

A different perspective

The UK rental sector for larger truck mounted platforms is a relatively small and close-knit community and when information is scarce gossip and rumours are rife. One company that currently has the jungle drums beating is Bradford-based, Blade Access and Cleaning Services. *Cranes & Access* investigates and discovers that the company has been around for a lot longer than many think and has major plans that might shake up some of the established players.

If you believe a tenth of what you hear, Blade has rapidly appeared on the truck mounted radar, is backed by billionaires in the Middle East and is building a fleet of big machines to take the UK rental market by storm.

As the saying goes, there is no smoke without fire, and while most of these rumours are wildly inaccurate, there are a few truisms.

It is human nature to 'speculate' when there is intrigue. So let's establish a few facts by looking at the company's history. Blade Cleaning Services was started by current equal partners Mark Bell and Jamie Bairstow in 1993 as a residential window cleaning company - buckets, ladders and an old £200 van - in the Bradford and Halifax area. For the next six years the company continued to grow, employing five full time staff but still operating from a garage which acted as offices and storage.

By 1999 the business started picking up some commercial work and at the same time it was decided that for the business to grow further it needed to be more professional. Bell left the company to study business and finance and over the next three years he started

and ran a business employing eight people offering financial planning services.

Bell returned to Blade Cleaning Services in 2002 as it was in the process of acquiring another cleaning company which was incorporated into the business.

"The acquisition brought us into contact with certain commercial and industrial clients and this resulted in selling off our residential



Mark Bell

cleaning business and continuing with the two merged commercial businesses which then employed about 30 full time staff," said Bell.



"As well as commercial window cleaning, we offered a full range of industrial and commercial cleaning and graffiti removal."

At this point, anything to do with working at height - expertise and equipment - was hired in from other companies. "In these early days some of our now competitors did well out of us hiring equipment from them," says Bell.

Then one of its customers offered a regular high rise cleaning contract in Leeds city centre which raised the 'why keep on hiring?' question.



This 50 metre Bronto was added to the fleet in September 2008

Hire or buy?

"Although we knew nothing about platforms we found an ex-service fire engine - a 1989 Simon S85 - in fairly good working order and bought it for £10,000," said Bell. "We started the contract using it once a month but found the platform was parked up quite a lot of the time. Word that we had a platform soon spread and local companies started asking if they could use it for an afternoon etc."



"We were then approached by a Manchester-based telecommunications company to clean the loft of a mill in Bradford that was absolutely caked in pigeon muck so they could install equipment," explained Bell. "Within 10 minutes I was on site quoting a price and we started next day. In all about 12 tonnes of droppings were removed from the loft area over four days."

"This was not our usual work, but it was basically 'say yes' and then sort it out," he says. "We got all the correct Health & Safety PPE equipment and did the job quickly and efficiently. At this point I asked the impressed client if they ever used access equipment to mount telecommunications equipment on the outside of buildings. Three months later he rang asking if we could take the platform to Manchester the next morning. This was the first hire for Blade Access and the company was born."

The company continued to focus on scheduled, easy to manage window cleaning work. It was at this point that the two equal partners split the running of the two divisions: Bairstow continuing to run and grow the cleaning business, with Bell taking the platform side of the company. Blade also became involved in consultancy work, advising architects on the potential problems of building cleaning and maintenance.

"We are still heavily involved in the consultancy which is useful in that it naturally opens up doors to new

clients rather than a forced sales process that does not always work," says Bell.

Wanting to expand its access business, Blade Access' next purchase, around a year later, was a 1994, 25 metre Wumag from a local window cleaning company. After this, the company expanded further with a 34 metre Bronto and a couple of 26 metre Wumags. A further two 34 metre Brontos were added soon after.

"The Bronto 34 metre is the classic window cleaning machine with 180 degree cage rotation, 25 metre outreach and mounted on an 18 tonne chassis," says Bell. "It is a very good machine. All machines purchased were second hand because the platform side of the



C&a company profile

business was still in its infancy and I didn't want to put the company in any risk, keeping it cash rich. For any work higher than 34 metres we cross-hired and there was a good reciprocal business from most of the major hirers."

The cleaning business now covers the whole of England, from London to Newcastle and the company has built up a reciprocal agreement with local rental companies for additional machines if and when they are needed.

"With our fleet of platforms working on window cleaning contracts through the night, we have the benefit of sending the same platforms out on hire during the day, giving a second revenue stream."

New ideas

We started having a few crazy ideas on the access side to develop the business and these coincided with a few window cleaning jobs that required a 60 metre platform but to be competitive it had to be our machine," says Bell.

"As we were financially secure, we decided to look for a bigger machine, finding one in Ulm in the south of Germany that was bought

new solely to work on a church. The 58 metre Wumag had low working hours and after checking its records we drove the machine back to the UK."

As soon as it was in the UK, it went to a local paint shop which stripped it down and it ended up in the now familiar blue and white livery. This first venture into the bigger end of the market was about 18 months ago.

At that time the company's main focus was growing the operated rental business, so Blade never saw much of an opportunity for 3.5 tonne, self-drive lifts. However earlier this year it purchased two, CTE Z21J platforms and entered the 3.5 tonne self drive market, quickly securing several permanent, long-term local authority contracts.

"We looked at many 3.5 tonne lifts and narrowed the final choice to GSR and CTE with the final decision made on price. The Z21J is very reliable and is excellent value for money," says Bell. "As we expand this area of the business, we will stay with CTE so long as their pencil remains sharp! It is a new area for us and we are still learning but a few doors have opened quite quickly. We are not after daily hires - although we do get them because we are the only hirer in Bradford - but I want to focus on the longer term contracts and build up the fleet of self-drive machines. More will be arriving later this year."

