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Van mounted platforms

The van mounted market in the UK and Ireland is probably as busy as it has ever been, with manufacturers' bulging order books extending deliveries until the end of the year, if not beyond. However continual changes to the vehicle chassis are having an effect on the market. Cranes & Access investigates.

Anyone passing their driving test after January 1997 is restricted to driving vehicles less than 3.5 tonnes without taking a further heavier vehicle test. This effectively limits anyone under the age of 29 with a regular car licence to driving a commercial vehicle with a van chassis such as the popular Ford Transit or the Iveco Daily. With the number of people in the working population affected by this ruling now reaching a significant level, buyers of truck and van mounted platforms are increasingly focusing their spending on lifts that can creep in under this threshold. This in turn is having an effect on new product development.

One of the van mount's 'raison d'etre' is that it provides both a working platform and has the storage capacity to double up as a mobile store/workshop/lockup. The market was in fact created by street lighting contractors along with telephone engineers and their specific needs to carry equipment and then gain access to lights or poles. More recently other trades have taken the van mounted lift to heart, 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.

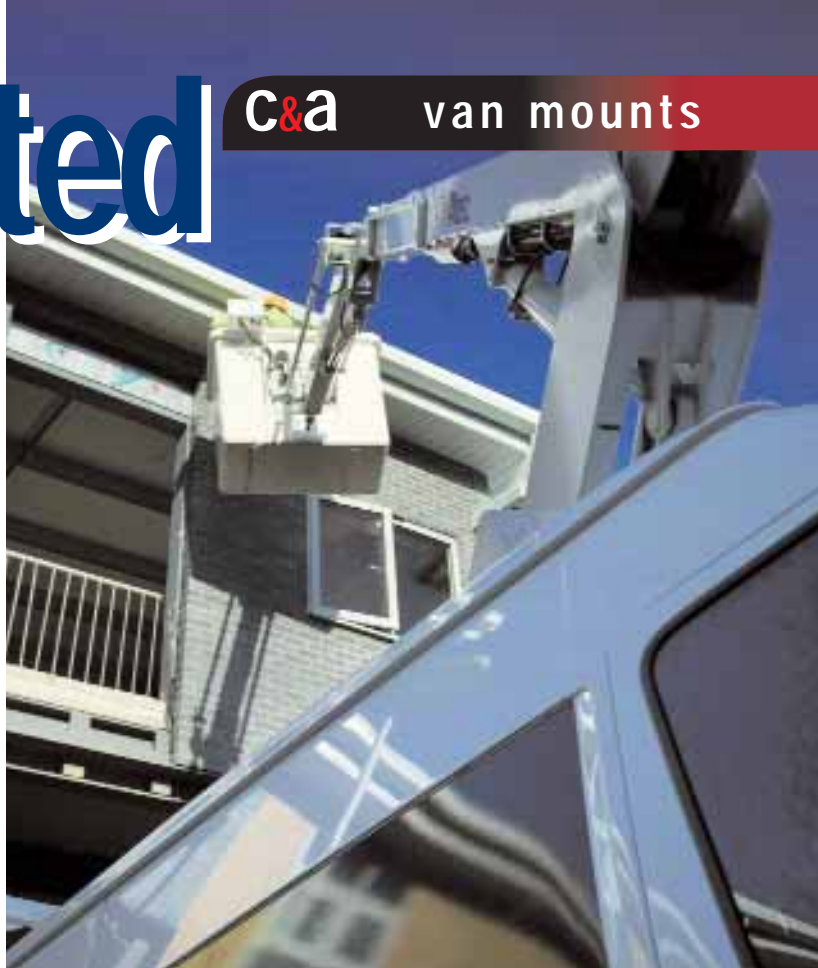
For CCTV 12 to 13 metres working height and up to five metres outreach will usually suffice.

The most common van mounted platforms are those with 12.5 to 13 metres working height, due to the fact that most platforms of this height leave a reasonable payload and sufficient space in the van for tools and parts needed for the job and are still easy to drive. Some of these vans are used as mobile workshops, with vices, workbenches and washing facilities all built in.

