

Life after Cranes & Access

Is there anything left to do after a career in the lifting industry? Tim Whiteman, ex-publishing editor of *Cranes & Access*, met up with Martin Ainscough and David Barrass, ex-MDs of the UK's largest rental fleets, to review an interview we featured on our first front cover over 10 years ago

"You're looking older Tim!" was the jovial greeting from David Barrass as we headed into the headquarters of the Ainscough Group. We were there for a re-run of the interview that Martin Ainscough, David Barrass and Tim Whiteman put together ten years ago to mark the launch of *"Cranes & Access"* magazine. And in truth, we're all looking a bit older, but the sparks that flew at that first interview are still only just below the surface and the two greet each other like old sparring partners.

Ten years ago, David Barrass was managing director of Initial Plant Services, the group that owned Initial PTP Platforms and Initial GWS Crane Hire while Martin Ainscough

asked Martin Ainscough back then. And added: "What it's all about is making sure your salesman has more in his bag - the more he can offer the customer, the better the relationship they will have - access equipment is a natural extension to cranes."

David Barrass' response was characteristically blunt: "The overlap is tiny and it's the lowest margin business in the world - construction."

The debate raged on and makes instructive reading 10 years on (visit www.vertical.net to read the original article in full).

The gist of it was that Barrass felt there was precious little synergy to be had from running cranes and access in the same company while



was chairman of Ainscough Group which had just added a fleet of booms and scissors to complement its established crane hire business. The companies were fierce competitors but had very different business philosophies:

"Why should the customer have to phone completely different people for his cranes and access equipment? After all, it's similar technology and the customer wants just one invoice - why give them separate ones from GWS and PTP?"

Ainscough was convinced they were natural partners. At the time, the Initial Plant Services Group was the UK giant with 500 cranes and 1,400 platforms while Ainscough was the young upstart with 280 cranes and a brand new fleet of 150 platforms. Today, Ainscough Crane Hire is the largest crane fleet in the UK and has long since merged Initial GWS into its fleet - access equipment does not appear to be part of its strategy. Initial PTP meanwhile was acquired by



France's Loxam and continues to run as a stand alone business.

So who was right? We get that one out of the way pretty quickly: "I have to say that David Barrass was right," says Martin Ainscough with a rueful smile, "but," he adds quickly, "we only had the access platforms on a two year lease and then they all went back." The conclusion of the argument then is that although there are similarities in the markets, the differences outweigh them and "we should have set up a separate company to develop the access business." David Barrass is in agreement even though "there is not a big difference in the skill base, but there are crane people and access people."

So what else do they remember from the business 10 years ago? Some of the comments don't seem to have aged as Ainscough notes: "A problem in the access business was that the manufacturers were oversupplying and credit was much too easy to get - some of the wrong people set up in business." But the crane industry also comes in for some stick as in Barrass' view the trouble is that "people fall in love with the metal, not the balance sheet." But then Ainscough notes with a smile that he is "incredibly proud to see my name on cranes around the country." That said, he

feels that part of Ainscough Crane Hire's success has been the fact that "we were always fanatical about measuring utilisation and our software set us apart - our salesmen had a structure and we were focussed on increasing our contract lifting."

Both former MDs are adamant that contract lifting is the way forward for the crane industry and are dismayed at signs that there may be a drift away from it. "The crane industry consistently undersells itself in terms of the risk factors, the investment and the skills necessary," says Ainscough adding that contract lifting was a way to professionalise the industry.

Both men are in complete agreement on the vexed subject of MOTs (annual road worthiness tests) for cranes and believe they should be mandatory. "How can it be right that cranes are not checked to see if they are roadworthy?" asks Ainscough noting that society is effectively relying on good practice to ensure the checks are done "at a time when there is tremendous economic pressure on all hire companies."

What has changed since the interview ten years ago is the used equipment market for cranes and access which provided an easy pressure valve - "we always knew

that if things got bad, we could sell the kit overseas, something that is not so easy today," says Ainscough. Both men have now moved out of the business but look back on it with great fondness.

The Ainscough brothers sold the crane business in a blaze of publicity in October 2007 when the Bank of Scotland put up £255 million. This was actually £5 million less than the highest bidder, but Martin Ainscough and his brothers were convinced that BoS was more interested in the business.

