

# Built to last

It is often said that about 90 percent of all the Land Rovers ever built are still operational. The same may well apply to Jones and Iron Fairy cranes. They don't just die, they get rebuilt and refurbished. Mark Darwin investigates.

**With the crane market as buoyant as it ever has been, new cranes are either both expensive and have long delivery times while good used cranes are as rare as hens teeth. One solution is to give your existing, tired machine a new lease of life - either a refurbishment or total rebuild.**

In the UK there are surprisingly few companies that specialise in this type of service, and even fewer that have all the parts needed to carry out the work sitting on the shelf. One such company that has both is West Sussex-based Southdown Engineers.

You may not have heard of Southdown Engineers, but if I mentioned Jones and Iron Fairy then things instantly

become more familiar. But whilst everyone in the crane industry has heard of these famous marques, I bet there are very few who know their recent history.

I caught up with Sean Preston, a director of Southdown Engineers to try to find out more about the past, present and future of two of the big names in the history of the UK crane sector.

Critical to anything happening now and in the future is the fact that most Jones and Iron Fairy cranes were totally over-engineered. This meant that they are very strong and reliable, making a major overhaul or total refurbishment well worthwhile. The other plus is that even over the last 30 years, there are very few modern cranes in the UK that can combine the pick and carry capacity and road going capabilities of the Iron Fairy, which is why there are still so many in operation even with major crane hirers.

Now for a bit of history. The Iron Fairy crane was designed and manufactured in the mid 1950's by British Hoist & Crane based in Swindon. In 1973 it merged with the GCM 600 group, formally the George Cohen 600 group which became known as the 600 group in 1975. The 600 came from its early head office address of 600 Commercial Road, East London that it moved to in 1876. George Cohen & Son started trading in 1843!

In 1915 GCM acquired and took a controlling interest in a company called TC Jones & Co which led to purchasing a steel foundry and engineering works in Letchworth in 1928. Five years later the first Jones



*This Jones 971C was refurbished and sold to Gosport Ferries*

crane was produced and it is thought that the crane was named after Percy Jones, a salesman in south Wales working for GCM.

Jones Cranes also played an invaluable part in the war, producing more than 1,000 mobile cranes. These were used in many international locations including unloading the first barge to land on the beaches at Arromanches, Normandy on D-Day. To meet the demand for cranes needed for D-Day, the company produced 180 cranes in just 25 weeks.

Jumping on a few years, GCM sold the Iron Fairy side of the business to Severnside Machinery in about 1993/4 with some of its strut jib and dockside equipment going to a Danish concern. Part of Jones remained in the UK, based in Wisborough Green in Sussex and traded for a while as Jones Mobile Cranes - totally independent of Severnside Machinery.

In 1997 Jones Mobile Cranes pulled out of the crane market altogether and the current owners Southdown Engineers took over the parts business. Southdown was at this time also buying, selling, repairing and supporting Iron Fairy equipment and later acquired the trademarks and drawings for Iron Fairy cranes.

At the same time as acquiring Severnside last year, Southdown bought a small local firm called Edwards Engineering which moved into the main premises and now goes under the name Southdown Precision.

Confused? Hardly surprising, it would appear that many Jones and Iron Fairy customers are as well.

"The recent history of the two companies is quite fragmented and it is the main reason to get it back under one roof," says Sean Preston, "so customers for Jones and Iron Fairy parts, service, refurbishments and rebuilds know where to come." "Southdown Engineers is a family business, started by my father in 1990 dealing mainly in transport and hire of road plates," said Preston. "I left school in 1986 and while most people seemed to be going into IT and the service industries, I did the unfashionable thing and went into engineering and have always worked in the family business."



*Jones Cranes Super 20 Barge at Arromanches, Normandy, D-Day*



*This JIF10S was refurbished and sold to Virgin and is working at Gatwick Airport*

With its full 'off the shelf' spares for all Jones and Iron Fairy cranes since 1974, and an engineering company within the group, Southdown is ideally placed to carry out complete rebuilds and refurbishments. And not just for these older marques. The company has also recently completed a full rebuild of a Tadano TL250E truck crane.

"We now have the capacity to carry out four complete rebuilds and a few refurbishments each year," says Preston. "We estimate that there are about 14,000 Jones and Iron Fairy machines produced from the early Mark 6 Iron Fairy of the 1950's through the Sapphire in the 1960's (the MOD had hundreds of these), the 6, 8 and 10 tonners redesigned in 1974 and through to the 12 and

15 tonners in the early 80's."

According to Preston, these machines were so over-engineered that they rarely break. "Customers buy them and keep them, they just keep on working," he said.

Whatever the customer wants is possible with the rebuilds - air conditioning, remote controls, new engine or gas conversion - all are possible. The original Ford engines would not be used in the rebuild but the Perkins engines are still available and can be turbocharged for a useful additional 50 hp.

Cost is usually the deciding factor in any rebuild/refurbishment.

"As a ball park figure, a rebuild of a 15 tonne Iron Fairy is about £75,000," says Preston, "whereas a new



A Tadano TL250E truck crane also rebuilt by Southdown



This JIF15A was rebuilt and resold to VT communications

machine may be anywhere between £120-160k. And many modern cranes do not have the road capabilities or duties of the Iron Fairy."

The fact that companies such as Hewden, Ainscough and Mammoet all have Iron Fairy machines in their fleets is a testament to the original design and build strength of the machines.

"One recent refurbishment of a 10 tonne unit went to Virgin at Gatwick airport and is being used to change

windcreens on planes," said Preston.

Unfortunately there are some parts that are harder to get. Because of the growth in wind turbines and their use of identical slew rings, there is a one year lead time for this item. All the other parts dating back over the last 35 years are no problem. There aren't many companies that can say that. So if you have an old Jones or Iron Fairy, or would like a refurbished or rebuilt unit, you now know where to go.



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