The challenge for platform

manufacturers over the past few years has been the increasing weight of the basic chassis from equipment involved with meeting the Euro IV engine emissions. This additional weight ultimately eats into the vans payload, putting pressure on lift manufacturers to respond and compensate.

Manufacturers are now struggling to cope with the latest weight gains, which have eroded a large chunk of the vans spare payload to make the whole concept viable. Market leading manufacturer Versalift UK, which builds platforms on chassis from 2.9 to 7.5 tonnes, thinks that it has now reached the point of no return. It says that there is no more potential for cutting further weight from the design of its 3.5 tonne van mounted platforms. It points out that the market leading 3.5 tonne Ford Transit chassis has increased in weight by 120kg in its latest form, which decimated the payload capacity on its Eurotel range. As a result it has had to redesign the Eurotel, using higher tensile steels in the main boom and turret, reducing plate thickness - 8mm thick steel is now 6mm - and using plastic components for guards and covers wherever possible. The end result, it says, is that its 13.2 metre working height ET36 now has a van payload of about 290kg, much less and it would border



A Skyking 125RA

Newly delivered Access Hire Nationwide machines

on being unviable for its job. So if there are further chassis weight increases, it will inevitably eat directly into this payload.

Gardner Denver has already accepted that the whole 3.5 tonne van mount platform concept will ultimately face defeat as a practical cargo carrying proposition. The majority of its van production is now in the five tonne and 6.5 tonne range, which offers an average payload of 1.5 tonnes.

"The whole concept of the 3.5 tonne van mounted platform is now flawed," says Scott McCall, Gardner Denver's national sales manager. "In a total role reversal, 85 percent of our 280 machine production is now on five tonne and larger GVW chassis."

It will be interesting to see how the weight of the 3.5 tonne chassis

develops over the next year or two, any further increase in weight would kill its use as a mobile store/workshop and platform. And without the storage space why not use a truck mounted 3.5 tonne platform?

So how big is the UK van market?

All manufacturers are seeing an increase in enquiries from potential first time users driven by concerns over the Working at Height and duty of care regulations. However this increased enquiry level does



Steve Couling md of Versalift showing off the walk in basket

not yet appear to have resulted in a significant increase in orders. The van mounted platform market is generally one of the more stable access markets year on year. According to Steve Couling, managing director of Versalift, a good year might be 750 units, a bad year 600-650. He thinks total sales over the past 12 months amount to about 700 with Versalift taking around 55 percent or 380 units (85 percent of which have 12.5-14.5 metre working heights). Versalift's main competitor - Bradford-based Gardner Denver - thinks the market is slightly smaller and closer to 600, but at least there is some sort of agreement.

If figures are to be believed (380 Versalift - made up of about 280 3.5 tonners and 100, 7.5 tonne truck machines - 280 Gardner Denver, SkyKing with around 60 and others at about 100) the total of 820 makes it a very good year if you listen to Couling and McCall. However it is not unusual for

manufacturers to round up their own numbers while understating the total market so annual sales in the region of 750 would appear to be about right.

Traditionally the van market has been dominated by two or three major purchasers - one being British Telecom - but when these big buyers decide not to purchase for any reason, the repercussions can be very serious. BT tends to place contracts for about 250 machines every three years. When the contract for 2003/4/5 ended, rather than re-order it used 2006 to reorganise and review the business. All contracts were put on hold and the number of new lifts it ordered dipped to just 11 units.

"Today BT still has a major impact on the van market and if it does not place an order, then we are looking at a shortfall of over 100 units," says Couling. "We sell about 70 to 80 units direct to BT and another 20 to 30 to contractors involved with BT work. Over the last 12 months we have sold 85 BT connected units."



Gardner Denver launched its 13.5 metre Land Rover 4x4 at last year's SED

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Versalift is unusual in the van mounted platform market in that it is a total specialist, and so the loss of such magnitude has a major repercussions. For this reason the company has been building-up its after sales business which includes repairs, refurbishment, rebuilds, servicing, spare parts and training.

"In 2004 we achieved £1 million in after-sales revenue," said Couling, "this has risen year on year so that in 2008 we are looking at a figure of £2.7 million of our £13 million turnover and an output of about 400 units per year. We also carry about half a million pounds worth of replacement parts - probably more than we should but our aim is to give flawless support."

