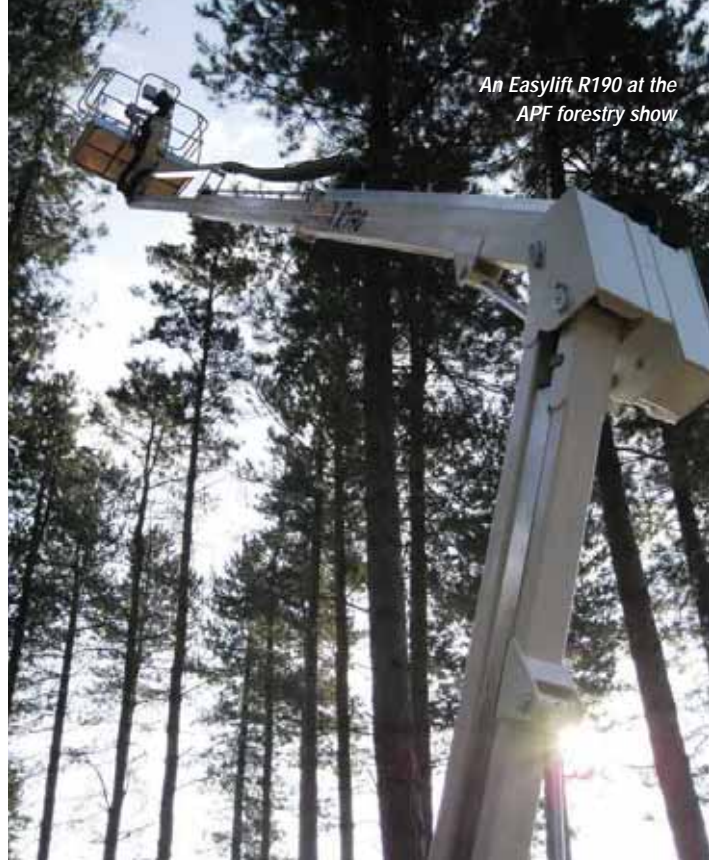
The Octopussy 2190

stops, an alarm sounds and only movements to lower the boom are allowed. Bluelift says that it was the first aerial platform manufacturer with this system which also provides full diagnostics. The new machine also has cable remote control with radio remote as an option and all hosing is run inside

metre) new machines on display that included this feature - the Multitel SMX170 and Palazzani TZX170 produced as a joint venture between the two.

The Octopussy

Oil&Steel was one of the first companies to promote the small, compact Italian type spider lifts in the UK with its Octopussy range.



An Easylift R190 at the APF forestry show

After a few quiet years it is currently making a comeback and has started shipping its latest model the Octopussy 2190, with a 21 metre working height and nine metres of outreach with 200kg capacity. The 2190 features a double-pantograph riser and telescopic boom allowing the operator to follow the vertical face of a building without constant

corrections - particularly useful for example, when cleaning windows or inspecting facades, while providing up and over reach of up to 10.5 metres.

The company will also launch a new tracked platform for the North American market - the Octopus 55 - at the ARA/Rental show in Atlanta next month.

FALCON SPIDER

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"The company is pushing forward its expansion strategy in North America and the USA in particular," says Andrea Certo, chief executive of Oil&Steel. "We are really confident about the future success of the Octopus line."

From tracks to compact spiders

While Oil&Steel pioneered the small spider market in the UK, Hinowa is arguably the market leader worldwide in this sector. The company is renowned for its tracked undercarriage and entered the market as a joint venture, but soon moved on to produce its own models. APS handles the UK distribution and has been highly successful with a wide range of buyers, including a large number of end users, particularly in the arborist market.

Headquartered in Nogara, near Verona, Hinowa has five main product categories, four of which use the tracked undercarriage. Its latest 23 metre working height Light Lift 23.12 has an impressive outreach just under 12 metres with 120kg in the basket. Outrigger spread remains under four metres, but only just and with an overall length of 5.96 metres is hardly a 'compact' spider. However in addition to its outreach it weighs less than three tonnes maintaining the ability to be towed behind a large 4x4. The platform features automatic outrigger levelling on slopes up to 13 degrees, full error and fault-finding

display and a new, patented, 360 degree boom rotation system.

Hinowa's design department clearly has an eye for producing solutions to problems. Its latest offering is the Light Tower Kit, a lighting system that can be mounted instead of the basket on the whole range of Hinowa spider lifts turning it into a track mounted lighting tower reducing investment and increasing utilisation for an owner or rental company.

Easy Lift - seen for the first time in the UK last summer at the Vertical Days show at Haydock Park - unveiled two new models. The R160 which has one metre reach than the 15 metre R150, yet is more compact and the R300 a 30 metre platform with three metre jib. The seven model range is now distributed by Eaton Socon-based Powerlift UK which was previously the distributor for TerrainScout (Italmec) machines.

