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van mounts

Demand for the van mounted platform around the world is largely limited to Western Europe. The UK, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Scandinavia and Ireland are all countries where sales of van mounts are steady rather than growing. The largest market is almost certainly the UK - with France a close second - while recent developments may have a significant impact on the market. *Cranes & Access* investigates...



The number of 3.5 tonne vehicle mounted platforms in circulation has exploded over the past decade, driven by their increased capabilities, performance improvements and cost savings. However the single most significant factor in Europe has been due to changes to the standard car driving licences issued since 1997 - earlier in some countries - which has restricted those with a normal car licence to driving vehicles with a total all-up weight of 3.5 tonnes.

At the same time sales of van mounted platforms have been much steadier. The UK where around 600 or so van mounts are sold each year, has seen a considerable change in product mix. 10 years ago around 80 percent of van sales were made up of five and seven tonne models, but with the vast majority of car drivers under 40 limited to 3.5 tonnes, there has been a total about-face with 3.5 tonne vans now making up the vast majority of sales, not only due to the licence changes, but also in an effort to reduce running costs. The larger vans also have restricted maximum speeds which might also be a factor.

Why a van mount?

The van mounted lift's main 'raison d'être' is that it provides both an aerial work platform and storage capacity which can double up as a mobile store/workshop/lockup - a fact not lost on users of 20 metre and above 3.5 tonne truck mounted lifts, who are unable to carry tools or equipment due to the lack of spare payload. For those not needing the higher working height, a van mounted platform is starting to look an attractive alternative.

The van mounted lift was originally created for street lighting contractors and telephone engineers to meet their specific requirement to carry equipment safely and then gain access to lights or poles. More recently other trades have adopted the van mounted lift, including CCTV installation and maintenance contractors and urban tree surgeons. Street lighting generally requires heights of up to 11 metres for town centre and amenity lighting, and 12.5 to 17 metres for lights along major roads and motorways. For CCTV applications 12 to 13 metres working height and five to six metres outreach will usually suffice.

A significant requirement in a van mount is spare payload/cargo capacity, allowing users to carry and store tools and materials both from prying eyes and inclement weather.

Decent cargo capacity is particularly difficult on the smaller 3.5 tonne GVW vans and is being further squeezed by increasingly heavy chassis, mostly due to changing engine legislation. The move from Euro 3 to Euro 6 engines has added close to 200kg to a typical chassis, so aerial lift manufacturers have had to work very hard using lightweight, high strength steels to save weight in order to leave as much as possible for payload.

It is interesting to note that in the *Cranes & Access* van mount feature of May 2008, one UK manufacturer said that 'there was no more potential for cutting further weight from the design of its 3.5 tonne van mounted lifts' following a 120kg increase in the weight of the Ford Transit chassis. However, a redesign resulted in a spare payload of 290kg just enough to be viable. With Euro 6 just around the corner, manufacturers have had to reduce weight by at least another 70kg or more, to keep cargo capacity in the region of 250 to 300kg. With today's modern LED street lighting units weighing more than 20kg, crews need enough capacity to be able to carry a days' supply of light fittings. UK van mounted market leader Versalift has dominated the market, since the demise of Gardner Denver in 2011, with between 60 and 80 percent market share. However there have been several interesting developments which may impact its market share in the years ahead.

New player enters the market

Last month UK van mounted lift manufacturer Aldercote signed an exclusive supply agreement with UK equipment distributor APS (the

distribution arm of IAPS) to mount and distribute a new range of van mounted aerial work platforms. Until recently APS was focused on sales of self-propelled and spider lift sales and service, however the company has recently had success with sales of the Isoli 3.5 tonne truck mounted range, its first venture into vehicle mounted platforms.

Aldercote launches its new range in October

At the end of August the company moved into a new three acre facility in Telford - double the size of its previous headquarters. The new facility also includes workshops and overhead cranes to facilitate the mounting and, assembly of vehicle mounted lifts. Another not insignificant factor is that IAPS



Ascendant says it is producing 100 van mounts a year



The new Aldercote van range will be launched in October

managing director Steve Couling was managing director of Versalift UK for more than 10 years and knows the sector as well, if not better than anyone. He joined IAPS in June 2014.