Couling quotes a figure of 99.3 percent same day parts shipment but then explains the very high figure. "What this essentially means is that the machines are very reliable and it is mainly small components that are needed - which we have in stock." Keeping these sorts of figures is important to improve our customer support, but also essential for the British Telecom contract which closely monitors statistics on machine, warranty and downtime."

The company has recently completed a 2,300 square metres (25,000 sq ft) extension to add to its 3,250 square metre (35,000 sqft) facility to be able to cope with the ongoing growth in after sales services.



An Allan Access Unimog platform

In an interesting and perhaps surprising move last August, Versalift announced a formal agreement with the UK's leading van mounted lift rental company, Rise Hire following its acquisition a few months earlier by the Lavendon Group.

"We have been working alongside Rise Hire since it began in 2003," said Couling. "It is a logical step in that a utility company that owns around a100 units, is also likely to rent in a further 20-25 units through the year. By working together we are able to offer our customers our product on a rental basis. When customers ring, our first question is 'do you want to hire or buy'."

But is there a problem with other rental companies when a manufacturer is so close with a competitor?

"We think people buy Versalift products because they are the best



AERIAL WORK PLATFORMS



Versalift's new 25,000 sq ft factory extension



All Versalift models feature a one and two man capacity rating which can increase the outreach depending on the weighed load in the basket. 120kg or less allows the additional outreach which according to Couling is particularly useful for contractors working in city centres. Another development over the past two years has been the introduction of the walk-in basket - again particularly useful for operators who may be in and out of the basket 50 times or more a day.

on the market and we haven't seen a reduction in the machines sold to our major rental customers," he says. Perhaps there is something in it perhaps not, but Gardner Denver is having its busiest year ever, particularly with five tonne and 6.5 tonne van mounts into rental companies. It believes that it is very close to Versalift on production numbers even though the mix of machines is very different - 85 percent being the larger five tonne plus van mounted platforms.

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Gardner Denver does not supply BT but is seeing changes in its market which used to be primarily to Local Authorities and their contractors. Now however with PFI contracts it is doing well with the rental companies, perhaps because it does not have a relationship with a specific hirer?

"We are very busy working with rental companies, even those in general access with the increasing awareness that the working at height legislation is starting to have," says McCall. "Demand is also being driven by the power network companies which have a specified amount to invest in vehicles but have tended to hold off purchasing for a few years but this is now coming through."

The company has a full order book which is helped by its new 4x4 Land Rover-based lift launched at last year's SED show. Several manufacturers reported increasing interest in the vehicles more suited to off-road work.

Gardner Denver has sold 42 of these 13.5 metre platforms on Land Rover 110 chassis since January. It also is well down the line towards producing its first platform on the Iveco Daily 4x4 which will be delivered to Norwegian Electricity.

When the chassis becomes available in the UK, it will again be first into the market with a machine for EDF.

The company launched a new plastic basket with walk-in gate design at the recent Commercial Vehicles show. The basket, made from fabricated plastic, can be retro-fitted to older Gardner Denver vehicles with cracked or damaged fibreglass baskets.

Versalift offers a full machine refurbishment facility.



"Fibreglass can break quite easily whereas the plastic baskets can take more punishment without damage, and yet can still be repaired if necessary," says McCall. "The full, walk-in door is warmer for the operator and safer, easier and quicker to use."

While there is no question regarding the trend to 3.5 tonne truck mounts and vans, those companies who have operators able to drive the larger machines generally prefer to hire or buy them. This is particularly true where a decent payload is required, resulting in a second van accompanying the platform van tying up two vehicles on each contract where a single five tonne van with platform would have handled it.

"The 3.5 tonner is an ideal short-term hire particularly for sign erection companies," adds McCall, "but in the long term it is the payload that is critical. We are even seeing increasing interest in 6.5 tonne machines purely for the increased payload."

In the five tonne capacity range, Gardner Denver uses chassis such as the Iveco 50C and Mercedes 511 both proving popular with a 14.5 metre working height platform and 10 metres of outreach.

