

50 years and offering advice

Cork based William O'Brien Plant Hire is best known in recent years for its crane hire activity, founded over 50 years ago by William O'Brien senior, the company has traded through several tough periods and economic downturns some of which were far harder than the current slow down.

O'Brien was born in Kerry and built the business through a time when Ireland was asserting its sovereignty and taking its first tentative steps towards Europe. The first programme for Economic Expansion was brought in by a government led by Sean Lemass, which came to power in 1959, it ended Irish protectionism and saw the beginning of foreign investment in Ireland resulting in the beginning of a more industrialised economy and a move away from the traditional farming background.

O'Brien began with earthmoving equipment, clearing off old country estates and golf courses such as Mallow golf course, he then moved into the crane hire business and began to buy equipment and establish his plant hire business. He quickly understood that there was an ongoing need for waste disposal and added the activity to his growing business. His next venture was plastics which spawned many other local plastics businesses in Cork. He was a real entrepreneur and went after any opportunity he spotted. The company helped change the face of Ireland, working on various high profile projects throughout

Ireland including the GPO in Dublin, Knock Cathedral and the buildings along the Grand Parade in Cork. The company successfully traded through the difficult years of the 1980s when unemployment reached an all time high and emigration became the only option available to the majority of the population. In spite of this the crane and plant hire business continued to trade and to grow.

Surviving and thriving in tough times

Having successfully grown through past recessions with many of the same staff has taught the company how to deal with the task of trading through downturns. Finbarr Warren, the managing director of the company speaking about the current economic situation in Ireland says: "We saw the signs over six months ago and stepped up our credit control efforts. It's important to get your cash flow in order - to make sure creditors and debtors are up to date. It's also important not to have too much excess stock at all times. This is particularly important in the plant hire business with regard to spare parts some of which can cost thousands of Euros. Tyres alone cost an average of €1,600."

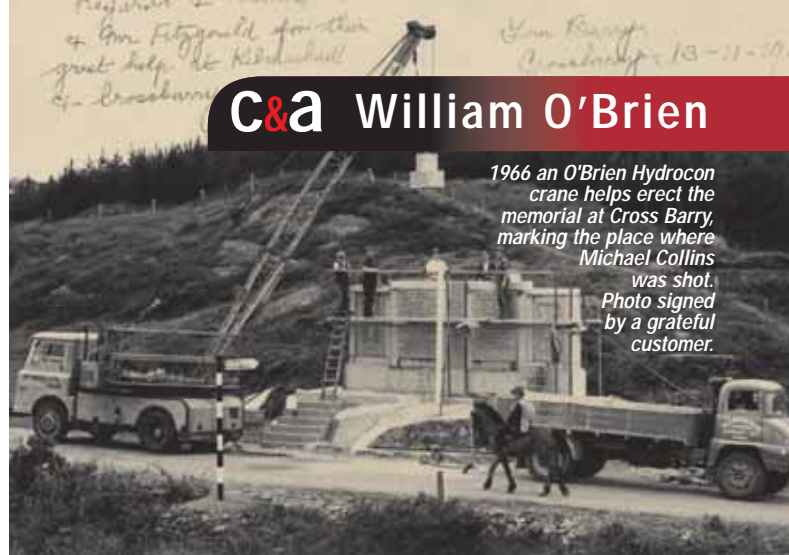
"When it comes to sales we do not consider it is a sale until the item has been paid for. Full ownership of a deal is given to the sales team right up

1973 and the demolition of Jennings building in Cork, note the crane with Foden chassis and O'Brien skip used to dispose of the rubble.



C&a William O'Brien

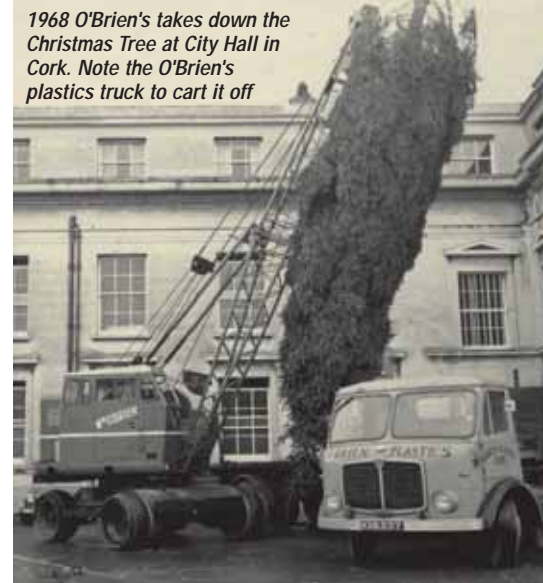
1966 an O'Brien Hydrocrane helps erect the memorial at Cross Barry, marking the place where Michael Collins was shot. Photo signed by a grateful customer.



1968 O'Brien's takes down the Christmas Tree at City Hall in Cork. Note the O'Brien's plastics truck to cart it off



An early circus act in Cork with a 22 tonne Grove-Allen H-2264, clearly health & safety was much less of a concern back then.



to receiving payment. If payment is a problem for some customers they are encouraged to spread their costs, perhaps by leasing."

We are also careful to make sure that the business is not overly reliant on one or two large clients. It is important to spread the risk and to deal with reputable companies who have a solid business reputation. New customers to the plant hire company are encouraged to pay in cash to avoid losses later on and keep a steady cash flow system in operation.

An upside to the downturn?

Finbarr maintains that the key aspect of surviving the downturn is by knowing and understanding the business and your key customers. "One upside is that it allows companies to slow down and to concentrate on re-establishing contact with clients that you may have previously been too busy to speak to."

"It may also be a time to use key staff in other areas, perhaps by researching other sectors where growth might be expected. For example we have invested in a

Terex-Demag AC700 the largest crane of its type in Ireland which will be kept busy in the development and construction of wind turbines, an area of expected growth over the coming years. This is a bigger and more solid market and it is exactly the type of proactive decision making which will result in real and sustainable business growth over the coming years."

"It is the companies that adapt to the recession without burying their heads in the sand that will survive and thrive in the future. Many of us here at William O'Brien Plant Hire, have lived and worked through tougher times before and have learned how to cope while developing



solid strategic plans that will enable growth in the years to come.

During president Kennedy's visits to Ireland in 1963 O'Brien supplied a crane not only to gain a view and wave the US Flag but also to advertise, the slogan says "Any obstacle put in the presidents way call William O'Brien"