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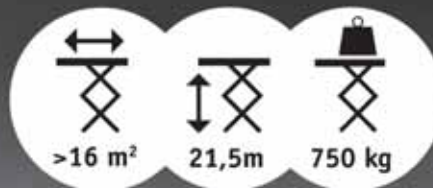


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Hiding its light under a bushel

Are rental companies holding back product development? In many parts of Europe, including the UK Scandinavia and Holland, the majority of construction related equipment is bought by the rental industry. And because of the huge overall number of machines destined for this sector, manufacturers tend to focus on equipment that fits their requirements.

There are, however, many excellent specialist access equipment manufacturers and products available that are better and more cost effective for certain applications but are not getting the exposure or usage they deserve, primarily because - in the classic Catch 22 scenario - the major access rental companies do not offer them.

This could be said to be true for the trailer lift sector, which appears to be a shrinking market and yet demand for used ones grossly exceeds supply, suggesting that maybe there is more demand than the rental companies acknowledge. One of the world's largest manufacturers of trailer lifts is Milton Keynes, UK, based Niftylift. Mark Darwin went to see Niftylift's managing director John Keely to try to find out more about the market, its products and the company which readily admits to keeping a 'low media profile'.

One of Niftylift's recent innovations is the SiOPS safety control system.



"We are busy, but not telling you where," was Keely's semi-jocular opening remark which kind of summed up Niftylift's general reticence when talking to the press. Surprising really because the company has been around now for the best part of 30 years and has expanded its product range to include its market-leading trailers, innovative self propelled, tracked and Self Drive lifts - all with working heights between 9.5 and 21.3 metres.

Like all access manufacturers, the current market conditions has meant cut-backs, reductions and a phrase used by many - 'battening down the hatches'. However, Niftylift has continued with its 'free-thinking' design philosophy that has got it to where it is today and is responsible for recent innovations such as its SiOPS safety control system and the Tough Cage basket.

"The global downturn in equipment demand has meant that we have obviously had to make cut backs

in certain parts of the company but we have maintained all the staff and investment in R&D and design, which we believe is one of the key areas," says Keely. "As a result, we will probably have more product launches next year than any manufacturer."

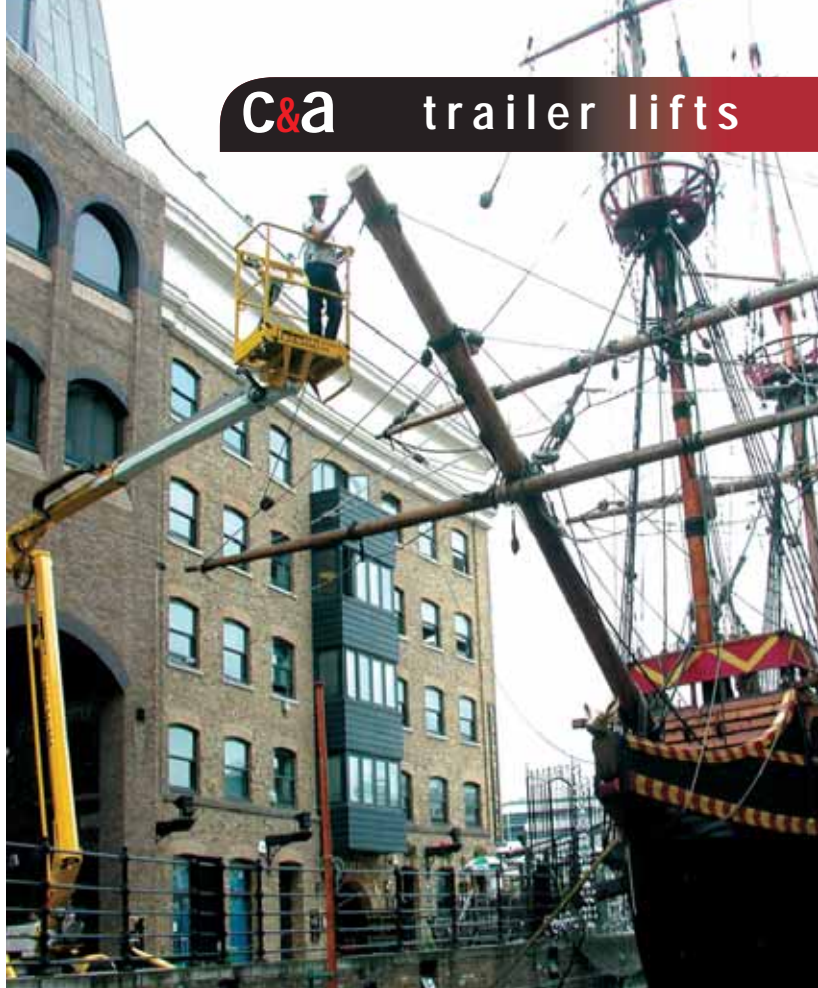
The business was founded in 1982 by chairman Roger Bowden - who still owns 90 percent of the company and, with the R&D and design departments, is responsible for every machine produced by the company. The first trailer lifts were offered for sale in 1985 and Keely joined in 1989, the year after the company moved from Dunstable to Milton Keynes, at which time there were just four employees. Keely, who owns the remaining 10 percent of the company, spent four years as commercial manager before taking over as managing director, a position he has held for the last 16 years.

