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on the cover:

With an access fleet of more than 6,000 booms, scissors, truck- and trailer-mounted platforms, Nationwide Access stands proud at the very top of C&A 2004 Top 20 access hire company listing in spite of limited new investment. Turn to page 27 for the complete 2004 survey, which also includes the full Top 20 UK crane hire company league table, the Top 5 UK tower crane rental company listing, and for the very first time, a Top 10 listing of the UK's leading telehandler hire companies.



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SUBSCRIPTIONS: Cranes & Access is published six times a year and is available on payment of an annual subscription of £40.00. If you wish to subscribe, please send a crossed cheque made payable to The Vertikal Press Ltd to: Subscriptions, The Vertikal Press, PO Box 3227, Brighton BN1 4UR. Address changes should also be sent to this address. Please include the address label from a recent issue with all correspondence and allow 3 months for changes to be effective.

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cranes & access

For UK users & buyers of lifting equipment
August □ September 2004 Vol. 6 issue 5

The Vertikal Press

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Design & Typesetting by:

bp design Ltd.
Tel: 01707 642141 Fax: 01707 646806
email: info@bpdesign.info

Printed by: VIP Print Ltd.

ISSN: 1467-0852

© Copyright The Vertikal Press Limited 2004

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C&A

comment

Big is not always beautiful

Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day? Thee being the UK crane industry, then no, not really - the Summer so far being on par with a

bleak day on Bodmin and the crane and access sector for the first time in recent years seemingly brighter than the morning sun. So suggest a number of UK industry analysts.

The UK crane hire industry "is finally turning the corner" with 16 leading companies reporting a sales increase of over 15 percent in 2003, 19 reporting doubled profits, and 29 reporting debt reductions of 50 percent according to the surveys.

But in spite of this positive trend, evidence suggests that big is not always better, and that scrapping among the UK's mid to large crane hire companies is minimising the potential to cash in on the current strong market conditions. "Leave them to it" say the smaller players.

"Size does not necessarily lead to success in the crane industry," says David Patterson, senior analyst at Plimsoll Publishing.

"The larger companies are finding it hard to breathe, while the smaller companies are at little risk of take-over as they don't offer any strategic opportunity. I predict we might see at least two of the top companies having to merge or be taken over." Shades of the consolidation of the original Baldwins and GWS into Ainscough in 2003 may be forming here.

If it all sounds too familiar, just consider the access industry and Meek Groups' failure at the end of last year and its subsequent take-over by The Platform Company. Then came Haulotte's acquisition of UK Platforms a few months later, followed by Elevation, one of Ireland's largest access equipment rental companies, filing for liquidation. Just a month later, the administrators came knocking at the door of Independent - at the time one of the UK's largest access rental companies.

But, despite the difficult rental conditions across the UK in recent years, and indeed across Europe, utilisation is on the rise, non-private construction in the UK is strong and rates are showing signs of improvement, albeit at a slower pace than when they plummeted when business slowed a few years back. The sun is shining and now is the time to make hay!

Readers can assess for themselves how all these factors have helped to shape our 2004 annual Top 20 survey starting on page 25, which, for the first time, includes a listing of the UK's Top 10 telehandler hirers.

Warren Wadsworth

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