

Getting it right

Much has been written about the increasing threat of the Chinese-crane invasion helped by the inability of the major European and North American manufacturers to satisfy current demand levels. Yes, the Chinese machines tick all the boxes in terms of price and delivery, but quality and fear of the unknown is a major issue.

Churning out thousands of machines is impressive, but has a downside - not necessarily in the quality of components, many of which are the same brands used by the 'major' manufacturers - but in the final finish and in particular the paint.

Zoomlion is China's second largest crane manufacturer but appears to have made more strides in the export market than leading producer XCMG. In the UK and Ireland the name has been around for a while but the product is only just starting to arrive in any numbers.



One of the recently sold Zoomlion QY30 truck cranes

Last September the company appointed Universal cranes - a division of Crowland Cranes - as its distributor for the UK and Ireland. Perhaps surprisingly Zoomlion did not appoint a pure sales company. Instead it went with a very experienced crane business that deals with all aspects from inspections, service and repair; operates a 16 strong crane rental fleet up to 180 tonnes; runs a lifting supplies company (TMC Lifting Supplies) as well as being UK distributor for Ormig industrial cranes. Surprising? Not when Peter Issitt, Crowland's managing director explains the situation.

"We first saw the Zoomlion cranes about four years ago at Bauma, long



Peter Issitt

before anyone was interested in Chinese cranes," he said. "The truck crane looked sensible so we tried to get more information from the factory with a view to selling them in the UK and Ireland. At this point in time, Zoomlion was not ready for exporting and though we continually contacted the factory, there was very little response."

Crowland's customers had been asking increasingly for simple cranes that didn't need lap-top computers when they went wrong, mainly as good crane engineers were ever harder to find. Issitt was

At Bauma last year, Crowland again saw Zoomlion which was this time showing the 70 tonne QY70 truck crane which Issitt thought 'looked good'.

"We were very surprised when instead of being ignored, as we had been since the previous show, we were made very welcome and they asked us to come to the factory with a view to distributing the machines."

What happened next highlights the ongoing problems trying to introduce large products built outside of Europe into the UK.

"CE marking which should have been completed just after the show was delayed a few months and then a few more," said Issitt. "Modifications for the UK market also needed to be carried out but again, it was painfully slow mainly because of the language barrier but also because it was so difficult to speak directly to the right people at the factory."

By January 2007, Crowland decided that the only solution was to buy two cranes - a 25 and a 30 tonner - and help the Zoomlion factory go through the whole CE certification process. With its experienced staff and base just outside Peterborough, Crowland had access to everything required - but still it was a big commitment with no guaranteed result.

also convinced that there was room for a truck crane which historically had been used as a starter crane for operators before graduating onto more expensive All Terrains. Crane prices were also increasing along with delivery times.

Part of the Crowland Crane Hire fleet.



Using Laidler Consultants the process was completed surprisingly quickly. "There was a lot of paperwork involved, but most of the processes required for the CE certification - such as the drop loading of the cab - had already been carried out in China, we just needed the appropriate certification."

A brake modification was needed but was sorted by calling a local specialist.

Crowland soon realised that when the Chinese geared up to make thousands of cranes, it was very difficult to get them to make changes just for the UK market. It was far easier to order the stock machine and then modify it.

This was the case with the Safe Load Indicator which now uses a PAT Kruger system installed by Crowland. Other modifications



Aluminium fuel tank and outrigger lighting are recent Zoomlion additions.

include a foot slew brake and a deadman's slew switch in the bottom of the operator's seat.

"You have to modify the basic product if you want to sell into the UK," said Issitt. "Anyone who thinks they can just import and sell this type of crane without any further improvement work is mad. We currently put about 300 man hours into each crane which includes a full respray. This amount of work will reduce as more and more machines are brought in but it is still going to be significant."

Fortunately Crowland has an extensive range of facilities so is ideally positioned to carry out this sort of work.

Once all the upgrades had been carried out to the two units, they were given a thorough testing. The 25 tonner was placed with a customer in Newcastle and despite working



The paint shop carries out a full respray

hard had just one electrical switch fail. The other unit - the 30V - was put into Crowland's own fleet and again performed well.

"We wanted to put 12 months work on the cranes to see how they would perform under UK conditions so that we could be confident when selling the machines," said Issitt. "Both cranes performed exceedingly well so we ordered 10, QY30 machines which arrived at the end of last year. All were sold and to date there have been only a few minor faults such as a leak in the front window seal and a windscreen wiper motor failing. We now make suitable modifications to all new machines so that these minor problems don't re-occur."

Crowland now orders machines from the factory in batches of five, each batch taking about 10 weeks from order to arriving in the UK.

"The whole process has been more complicated and longer than we imagined but the end result has been worth it," said Issitt. "After all the modifications and work has



New parts facility just starting to be stocked

been carried out, these cranes are good quality and reliable and excellent value at about 30-40 percent less than a similar-sized All Terrain crane."

The 10 QY30's are now in fleets from Glasgow to Towcester and all performing well. The machine - rated at 32 tonnes at three metres - has very good performance and has simple technology. Crowland has made a big investment in establishing the marque, carrying out the required upgrades as well as improving the overall quality of the machine and has also invested in putting a lot of spare parts on the shelf. The end result is that of the 12 machines now operating in the UK, no crane has yet been off the road waiting for any part.

Crowland estimates that it will conservatively sell 20-25 units this year, primarily the QY30 but there



The impressive Zoomlion test facility

are also other Zoomlion machines on the way.

"At SED we will be launching the new QUY70 tonne crawler crane which has already been sold to London-based PJ Plant Hire. The unit is going on a long-term hire in a concrete stockyard in the Peterborough area. A 50 tonne crawler will also be added to the range although this has not yet been through the CE process."

Orders are also expected for the 50 tonne, 50V truck cranes at SED and a 70 tonner is coming to the UK for evaluation. So the line-up later in the year should be five machines - the QY30, QY50 and QY70 tonne truck cranes and a QUY50 and QUY70 tonne crawler.

In spite of a tax increase on cranes from China, Crowland has seen very little increase in his landed cost, thanks to the dollar based prices. A significant advantage compared to the Euro based producers.

my trip to the factory I did see a small, two axle AT. If they decided to market this at about £160k, customers would be queuing up for it."

The sophistication and expectation of UK crane customers means that trying to sell a machine such as the Zoomlion straight out of the 'crate' would have been doomed to failure. However, by bringing the machines up to the standard required by customers - even if that means almost rebuilding each unit - coupled with a significant price advantage, reliability, availability and a solid parts and service backup, they look set to sell well, satisfying a growing demand for smaller truck cranes.

It is easy to sell one of anything. Crowland now has existing customers ordering their second and more machines - evidence that it has got the whole package right.



70 tonne crawler in China

"Hirers want a reliable machine that does a job and the Zoomlion now fits the bill," said Issitt. "We have customers that get £400 a day for the QY30, which makes much more financial sense than a 35 tonne AT. Zoomlion does have two larger All Terrain machines - a 160 tonne and 240 tonne - but these are too big and we have no intention of bringing them into the UK. However, during

The Group is also growing and investing in other areas including the development of a new four acre crane test site, additional workshop inspection pits with built-in rolling road for brake testing and axle weighing and increasing the hire fleet to 20 units and adding a larger 220 tonne crane into the hire fleet. With all the basics in place, could this be the start of the Chinese invasion?