Self propelled booms, beginning with the Height Rider 10, were launched after the move to Milton Keynes but at this time, trailers were the mainstay of the company and have formed a large chunk of its sales ever since.

"We still make the first two products that we made almost 25 years ago, the Nifty 90 and Nifty 120 trailer lifts," says Keely. "Both feature a large number of improvements but are still quite

similar to the originals. One of the main developments in our trailer lift line was the introduction of the telescopic boom so although the Nifty 90 and 120 still have their followers, they are massively outsold by the Nifty 120T (T for telescopic) which offers more advantages. The Nifty 90 remains popular because of its light overall weight of 595kg and the ability to go through a single door and is still a very appealing package, particularly to owner operators."

After the 90 and 120, Niftylift produced the 17.1 metre working height 170 followed by the telescopic 120T. The introduction of the telescopic boom meant that although the two 120 machines have similar working heights (12.33 metres for the 120 compared to 12.20 metres for the 120T), the 120T is a metre shorter at 4.5 metres and has more than a metre more outreach at 6.1 metres. The telescopic boom also improved one of the articulated trailer platform's weak points - lack of outreach at lower heights, which on some models is not much better than the outrigger spread. The 120T achieves its superior outreach at the expense of a heavier overall weight (1,400kg as opposed to 1,160kg) and larger outrigger spread (3.55 metres compared to 2.7 metres).





A Nifty 170 setting outriggers

Another variation on the theme was introduced with the Nifty 140 which is non telescopic but features a 150 degree articulating jib, a large and a two man 225kg capacity rotating basket although this was more in response to products and features offered by the competition than specific user demand - customers clearly prefer the models with telescopic upper booms.

Nifty's largest trailer is the 21 metre Nifty 210 which achieves its impressive working range which includes almost 12 metres of outreach and compact dimensions is achieved with a dual riser and three section telescopic boom. The Nifty 180 was only briefly sold in France so the range is now completed by the 150T.

One of the criticisms levelled at the trailer lift, compared to a tracked spider lift is that it is too long to negotiate narrow, tight turns, say getting to the rear of houses. The relatively large outrigger spread can also an issue, but Niftylift - which also produces tracked machines - does not accept this criticism.

"The trailer lift is of course longer but taking our 12 metre trailer versus our 12 metre tracked model, the 120T is 4.5 metres long and the tracked TD120T is only 550mm shorter at 3.95 metres. In fact, because the boom is common to both machines, this is the only dimension that differs - machine height, width, carrying capacity, basket size and outrigger spread are all exactly the same," says Keely.



Nifty 170



The Tough cage is a lighter, safer and more durable basket.

"The trailer is 450kg lighter as well and perhaps more importantly, is not far off half the price!"

When all the facts are presented in an easy to digest form, you have to wonder why, at least the smaller trailer lifts are not more popular, particularly as a spider lift must

geared up for the generally shorter hires and users visiting the depot to collect the equipment."

This type of hire is the domain of the tool or general rental company. The current economic situation is not helping the situation either. With most large hire fleets running at no



A Nifty 150T in towing mode

have its own trailer or transport. But is the lack of popularity the fault of the product or are we back to the original question - is it an availability problem and there is something about trailer lifts that the specialist rental companies do not like?

Spider lifts are rapidly becoming more readily available, whereas the trailer lift is increasingly concentrated in the hands of general/tool rental companies - which have bought in sizeable numbers over the years.

"In the early days of powered access many different types of rental company offered platforms but by the mid to late 90s the market was becoming more specialist," says Keely. "The 'powered access specialists' all started offering large volumes of very similar equipment, which ultimately limited user choice."

But why did the trailer lifts loose out?

"Trailers tend to achieve a much better rate of return than the more popular types of self propelled platforms but they need more thought and work in order to achieve the hire," he says. "The larger access rental companies are not

more than 50 percent utilisation, there are bargains galore for certain types of access equipment and less interest in new investments.