Aquarius Leasing - one of the largest van mounted rental companies in the UK - was a big



The Altec AT103F 13 metre platform on a Euro IV Ford Transit

user of Gardner Denver products. Last December it was acquired by David Wraith through a new company, Access Hire Nationwide, Wraith is best known for founding Nationwide Access Platforms with Garry Smith in the mid 1980's. Wraith sold Nationwide Access to a Management Buy In by David Price supported by Cinven in 1992, which became the Lavendon group. Since then of course Lavendon has gone on to become the world's largest specialist powered access rental company. With the Lavendon acquisition of Rise Hire he is now going head to head against it with his new company.



A Rise Hire platform

John Wood, managing director of Access Hire Nationwide says that the van mounted hire market is buoyant at the moment, "in an ideal world buyers would prefer a 3.5 tonne van with 14 metre working height platform." He says

"Most hirers make do with the payload on the 3.5 tonne machines, as all too often they don't have the drivers with the appropriate licence. In spite of this the higher platform and payload requirement is making the five tonners increasingly popular."

Currently Access Hire Nationwide claims to have 286 machines in its fleet and is looking to expand this with a further 100 or so machines over the next 16 months."

"Three quarters of the fleet is Gardner Denver, but we also have some SkyKing and Versalift units although not too many because of the Rise Hire association. Gardner Denver is our preferred supplier but we try and achieve complete independence."

Most of those we spoke with agreed that rental rates have improved over the last 12 months following their low point in 2006 when BT's inactivity saturated the rest of the market with machines. "Rates are up all over the UK but particularly in the South East and because many councils are now looking to hire rather than buy," said Wood. "There is also a lot of money being spent on power infrastructure so overall the market is going well."

Two other significant van mounted platform producers are Skyking and Allan Access, both based near Market Harborough. The SkyKing Reverse Articulated (RA) and Telescopic Jib (TJV) van mount range are produced by GSR the truck mounted aerial lift specialist and are available for mounting on vans and chassis cabs with a GVW of up to 7.5 tonnes, giving maximum working heights from 10.5 metres to 17.5 metres.

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Allen Access, owned by industry veteran Phil Allan, has a wide range of equipment including van and 4x4 mounted vehicles using Niftylift and Socage booms as well as the well established Powered Access range. At last year's Vertical Days the company launched a new 3.5 tonne van mount with 12 metre working height, No-outriggers and up to 12 metres outreach, while retaining 450kg of payload. This year it plans to show a 14 metre model with similar characteristics on the same size van. It has also started shipping its Nifty based boom lifts on the new Santana 4x4, shortly to be rebranded as the Iveco Massif, as well as the traditional Land Rover. Allan Access was also the UK distributor for Altec insulated

booms until it moved to Terex Utilities. Altec is now distributed by Coventry-based Kalmar and backed by a national team of 60 engineers so it will be interesting to see if a new sales force can break into the UK market for the American giant. The first telescopic boomed unit - the new AT103F 13 metre platform has been designed and mounted onto the Euro IV front wheel drive Ford Transit.

Altec is also a specialist in fully insulated boom lifts, and is naturally looking to muscle in on Versalift's domination of this market in the UK. Versalift says that about 25 percent of the units it produces are insulated machines - up to 46kV or an optional 69kV. "With outage (when the system is down) costs of £200,000 for just four hours without power, contractors need to have machines that can work on live cables," says Couling. "And with the UK pylons placed across the countryside many opt for platforms mounted on Unimog U3000 7.5 or 8.5 tonne chassis or 10 or 12 tonne Unimog U400."



An Allan Access V130 on a Land Rover chassis

So overall the van market has recovered well since a low point in 2006. Rental rates are on the up, there is increased activity generated from the work at height and duty of care legislation, resulting in full order books for the foreseeable future. Street lighting work will always provide a base line of work, although this

is increasingly augmented with other work such as CCTV and tree work. The only major problem may come should the 3.5 tonne chassis put on weight again. Even if it did happen, a spot of extra training and a new test for drivers who have passed their test after 1997 and they can benefit from extra height and payload with five tonne unit.



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