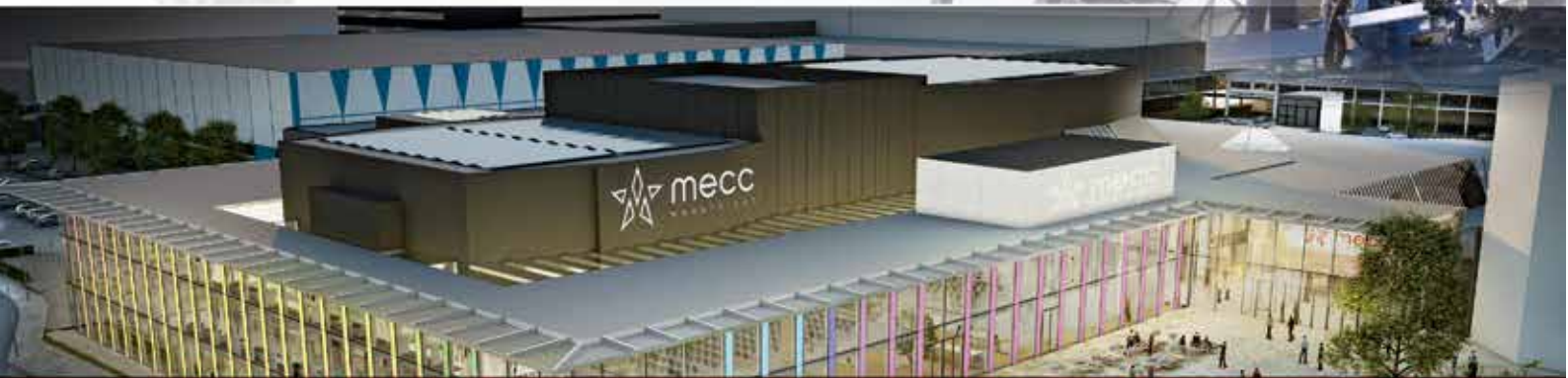


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Klaas at full capacity

C&A

Klaas

Earlier this month German aluminium crane company Klaas held two open days at its headquarters in Ascheberg, Westphalia, Northwest Germany, one for customers and dealers and the other for its 320 employees and their families. Cranes & Access editor Mark Darwin managed to talk with chief executive Georg Küter about the company and its products.

The company was established in 1933 by Theodor Klaas, the father of Ludger Klaas, the current owner and chairman of the board. It remains a family business run by the second and third generation of the Klaas family. Georg Küter is married to the founder's daughter Sabine Küter.

Klaas developed the inclined material lift in the late 1940s, but it wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that Ludger spotted the opportunities and benefits of aluminium, producing the first aluminium crane in 1993. Mounted on a 7.5 tonne truck it had a lift capacity of 500kg. This proved a turning point in the company's history and the basis for developing other equipment, including firefighting equipment - partnering with Iveco Magirus in 2000 and now producing three ranges of firefighting and rescue machines. In 2005 it developed the new TS aluminium boom profile which it still uses today, helping reduce weight while increasing strength and stability.

The company has been responsible for a good number of innovations over the years, in 2013 it started



Klaas chief executive Georg Küter at the customer and dealer open day

using the stir welding method on its aluminium booms - a welding process that fuses the two elements of a boom section without adding additional material, resulting in zero distortion, increased strength and improved stability. There are apparently just four stir welding machines in the world, with Klaas now operating two of them.

The company has enjoyed strong growth over the past few years and is currently running at full capacity.

"Klaas has expanded every year for the past five years," says Küter. "When I started 16 years ago we had 70 workers and built two cranes a week. Now we have 320 staff, a full service network all over Germany and we distribute cranes



Demonstrating a Klaas K1003 with panel attachment

in almost every European country, with the firefighting equipment going worldwide. At the moment we build around 550 trailer and truck cranes per year - 60 percent being trailer cranes - and next year we plan to expand even more."

Boom production was the main bottleneck limiting further growth so four years ago Klaas ordered a Swedish stir welding machine - the first company to employ the technology for crane booms. Further growth required the second stir

welder but instead of going to the original Swedish supplier, it ordered a German built machine, but that did not work out so well. "Unfortunately during the process the manufacturer was acquired by a Chinese company, people were changed, and development stalled," explains Küter. "We tried for 18 months to make it work but in the end returned it and ordered a second machine from the original manufacturer. We have had the second machine for six months now and capacity is improving so



Just some of the Klaas machines on display



A close up of the welded boom joint

that next year we will be able to increase production significantly, as well as produce larger machines. All our cranes - both trailers and truck mounted - use aluminium boom sections only, rather than using a steel base section like on our competitor's. We are able to do this and have excellent outreach because of the stir welding process."