"Access companies all over the UK are quoting cut-throat rates for self propelled platforms far lower than the rates for trailers - and then throwing in free transport whereas you have to go and pick up the trailer," says Keely.



A Nifty 210at the National Hockey Stadium in Milton Keynes



A Nifty 170 at the Tate Modern in London

Our latest feed-back is that 12 metre trailers rent for around £120 per day or £200 per week and 170s for £400-£500 which compares very favourably with an equivalent self propelled. Smaller specialist rental companies are happy not to put trailers out at silly money during the week because they know they can get £200 on a Saturday.

"All too often hire desk staff don't get patted on the back for getting a good rate, but they do for increasing utilisation," says Keely. "The funny thing is that the rental companies that are geared up for hiring trailers are currently very busy and getting a good return on the investment. So the main factor holding back trailer lift popularity is the reluctance of the mainline rental companies to stock and promote them. Customers are not given the option of different machines might better suit a specific job. All too often the

and trailer platforms are ideal," says Keely. "You can't get a Nifty 120T for love nor money. Some steel erectors are now using trailers rather than normal self propelled booms just because of the floor loading."

Trailer lifts do appear to have a poor image, with most rental companies thinking that the returns are patchy at best. This however is not the case.

"I tried to find about 100 trailer platforms for a large tool hirer and rang companies I knew that had machines. The initial reaction to my calls were generally positive, but once they had analysed their performance they found that they were making more money on the investment than most other platforms and so quickly lost interest in selling them. Try buying a second hand trailer. You can't find one and if you do they are very expensive and not far off the price of a brand new machine. If you buy a new unit the first year you will get your money back, and after a further four years renting it out, you will still be able to sell it for more than you bought it for."

Demand for trailers should be on the increase because of the Work at Height regulations and the increasing pressure for window cleaners, painters and general maintenance workers to work more safely at height. Window cleaners do appear to have ditched using ladders, but



The Swiss Army using a Nifty trailer lift for cleaning tanks

machine sitting in the yard is the 'right' machine and that is generally not a trailer lift."

Trailer lift demand currently seems to be outpacing supply, how many second hand trailer lifts have you seen for sale recently? This possibly reflects the lower volumes lately but also changing requirements.

"Because of the low floor loadings on new construction sites, there is a demand for lightweight machines

the 'long pole' method of doing the job doesn't appear to be working. Customers demanding cleaner windows will force more to invest in some form of work platform - trailer, tracked or perhaps a small van mount. All have their advantages and disadvantages: although they can be specified with self propelled options, trailer lifts really need two people to manoeuvre it on site and being longer may



c&a trailer lifts

The drive system is available as an option on all models

struggle with tight corners and narrow side passages. Spider lifts are a lot more expensive, and they need either a trailer or truck for delivery. But are more compact and manoeuvrable once on site. Small truck mounted platforms have built in transport and storage but can loose out on accessing some areas. As they say, you pays your money and takes your choice.....

Niftylift has been the UK market leader for trailer lifts almost since it started. In the early days, it had a lot of local competitors - Hi-Spec, Go Industries, Aerial and Simon to name a few - with several others including UpRight, JLG, Genie and Bil-Jax subsequently entering the market.

"The market for trailer lifts has never been as big as many people think, and there are many aspects of a trailer design that make them quite tricky to manufacture and has caught many out," says Keely.

"Currently sales in the UK are slow, but the United States is doing well and is currently our biggest market. There are several European countries that do not allow equipment to be towed - including Russia and Italy - however where they are needed for their specific advantages, the trailers are transported to site like other self propelled platforms. Trailer lifts are durable machines and tend to have a long life. When we had a recent competition to find our earliest machine and we found the very first trailer we produced was still operational!"

"We make continual improvements to all our platforms to make them safer and easier to use. However, when we introduce a new feature we tend to adopt it right across the line. The Tough cage for example is a lighter, safer more durable basket and can be fitted to all our platforms. Recent product developments have been for the benefit of users rather than rental companies," adds Keely.



John Keely (L) and Roger Bowden (R) with Milton Keynes MP Mark Lancaster

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Bigger CAT lands on its feet

Expanding specialist rental company CAT Access Solutions is very pleased it bought its Bil-Jax 5533 trailer lift. The unit - the first in the UK - was ordered 18 months ago and has been in constant use ever since.