The big boys

When it comes to larger spider lifts the main focus moves away from Italy to Denmark and Germany. Danish manufacturer Omme Lift identified outreach - or lack of it - as one of the main restrictions for users, particularly tree surgeons or those working up and over buildings and obstacles.

It claims that its new 27.5 metre 2750 RBDJ with a 200kg basket load which should be available from late spring this year solves this problem. With 15.5 metres outreach, zero tailswing and 10.5 metre up



Jonathon Wiseman of CTE UK demonstrates the plug-in cable and controller for moving the machines

and over height the specifications are impressive, especially when combined with a stowed length of 7.5 metres and a retracted width of just 1.1 metres.

Like many Omme machines, the platform can set up on slopes or steps of up to 40 percent, perfect for hilly ground, steps or landings where a good footing is needed.

The company says that the manual levelling of the stabilisers assures safe setup in the most difficult of situations and gradeability is 35 percent - equivalent to 19.3 degrees. By using non-skid crawler belts, the platform can cope with rough terrain and in town centres for climbing kerbs and other obstacles. Omme is distributed in the UK and Ireland by APS, combining perfectly with its Hinowa range of compact spiders.

The original

The originator of the spider lift concept, Falck Schmidt, now part of Worldlift Industries, is really at the top end of the market with its Falcon range of both wheeled and tracked spider lifts. The company has built up a substantial niche business in atrium work thanks to its ability to move through narrow doors and then reach up 42 metres. The company is renowned for customising its big lifts for special applications. Its largest track mounted lifts feature dual trunion mounted undercarriages that can negotiate steep escalators

or slopes. Since the demise of Max Access - the long time distributor Facelift - the Hickstead-based access specialist is now the sole distributor for both Denka and Falck Schmidt.

While we have focused on the companies that are most active in this market, what is just as interesting are the manufacturers are not present in this expanding market. It is surprising that none of the big self propelled manufacturers has yet to dip its toe into this market. Nifty is probably the largest to do so to date, while JLG, Genie, Skyjack, Haulotte or UpRight have seemingly shown no interest. As the concept continues to grow in popularity, this might of course change. But will it be via organic entry or acquisition?



A pair of spiders carrying out building maintenance



The Hinowa Light Lift 23.12 has a 12 metre outreach

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Always look on the bright side of life...

If Monty Python's film 'The Life of Brian' taught us anything, it is to be positive and 'always look on the bright side of life' (whistling optional!). In spite of the current gloom, there are companies with this positive outlook, determined to buck the current trend and actually grow the business. Specialist equipment supplier and hirer Ranger Equipment/The Spiderlift Company is one such business.

In 2005 Ranger was appointed UK distributor for Teupen spider platforms and a combination of a good product with strong marketing and sales resulted in several years of significant growth.

Last March, the company launched 'The Spiderlift Company' in an effort to reflect the company's area of business. However, confusion over the new name - designed for use by the rental side of the business - and the existing Ranger Equipment which is the equipment sales side of the business, has resulted in a major rethink.

Development Agency transformation

"Because of the tremendous growth we have achieved over the last three to four years, we became involved with the East Midlands Development Agency's 'high growth programme'. Its help has transformed our outlook and approach to the way we do business," says managing director Steve Hadfield.

The idea behind the programme is to maximise and maintain the expansion of 'high growth' companies. By helping them they repay the time and specialist input with continued growth, raising the profile of businesses in the region and ultimately increasing employment.

"We are one of just 27 companies in the East Midlands and with EMDA help, the whole mindset of all our employees has changed," says Hadfield. "By formalising and implementing a 10 year company strategy it has led to developing a short and medium marketing strategy both for marketing and sales which has led us to rethink the whole company setup."

Over the next three to six months, there will be a complete revamp with a different identity for Ranger Equipment which will deal with new, premium brand equipment sales. This division will include Finnish-made Dino Lift trailer and self propelled platforms and Japanese Aichi scissor and boom machines alongside the established Teupen range of spider lifts. The Spiderlift Company - which was originally for the Teupen spider platform rental operation - will continue, headed up by Andy Bray.



Steve Hadfield with Aichi president Shinji Takeuchi

With a clearly defined divide between new equipment sales and rental, it allows the rebranded Ranger to build up its new equipment sales.

"Aichi gives us a foot into the main aerial lift market, but we do not want to veer away from specialist equipment," says Hadfield. "We will continue to look and talk to other manufacturers with premium products that may be added to our portfolio. Quality products do have a premium price but this equates to increased performance, reliability, resale values and therefore lower whole-life ownership costs."

Entering into an agreement with Aichi has been a long, slow process, but once finalised, it is long-term commitment from both parties.

C&a ranger equipment



Aichi started looking for a UK dealer in May 2007 and had several possible candidates. By last September's Apex we were all expecting an announcement to be made public but no, although they had decided on Ranger, it was not officially announced until December. Ranger now has a two year letter of intent at which time Aichi president Shinji Takeuchi will return to the UK to finalise the agreement.