The addition of the 58 metre platform created new opportunities, particularly with its 36 metre outreach.



With additional new contracts needing larger machines, a 50 metre Bronto - sourced from Holland - was added to the fleet. However it was about this time (September 2008) that the company placed its first order for new machines with order value running into the millions.

Blade's name was never disclosed in the deal and all involved did an excellent job of keeping the industry guessing who was behind the purchase, helping fuel the rumour mill.

However when Blade took delivery of a 70 metre WT700 at this year's Vertical Days - following a 45 metre and 53 metre a month earlier - the industry really started to take an interest in what the company was doing, particularly as the order contains further large truck mounted platforms still to be delivered (103 metre).

cage/pod (possibly enclosed?) giving 360 degree, independent rotation and designed to fit Wumag truck mounted platforms from 37 metres to 102 metres. Subject to final patents, the pod should be seen by mid September.

"The TV outside broadcast sector was one area that I wanted to actively pursue," says Bell. "Initially the attachment will be exclusive to Blade, although how it develops remains to be seen."

The Pod is totally different to existing camera cages and the excellent initial feedback could add considerable value. There are live trials in September and according to Bell, the 'right people are aware and are waiting for it to be available'. Bell also touched on several other unique projects being worked on but would not say more.



CamPod

With the large order placed but not delivered for at least eight months, Bell was doing a lot of work in the background, developing new work methods, ideas and rescue plans for other industries. The first of several ideas coming to fruition will soon be unveiled and involves the outside TV broadcasting sector.

The new attachment - called the Blade CamPod and built in the Bradford area - is a two-man camera

"Blade is here to offer a service, so having bespoke solutions giving added value, singles us out," he says. "Over the past seven months I have been doing a lot of research and development. The CamPod will be the first project to come to fruition and will be included into the standard platform hire rate. Our aim is to provide the right service and equipment for a given task.

We have already had interest from TV companies based in mainland



CTE Z21J



Simon S85

Europe so this may be the first of our ventures overseas. We have already attracted interest from Spain, Holland and Germany primarily for the projects that are being developed at the moment. The cam pod is the first and others will follow."

Blade's success

So why is Blade so successful particularly during the current economic climate?

"Customer service is paramount at all times. Both Jamie and I have a very 'hands-on' approach and we still occasionally go out and do the job to keep in the real world."

"We have around 20 operators in the two divisions, and some of the window cleaners can also operate the platforms. The access side of the company has more machines than operators, but can use the window cleaner operators as cover, depending on what is needed. In this way we are never short staffed and there isn't the pressure of employing 10 operators for 10 machines as we can inter-change between the two divisions of the company which to me is a much smarter way of operating."

Larger units taken

The new Wumag and other larger lifts are unlikely to be available for rent, at least for a while, as the company is negotiating a large, long term contract for them.

"We are in final negotiations of a major project that will need the use of some of the company's existing and not yet delivered larger platforms, so in effect, they will not affect any other rental company," says Bell. "We have already been doing work on this new concept, and most of the big machines delivered from the end of this year will be used for

this. We will keep one 70 metre machine in the hire fleet, but of course we have the option of using the other machines if necessary. The whole thing is complicated because access is just one part of the overall project."

Blade is still a partnership but there are plans to incorporate into a limited company. "The partnership works well because Jamie and I bring something very different to the company - it is a different concept but works for us," says Bell. "All the staff are deliberately chosen from outside the access industry, we made the decision to take people with specific skills and not take salesmen from other companies that have fixed ideas and fixed customer bases. It gives the company the best possible chance of impressing the client from day one with fresh faces and fresh ideas."

Equipment maintenance

"We have one in-house fitter but at a basic level. The truck maintenance is totally outsourced to a local company that works 24/7 which helps as our lifts work day and night. This means machines can be serviced at 1am in the morning when the driver is sleeping if necessary and be ready to go the next day, allowing us to keep saying yes to customers, keep good machine utilisation and minimise breakdowns."

Bell is involved in many new ideas that will emerge over the next year or two including a totally new method of access that will be launched by a new company within the Blade group. A larger, specific window cleaning basket - which would be a huge advantage to the business - has also been discussed with a local manufacturing company but is on hold for about 18 months while other developments are introduced.

The future?

"We are in the process of creating a specialist solutions company - not just a hire desk," says Bell. "I would hope that Blade Access is an approachable company to others in the industry. We have good relationships with most companies

and people who work with us know we do the job right. We invest a lot into staff training - our operators do not just have IPAF cards but are fully trained for working in seven or eight different industry sectors. The equipment is the best available, our pricing is right, we are competitive but small enough to care. Over the next three years there will be a rapid growth in revenues as the other ideas we are currently working on enter the business on both sides of the company."



Wumag WT700 at Vertikal Days



"Very few people know the truth about what Blade is doing and that is the way I like to keep it. If other companies in the sector haven't the foresight to think of new ideas to benefit the way people work and

dramatically change the way some sectors work and that is what we are going out to do. The technology exists so why not?"

"Many access companies treat the technology as a machine that goes

out to work for a rate and makes a bit of money. There are places for companies like this but I don't want my business to go down that route - I don't want to be another national access rental company. We have a totally different ethos and viewpoint which will become clearer over the next few months and years."

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