"The 61ft (19 metre) working height Bil-Jax 5533 is a very versatile and easy to use platform, however the main feature that attracted me was the 10 metres of outreach at six metres height and its ability to go below ground level when needed," says owner Chris Taylor. "Once on site you just unhook from the towing vehicle and drive it into position. With automatic self levelling - just press two buttons - the unit is ready to work in just 30 seconds."

Unlike most other trailer lifts, the Bil-Jax is also fitted with a quick disconnect basket and the optional Material Lifting System which means it can convert in about 10 minutes into a 227kg capacity light duty crane. The battery powered lift is fitted with an on-board generator to recharge the batteries when in use.

"The machine has been out on hire for the last couple of months helping in the construction of a new, self-build house by installing roof trusses and performing all high level access requirements and will not be back until next year," he adds.

According to Taylor the lift is achieving good rates, even on longer jobs than are typical for trailer lifts. It has been used on

many different types of jobs including sign erection and gutter repairs. However the lifting system has proved surprisingly popular and has proved to be ideal for the installation of solar panels, first lifting the materials into place on the roof and then reverting back into a 227kg capacity platform for carrying men and tools required for the installation.

"One recent contract involved painting commercial property in Leeds which was complicated because of a weight restriction on the pavement outside," says Taylor. "We chose to use the Bil-Jax for the work because with its reach we could set up just once and not have to move it. It completed the job without leaving a mark. The 5533 weighs just under two tonnes so can work on delicate floors. Also its 10 metre outreach is enough to get to the front of most (council) houses when carrying out repairs for local authorities."

Castleford-based CAT is continue to expand its fleet and currently has eight specialist units with a few new additions. The company bought the first of the new Platform Basket 18.90 from UK distributor Promax which has been out constantly since it was delivered after the Vertical Days in June. According to Taylor, the machine currently has a waiting list for it because of its 9.5 metres outreach.

Taylor also took delivery of the first Bil-Jax 45XA self drive boom lift with a rotating jib. As with the 5533 it can convert into light duty crane. Taylor describes the platform as a 'mountain goat' because of its 48 percent gradeability light weight and 4x4 drive.

"The machine is one of the easiest machines to use with the button/joystick controls and our customers have had no problems understanding its use."



Its 10 metre outreach allows the Bil-Jax 5533 to complete most jobs from one set up position



c&a trailer lifts

The company has also invested in a Bil-Jax CAT23 with auditorium kit for working over the pews in local churches. Taylor says that the 11 metre working height push around unit has saved his customers a substantial amount they were paying for scaffolding.

CAT's expansion has necessitated a move to larger premises, still in Castleford, the new unit is more than four times larger than its old depot. The team has grown to a total of seven but the company is looking to recruit a couple more at the start of next year.



Chris Taylor (R) with Shaun Day of distributor Promax outside CAT's new premises in Castleford

Crane platform combination?

Bil-Jax has been building trailer lifts for many years and has always offered a lifting attachment, effectively switching the unit to a crane. Here in Europe, the idea of switching between crane and platform was for a number of years frowned upon and considered unsafe by many.

However, more recently companies such as Böcker have added platforms to their aluminium cranes and loader crane manufacturers increasingly promote fully integrated platform



A Böcker aluminium crane with basket attachment



loader crane with basket

attachments. The benefits of a machine that can handle both jobs are clear for small job sites. The key is being able to carry the attachment to site while being foolproof, easy and quick to install. Expect to see more of it as rental companies look for an edge and small contractors become more aware of the potential.

Articulated or telescopic?

The first trailer lifts were modelled on and often used the same lifting mechanism as the earlier truck mounted lifts and were largely simple, two boom articulated affairs with mechanical levelling linkage. Lifts such as this are still produced by companies including Niftylift and UpRight although they are now massively outsold by their models with telescopic upper booms.

One of the largest remaining trailer lift markets in Europe is Scandinavia and so it is no accident that it is home to so many major producers, including Dinolift, Omme and Denka/World Lift. As the access market became more sophisticated in the mid 1980's it became evident that simple articulated trailer lift simply did not offer enough outreach, particularly at lower heights.

Another issue, probably a more important one in many countries, was the large tail-swing at lower heights. This problem was also inherent in the early truck mounted lifts and accidents with protruding lower booms were a regular event.

To solve the outreach issue most producers added articulating jibs - tip booms as some called them - and telescopic top booms, while other manufacturers, particularly in Scandinavia, introduced straight telescopic boomed models which

overcame both the outreach and the tail-swing issues. With excellent outreach and in many cases lighter weight, the concept took off in the Nordic countries almost completely eliminating articulated models for many years.