"There is also a limit on market demand of course. I do not want to get involved in steel boomed cranes which involves more weight and larger outriggers - that is not our market. Aluminium is all about taking smaller loads - 500kg, one and two tonnes - as far out and as high as we can. Weight is the enemy so we look to reduce it whenever we can."

Truck mounted work platforms

As well as cranes Klaas builds three truck mounted models mounted on 3.5 tonne chassis. But there is a problem.

"The Theo access platform was launched four years ago and at the moment we sell as many as we can build," says Küter. "We started with the Theo 25 and then introduced the Theo 20. At the end of the year we will introduce a new 21 metre machine with jib. But we only have enough capacity to build one machine every two weeks i.e. 25 a year. We cannot build more because we are at full capacity with the cranes which is our main business. At the moment we do not plan to expand outside our facilities here in Ascheberg, but we do want to grow over the next few years. We needed to gain experience with the truck mounted lifts - we want to sell German quality at German prices - so they must be solid and fully sorted. The idea was to develop the 3.5 tonne range, gain more experience and then review the situation."

Trailer problems in the UK

As mentioned earlier the majority of cranes produced are trailer cranes however regulations in the UK mean the cranes are too long to be sold there legally. "We are happy to have found a new dealer in Kranlyft and add the new markets of UK and Sweden. At the moment most of our production is sold in Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Poland. The markets are changing - over the past 15 years we have produced between 30 and 50 percent more cranes than the competition. We are more innovative, have the better aluminium profile, and a smaller company structure so we can adapt to customer requests and make changes more rapidly."

Of the 300 or so trailer cranes produced each year, the most popular is the K23-33 TSR which has a 1,500kg lift capacity and 32.8 metre hook height. "It is the VW Golf of the trailer cranes," says Küter. Perhaps surprisingly, its most popular truck crane is its largest - the K1003 RSX, mounted on a three axle truck it has a hook height of almost 53 metres and a maximum capacity of six tonnes.



A Klass K850 aluminium truck crane

"The K1003 in my opinion is the most cost-effective machine we have. In Germany you would have to spend an extra €50,000 to €100,000 for a steel boomed crane to get the same performance. If you work with loads of up to 2,000kg I don't think you will find a better machine on the market. When we developed the machine four years ago we only



One of many Klass trailer cranes



At the end of the year Klaas will introduce a new 21 metre truck mounted platform - currently it has two Theo machines



A Klaas firefighting platform



A close up of the firefighting basket.

our cranes people can work more easily and faster, which fits the trend throughout Europe, which is promising for the future."

expected to sell a few units each year, but if we had the capacity we could sell around 50 a year."

Firefighting machines

Production of the firefighting machines is barely 10 units a year at the moment but Klaas claims to have several hundred Multistar machines working around the world.

"This market goes in cycles. In one order we supplied 30 machines to Slovakia but then sold just two machines the following year. We are currently building six machines for Vietnam. In the UK the unions don't like the Multistar because it needs less people to operate it - just the driver. So some in the UK like it and some don't."

What lies in the future?

"If we have stable economic and political conditions in Europe and Germany, I would expect the company to grow at least 50 percent over the next five years. If Germany goes like UK or the USA then I am not so optimistic. We will have to see what happens. With

"We did not attend Bauma this year as we are absolutely at full capacity. Sweden is set to become an interesting market, because wages are high and it is difficult to get workers who are prepared to work with their hands, or the required skills, and this is where the Klaas crane excels. We are now number one in Poland, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland and hopefully in a few years the UK too. We would rather use a local distributor which knows the market and the potential customers and are more motivated to do a good job. I think that this is the best solution. Setting up a wholly owned subsidiary may provide you with a bit more control or leeway with pricing, given that you do not need to worry about a dealer margin, but this advantage is completely lost when you add back in the overheads you have to pay for staff and the facility. Using independent dealers also allows us to concentrate all of our efforts on developing and producing new products."



Aluminium boom sections

The advertisement features two Merlo telehandlers in a large, empty industrial warehouse. On the left is the PANORAMIC 40.17, a green telehandler with a long boom extended high, carrying a load of wooden pallets. On the right is the ROTO 50.35, a green telehandler with a rotating turret system, also with its boom extended. The background shows the structural steel beams and high windows of the warehouse.

PANORAMIC
40.17

ROTO
50.35

ALL NEW **CONSTRUCTION** **RANGE**

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The PANORAMIC and ROTO Range design has inspired the construction market over the years, and is now introducing a new generation of wider cabs, improved cab comfort levels and a multitude of new features. The ROTO range has changed the movement method for telehandlers by introducing the rotating turret system that can rotate 360 degrees without having to reposition the machine. Merlo have skilfully evolved during time with exclusive technological innovations and an unparalleled level of performance, safety and efficiency.