Ainscough remembers the day well as former colleague Neil Partridge became CEO and, after a two hour signing session, the entire staff of the company was invited to a champagne reception on the lawn of Bradley Hall, headquarters of Ainscough Crane Hire. "I started work in my new office at 8.00am the next morning and have not been back to Bradley Hall since." The new business includes the old Ainscough Vanguard group but is primarily focussed on property and some investment business "yes I do watch Dragon's Den, but we are more interested in bigger businesses," says Ainscough with a smile. The property and investment business run through a variety of companies, one of which owns the properties used by Ainscough Crane Hire.

Barrass meanwhile has gone on to become a "turn around" management consultant specialising in helping companies that are in difficulty. One of his most famous patients has been the Royal Mint soon after the time when it became infamous for minting undated coins and nearly went bust...

Barrass left the cranes and access businesses in 2000 and went to Pickfords where he became European MD. Two weeks after he left, Initial sold GWS to Ainscough. Prior to that the GWS heavy lifting division had been successfully sold to Sarens.

"What would you do differently if you had your time again?" Ainscough asks Barrass who pauses for a moment before answering. "Not much, the crane business was all about camaraderie and people and I had a really great time, shame it came to an end really." What may be a surprise to some is that Barrass tried to raise equity to purchase GWS from Initial but was unsuccessful. "You got a very good price Martin," concludes Barrass.

Ainscough, who started working Saturdays for his father at age 13 and went on to become manager of the fledgling Ainscough Cranes in June 1976, also looks back on the business with great fondness and seems to miss the

people. The two still have at least one thing in common as both are involved with charity work that ranges from the Prince of Wales Trust and charities for the homeless to working with a residential care home that looks after "challenging" young people for whom fostering is not appropriate.

"And what about you Tim, do you miss the publishing business now that you are running IPAF?" asks Ainscough: "Yes and no, my new job is highly enjoyable, but publishing has its own very special attractions, however... meeting the deadline for this article has certainly reminded me of all the stresses that I am happy to not have anymore!" It was a pleasure to meet up with Martin and David again - my thanks to them for taking the time to relive that first interview ten years ago and for today's Vertikal Press for giving me the opportunity to be a journalist for one more day!



Martin and Brendan Ainscough at Vertikal Days in June marking the 10th anniversary of Cranes & Access

We would like to add that the deadline of June was grossly overshot, it seems that Mr Whiteman has lost a little editors discipline - at one point we thought we would save the piece for the 20th anniversary! Many thanks though to Tim Whiteman, David Barrass and Martin Ainscough for taking part in this reflection of a historic and first class first issue.
Leigh W Sparrow

Cranes & Access 10 years on

Cranes & Access was a cornerstone of the Vertikal Press when it was founded in 1999. However, the title cannot claim to be a completely new magazine, incorporating Cranes UK, a publication that had been launched by the KHL group in early 1995.

Tim Whiteman, then a partner at KHL, spotted the growing closeness between the producers and users of cranes and access equipment and could see a publication that covered all such mobile lifting equipment would have widespread appeal with rental companies, distribution and service suppliers and a wide number of major end users.

Cranes & Access and the German market sister magazine Kran &

Bühne were launched and the Vertikal Press established as a fledgling publisher. The company stole a march on the industry when in 2001 it launched Vertikal.Net - the first online news service for lifting equipment. It was also the first company to publish its magazines online. The lifting industry portal, celebrates its ninth year at Bauma next year with its first major revamp having taken place at the end of November.

Whiteman sold the Vertikal Press to industry insider Leigh W Sparrow in 2003 after accepting the position of managing director of the International Powered Access Federation - IPAF a position he still holds today. Since then the Vertikal Press has

continued to grow and now publishes three guides to lifting equipment at the big international exhibitions and organises the Vertikal Days event in the UK and the TABS safety conference in Germany.

Meanwhile Cranes & Access, which began as a largely UK/Ireland based publication has gone on to develop a wide international circulation reaching around 17,000 recipients in more than 120 countries and is published nine times a year.

Cranes UK was incorporated into Cranes & Access in 1999



The first issue of Cranes UK was published in the spring of 1995



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