As time progressed and self propelled articulated boom lifts became more popular, articulated-telescopic trailer lifts began to creep back into some sectors of the Nordic market, including ultra compact 12 metre models with short risers and then larger units which used dual parallelogram risers to eliminate the tail-swing problem, while still offering the up and over reach that is ideal for certain applications.

But in the UK, Ireland and many countries in Southern Europe, the straight telescopic trailer lift has not caught on at all. Why not?

There appears to be no single logical reason behind it. One factor is that



Telescopic

telescopic tend to be built in higher cost markets and so were and are more expensive. There is nothing like a high price to curb the appetite and thus the take-up by rental companies. Especially as so few were able to 'sell' the benefits of higher costs niche products, tending to focus on the height and price 12 metres = X£ so the cheaper the lift is to buy the higher the return. With no large rental company volume it is hard for a product to break into the mainstream market. With no respectable volumes, larger manufacturers such as Niftylift, UpRight, Genie or JLG, have little incentive to enter the market. So when the market for trailer lifts in the USA began to surprisingly take off in the mid 1990's all of them introduced articulated models. Bil-Jax also initially followed that trend starting with articulated machines badged from Aerial in the UK, but has since added a range of telescopic models which have been very successful. The company has more recently had

some success in Europe, particularly in Germany where telescopic models have long been appreciated.

In the UK and Ireland some telescopic models have been sold but very few, and yet their attributes - good outreach, simplicity and no tailswing outside of the outrigger base at any height - are appreciated in these markets.

One downside of many telescopic trailer lifts in the past has been their overall length, often exceeding six metres which makes them a challenge to tow in some countries and lack of up and over reach might also be a factor. The point is that few users outside of the Nordic region and Germany really get a chance to see for themselves as so few rental companies offer them.

So how great is the difference?

We look at a few examples below to provide an idea of the variation on outreach and weight between articulated and telescopic.



Articulated

Type and working height	Outreach	GVW	Up&Over
9.8m telescopic (Bil-Jax)	6.66m	1,320kg	No
12m articulated (Nifty)	5.0m	1,160kg	Yes
12m articulated (UpRight)	5.0m	1,300kg	Yes
12m articulated telescopic (Nifty)	6.1m	1,400kg	Yes
12m telescopic (Dino)	7.9m	1,275kg	No
13.2m telescopic (Bil Jax)	9.8m	2,050kg	No
14m articulated + jib (Nifty)	6.4m	1,500kg	Yes
15m articulated telescopic (Nifty)	7.55m	1,725kg	Yes
15m Telescopic (Dino)	10.0m	1,665kg	No
17 m articulated telescopic (Nifty)	8.7m	1,900kg	Yes
17 m telescopic (Omme)	10.3m	2,200kg	No
18m telescopic (Dino)	10.7m	1,800kg	No
21m articulated telescopic (Nifty)	11.8m	3,300kg	Yes
21m telescopic (Omme)	11.2m	2,500kg	No

Tow and go

While some may consider trailer lifts to be a bit of a niche product these days, they are a positively high volume product in comparison with the towable scissor lift. Available over the past few years, it can never be described as a runaway sales success, this in spite of the fact that the concept has some strong appeal for many applications.

The original concept in the form of a production machine, was introduced in the USA by PLE some years back but was probably 15 years too late to have mass appeal for the rental operator? This might be set to change though with the launch of the new Self Drive Upright XT24SD?

The company has been selling its own version of the PLE TP9000 for the past 12 months or so and has the sales rights for the access market, (while PLE focuses on the security camera and hunting markets). However while there has been a good deal of interest in the towable scissor concept, its lack of manoeuvrability on site has been a sticking point for many potential

buyers. UpRight says the new 24ft/7.0 m platform height XT24SD is a cross between a trailer mounted lift and self propelled scissor. It is clearly light enough to be easily towed by most cars or commercial vehicles, but it can also be driven from the platform (while stowed) like a conventional scissor lift.

"We believe there is huge potential for this machine with tool hire companies, as it makes aerial lifts attractive to a whole new sector of end users who are currently put off by the transport costs," says UpRight sales and marketing director, Richard Tindale. "We see the XT24SD being used by wide range of industries from external building and facilities maintenance



C&a trailer lifts

to sign installation and even crowd control."

The XT24SD can be used with the outrigger jacks set within the machines overall width, providing a working height of up to 5.9 metres, or for jobs that require more height, the outrigger beams

are manually extended. In both instances, the one touch auto-levelling system deploys the jacks from the platform at the push of a button. Other features include a roll-out deck extension providing almost a metre of outreach and a 227kg lift capacity.

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