"Nothing is rushed with Aichi," says Hadfield, "we had intended to target the launch for February or March, but with agreeing price lists and further developing a marketing strategy we have decided to launch two

machines - the SR14CJ which is a 15.6 metre working height, 12.6 metre outreach crawler boom and an electric scissor at Vertikal Days at Haydock Park on 24th and 25th June."

'Nothing is rushed'

Ranger does not envisage any Aichi sales before the Vertikal Days launch and according to Hadfield there is more emphasis on getting the basics right and establishing the brand than simply selling units for the first two years.

"During 2010 we are aiming for about 100 units but we need to scale up significantly in subsequent years," he said.





Two Aichi machines - an SR 14CJ crawler boom and an electric scissor - will be launched at Vertikal Days in June.

Ranger will sell the full Aichi range, all of which, says Hadfield, will be CE marked and will include Aichi's compact insulated boom truck mounts.

"Although Aichi has an office and parts facility in Holland, we deal directly with Aichi in Japan. We will keep a stock of product and parts in the UK but obviously can draw on the resources in Holland if needed."

The range of products will include new five, six, eight and 10 metre electric scissors; 12 to 14 metre wheeled and tracked booms with and without jibs as well as 21 metre wheeled and tracked booms.

Ranger Equipment's other 'premium' brand is Finnish trailer and self propelled platform manufacturer Dino Lift which it signed up at Vertikal Days last summer but has yet to really get going. With tough UK competition offering significantly lower prices, this might be the hardest of the three brands to make a success out of, although the small to medium Dino straight telescopic boom lifts might win over end users with their extra outreach.

Premium products the way to go

With the current recession and many large rental companies putting

capital spending on hold, some might question Ranger Equipment's decision to pursue the 'premium brand' option.

"Quality products which are initially more expensive, will never appeal to the largest access rental companies," says Hadfield, "but the small to medium sized companies such as Kimberley Access and Hi-Reach whose senior management own the company and therefore take a longer term view of its products, are the sort of companies that will be interested in our premium brand products."

Kimberly Access 'gambled' by purchasing two Teupen platforms last summer - a Leo 23GT (23 metre working height and 11.2 metre outreach) and Leo 30T (30 metre working height, 15.7 metre outreach) and says it has not looked back since.

"We bought the two Leos



The new 45ft Aichi SR14CJ



Andy Bray (L) with Steve Hadfield

specifically to supply the internal fit-out of the Westfield shopping centre in London's White City," said Ray Ledger, chairman of Kimberly Access. "We set up a site depot with 380 machines for Westfield, and thought we would take a chance and get two Teupens in there. Within days of them being delivered, they were snapped up and have stayed out on hire all the way through the project. At one point, we had nine Teupen spider lifts working on the site, with seven units on cross-hire from The Spiderlift Company's own rental fleet. The Teupen's very low floor loading meant that fit-out work could continue on the marble floors as they were installed, which was a huge advantage."

Distributors that rent

Distributors that also rent equipment is a topic that tends to split many a discussion. Ranger has sold numerous platforms to hire companies which in theory are in competition through the Spiderlift Company.

"If we know a rental company that we have sold equipment to is after a rental contract, we step back to avoid any conflict," says Hadfield.

"However we have machines in the hire fleet that are unique such as the Leo 50 GTX and the Leo 36. In all we have 28 Teupen platforms with working heights from 15 to 50 metres available for hire and will be adding the first production 40 metre, Leo 40 GTX platform as soon as it is available."

The fleet is set to expand by a further 10 platforms over the next 18 months.

Ranger/Spiderlift first started planning for a recession during the second half of 2007 and it was at this point that it became involved with the EMDA. The company is now finalising a move to new 10,000 sq ft premises between Junction 29 and 29A of the M1 motorway. It has been in its current 2,500 sq ft facility for five years and according to Hadfield "is bursting at the seams."

And its growth is not slowing. Four additional employees have been taken on recently, including an engineer, a driver an operations manager, Shelley White and demonstrator/training instructor Brian Penny.

"The change means that everyone is 100 percent behind the company, involved in the company strategy, mission statement and company values. The current 12 staff will need to increase to 18 by early 2010 and to 25 by 2011 to hit our targets." Revenues (just Teupen and not taking the other marques into consideration) which for 2007, 2008 and 2009 were around the £3 million mark, should increase to £4.5 million in 2010 and £6.4 million in 2011.

A case study

Ranger has already been used as one of four Business Link case studies which is available on U-Tube. "We want to be seen as a quality company, win awards, be Investors in People and a training matrix company which trains everyone from the drivers to the managing director," says Hadfield.

Identifying how to overcome a potential recession has totally transformed Ranger Equipment, taking it on a journey that even Hadfield would have thought highly unlikely. However with the different mind-set, involving all employees doing everything possible to make it succeed, the future certainly looks rosy.