"IAPS is a dynamic group and we are always looking for a fresh challenge, growth and opportunities to increase revenues" says Couling. "Given my background, getting into van mounted platforms was really a no-brainer. We looked at all the potential manufacturers, their capabilities and designs and found a partner with the right products and designs that we could work with. I know the management at Aldercote really well and I don't think that they will mind me saying that their forte is innovative design and production, whereas IAPS is all about the commercial front end of the business. We don't want to be manufacturers but we are very good at taking a product to market and supporting it well. The agreement means that APS/IAPS is now the exclusive dealer for Aldercote van mounts in the UK, and while we can sell into Ireland it is not our main focus."

As well as the move into the new facility, IAPS is also recruiting staff for the new venture. "We have recently added a new experienced van production manager as well as additional production staff. Aldercote's latest designs are innovative and creative and they will supply easy to fit kits for us to install onto vans to produce for stock. The van mounted market is a reactive market and needs equipment quickly," adds Couling. "Aldercote's designs use high grade, lightweight steels which give the van the highest spare capacity payloads. We have one product on a traditional (heavier) rear wheel drive 3.5 tonne Ford Transit and

even allowing for driver, passenger and a full tank of fuel there is more than 300kg of spare payload. Other manufacturers use the front wheel version because it is lighter, however we think it has poorer performance and reliability. Another feature is that all emergency functions can be carried out from the ground or inside the vehicle without having to get onto the roof - again unique in the van mount sector. We believe we have a lot of features that the market will want and accept."

IAPS will concentrate on 12.5/13 metre lifts on a 3.5 tonne van chassis with three different ranges - the low cost/low sophistication Contractor, the extended outreach, moment sensing and CanBUS controlled Utility range and the all singing and dancing Performance range. There will also be the same three ranges available on a five tonne chassis with 14.5 metres working height.

Largest in the range will be 16 and 18 metre models also mounted on the five tonne chassis. These larger van mounts will go to more specialist contractors which have trained and fully licenced drivers. Demonstration vehicles for the whole range will be available later this month, with full production from October.

"We don't want to change the world, but will chip away and anything we get is additional revenue," says Couling. "The UK van mount market at the moment is about 500 to 550 units annually. There may be some small growth but it is a strong, healthy market and we just want a share of it. People buy from people and ultimately the market will decide where it wants to put its business, based on relationships, product quality, service and support."



Versalift has launched two van mounts including this 13.2m ETM36-F

UK leader goes high tensile

Versalift UK has dominated the UK market for many years and has built its reputation on solid, well-engineered products with good backup and support. Several new products have been launched recently, including two van mounts - the 13.2 metre ETM36-F and 14.3 metre ETM38-F. The ETM36-F has 7.3 metres of outreach and can be mounted on the 3.5 tonne Ford Transit, the five tonne Mercedes Sprinter, the 5.2 tonne and seven tonne Iveco Daily.

"On the 3.5 tonne Ford Transit ETM36-F we have 210kg of payload after driver, passenger and fuel even though the Transit was 70kg heavier than the old model," said Andy

Bray, sales director of Versalift UK. "This increase in payload has been achieved by using a higher tensile steel main frame and redesigning the pedestal, main frame and turret and by taking weight out the new knuckle which has zero tail swing within the jacks."

"This is the last Versalift on a 3.5 tonne van which will look like this. The Euro 6 engine due next year adds a further 40kg to the chassis weight, so we have a new lightweight design - the ETL36-F - which uses an aluminium main boom and a different fly boom saving a further 70kg. Because the GVW is critical we weigh each vehicle before it leaves the facility to ensure it is well within the weight limit - and this takes into account



The UK is the largest van mounted market closely followed by France



Versalift 14.3 m ETM38-F



The busy Versalift UK facility



Market leader Versalift UK has about 4,000 platforms in the UK

the various options the customer can specify, such as plywood lining, racking and Chapter 8 compliance (beacons, reflective strips etc)."

The other new van mount is the 14.3 metre, 7.3 metre outreach ETM38-F mounted on chassis from the 4.7 tonne Jumbo Ford Transit to the seven tonne Iveco Daily 70C - there is still a demand

for the larger chassis platforms. This year Versalift has sold 15 new seven tonne the LAT160F on Iveco Dailys which have more than two tonnes payload. These are being used for central reservation lighting work on motorways, fitted with a variety of options including rotation interlocks which stop slewing into oncoming traffic. All these products

are available with the optional twin joystick controls.

"The ET36 and ET38 models were launched over 20 years ago and are almost industry benchmark machines. We have around 4,000 machines in the UK, most are mounted on vans but also other chassis such as the Mercedes Unimog - we are just building a

Unimog-based VST 5000 the first Euro 6 Unimog in Europe," he said. "The past two years has been difficult because gaining Vehicle Type approval has meant jumping through even more legislative hoops resulting in several design changes with the new Euro 6 chassis." "Although European Type approval was set up to give consistency,

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France Elevateur's 17 metre working height, 8.5 metre outreach bi-energy 172 TPF van mount

several countries such as the UK have their own take on the regulations. We have National Small Series (NSS) or Individual Vehicle Approval (IVA) as well as European Whole Vehicle type approval. NSS and IVA are different takes on the same legislation which results in products that vary but can also conform. One example of this is the rear step with in-built lights - required under NSS but not IVA!" Versalift's European head office in Denmark also produces truck mounted platforms including the new 24 metre articulated VTX-240 with 12.5 metres outreach. Which is arousing interest all over Europe. In the UK a Versalift survey of truck mounted users highlighted how price sensitive the market is. "It showed that 250kg platform capacity is more than enough on these machines", says Bray. "Keep

it simple and keep it to a price is what the majority of users want. One reason for Versalift's success has been the quality of aftersales support, and this may well be a deciding factor for new products, such as the 24m VTX-240. We are also exploring other opportunities to further develop the business."

France Elevateur

With 100 to 200 units less than the UK, France is probably the second largest market in Europe for van mounted lifts. One manufacturer finding success on both sides of the Channel is France Elevateur, distributed in the UK by Utility Equipment and Scott McCall.

"This year the interest in the UK spec France Elevateur van mounts has been about two or three times that of truck mounts," says McCall. "We have built 22 van mounts over the past three months so we are making nice inroads into the market. It is a fairly consistent market with spikes when one of the major customers, such as BT or SSE places orders for 60 to 120 units or more. What is creating a lot of activity at the moment is the fleet replacement for PFI street lighting contracts. The traditional markets still account for about 90 percent of the market however we are seeing interest in van mounts from companies currently using 20 to 22 metre 3.5 tonne truck mounts which do not need so much working height, but would prefer to carry their materials, equipment and tools."

Because of the additional installation time required for the van mount, the cost of a 20 metre truck and 13 metre van mount is similar. Some larger van models are equipped



France Elevateur's clear inside view



The Socage forSte 12VT is a 12 metre working height van mount with 7.5 metres of outreach with 120kg in the basket



An Easy Lift van mount at APEX



A frame stabiliser



An Ascendant Access van at Vetikal Days

with tow bars which helps reduce the need of a second vehicle on a contract. The four to five tonne vans can tow a very useful three tonnes, which means electricity companies can tow cable reels, compressors or generators and this opens up a different way of working with just

one vehicle.

The new 3.5 tonne France Elevateur van mounts claim to have a 400kg payload after the driver, passenger and full tank of fuel, more than enough for a day's work for most street lighting applications..

One of the immediately noticeable



Italian manufacturer Comet uses a bridge turret frame on its 3.5 tonne van giving a clear central storage area

features of the France Elevateur van is the cut away rear with the basket within the length of the vehicle. This has several advantages including reducing the overall length of the vehicle making it easier to drive and reducing the risk of damaging the basket when reversing. Another feature is the pedestal, mounted behind the bulkhead, leaving a clear area in the middle of the van to store materials. When using the front

wheel drive Renault and Vauxhall vans, the front is lighter, and the floor is lower to the ground thanks to the absence of a prop shaft. "The cost of replacing baskets is considerable says McCall. "One customer said a van can regularly go through three baskets during its life a cost of around £10,000. This is almost totally removed with this design. With side access to the basket it also improves safety which



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France Elevateur 142TPF from Utility Equipment

for local authority users is a major factor when looking at a vehicle mounted platform."

Italian manufacturer Comet has also done away with the central pedestal all together by using a bridge turret frame of its 3.5 tonne van giving a clear central storage area. The Comet 14/2/8 HQ Jib has a telescopic boom with articulating jib giving 14 metres working height and eight metres of outreach with

van mounts



Versalift LAT-160-F

200kg in the basket throughout the full working envelope.

Another Italian van mount is the Socage forSte 12VT - a 12 metre working height van mount with 7.5 metres of outreach with 120kg in the basket.

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Ascendant Access has a new telescopic boom and rotating jib van mount due next year

rental companies and end users buying our products in good numbers.” Ascendant will produce about 100 van mounts this year - mainly its 12.5 metre VM12.5 which has an unrestricted platform capacity of 230kg and a 250kg payload. The unit uses full hydraulic controls. All serviceable items are accessible from the ground, eliminating the need to climb on the roof. A new 12.5 metre telescopic boom version - the TJ12.5VM - will be available next year with rotating jib. Maximum outreach is 7.7 metres and GVW is three tonnes.

“The company is heading in the right direction and we are a significant player in the van and truck mounted sector particularly with utilities and rental companies,” says Dean.

Another company in the UK van mounted mix is Italian manufacturer GSR which produces three ranges including up to 17 metres, includes a 12.5 metre hybrid launched a few years ago. Although the hybrid has all the usual advantages - a reduction in noise, emissions and fuel savings - the take-up has generally been slower than anticipated. The GSR range is sold and serviced in the UK by Skyking, which at one time also mounted the GSR booms to locally sourced vans, but now imports them as complete units.

UK access company

UK based Ascendant Access is also very busy at the moment, producing roughly equal numbers of van and truck mounted lifts - around 200 a year in total. Ascendant is having to fight with one arm tied behind its back, following its acquisition and subsequent connections with rental company Facelift. This has resulted in a reluctance of some larger rental companies to do business with the company.

“Our largest truck mounted customer - Nationwide - will no longer buy from us,” says Steve Dean. “It has been hard for us but we are now seeing the smaller



Skyking E140TVJ on a Mercedes chassis



Versalift ETM38-F



Ascendant's most popular van mount is the VM12.5



Skyking's 14m E140TVJ has up to 8.5m outreach



Versalift LAT135H emergency controls



Skyking GSR Hybrid 125RA

Alternatives

With more users requiring increased cargo capacity/payload, while not needing 20 metres of working height, there is a definite trend towards smaller truck mounts with 11 to 13 metre working heights. Truck mounts are also cheaper than van mounts with similar working heights. For example the 11 metre France Elevateur Topy 11 mounted on a 3.5 tonne chassis offers 5.5 metres of outreach,



The France Elevateur Topy has 11 metres working height and can carry up to 500kg. This is the electric eco version with solar panels to help recharge the battery.

without outriggers/stabilisers and has lockable paniers capable of carrying tools and equipment up to 500kg. Skyking also offers an 11.6 metre truck mount with significant payload.

Conclusion

It will be interesting to see what impact the Aldercote/IAPS deal has on the UK market. The manufacturer most likely to suffer is market leader Versalift although it has very strong ties with customers, and it might be that the additional activity simply expands the market, rather than splitting it. It won't be plain sailing for IAPS either, as there are many very well established marques that have been working hard in the UK building up relationships over many years. However if the Aldercote product is as good as IAPS think it is, it may take a sizeable chunk of the market over the coming years. Interesting times ahead for van mounts.

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