

Berry picks the unusual

Neil Berry of Berry Cranes is a man who speaks his mind and is happy doing his own thing buying equipment that he thinks is right for his business. Since forming his own company about nine years ago, he has built up a varied and unusual fleet of cranes. Mark Darwin paid him a visit to find out more.

Bikers and truck drivers in the Northants/Bucks area will know where Berry Cranes head office is located, even if they did not realise it is there. Jacks Hill café is a famous start and stopping off point on the A5 just outside of Towcester - and Berry Cranes now has its office just to the side of the café although the cranes are parked in a secure yard and workshop in Towcester.

Berry has been working with cranes for the last 26 years, starting as a crane operator on a Grove H15 with Marsh Plant in 1983. Thames Crane Services (TCS), Davis Crane Hire, NMT, King Lifting - Berry has worked for them all, absorbing the good bits, ignoring the bad and applying them to his own business that he started in 2000.

"I still think like a crane operator, not just an owner," says Berry, "which is why I decided to purchase a Böcker aluminium truck crane - the first in the UK. I am sure that other crane hirers are watching to see if I make a success of it before they purchase one, but to me it made complete sense."

"The Böcker AK 32/1500 has a maximum lift capacity of just 1.5 tonnes and weighs less than eight tonnes - compared to a 25 tonne All Terrain at around 24 tonnes - and costs significantly less. Low weight means low outrigger loadings and with a lift height of over 30 metres it has enough capacity to lift trusses and air conditioning units onto roofs. The increasing number of weight restrictions often means that the Böcker is the only crane that can get onto the site and carry out the work. And with an annual service for the truck costing just £180 and fuel economy of 18 mpg, it is economical too."



Neil Berry

So did Berry consider trailer cranes as well?

"I did look at these about three years ago but decided that for us the crane would be far more useful on a truck and the fact that it is the only truck mounted Böcker in the UK is a real advantage."

Berry has a history of buying 'unusual' cranes, until recently he had one of the few Zoomlion truck cranes in the UK - a 30 tonne unit - which like the Böcker, was 'a good crane at a good price, with good lifting capabilities that cover a lot of lifting tasks'. Unfortunately it was a victim of the recession.

"Since January our operators have been on four day weeks, so when one decided to leave I had to decide whether to replace him or get rid of one of the cranes," said Berry.

"The decision was made easier in that a local one-man operator rang enquiring to buy a Zoomlion. When he offered the money for it, that decided which crane was going, otherwise I would have kept it. Over the 14 months in our fleet, it was a strong, reliable performer and an ideal owner-driver crane."



Berry's truck mounted Böcker installing roof trusses in a nearby village

A young fleet suited to the area

The current five machine fleet - all less than four years old except for a refurbished, 11 year old Tadano eight tonner - is targeted at 'taxi crane' work, ideal for dealing with local lifting jobs carried out within a maximum range of 50 miles around Towcester although he tries to keep it to 35 miles if possible. The cranes, the 1.5 tonne Böcker, eight tonne Tadano, and three Tadano Faun units - 35 tonner (the first new crane Berry ever bought in 2006), 40 tonner and the largest in the fleet, a 65 tonne ATF65.

"The eight tonner doesn't owe me anything," he said, "it has paid for itself twice over and I don't mind it sitting in the yard." says Berry. "Having said that, it was one of our highest earning machines last month working on a contract lift every day in Banbury."

But how did Berry make the transition from operator to owner?

"Cutting a long story short, the owner of the crane company I was working for died at the end of 2000. He had three cranes and a lorry loader and no-one wanted one of the machines - a 30 tonne Kato."

Until recently Berry operated a 30 tonne Zoomlion similar to this



"The main asset of the business however was his mobile phone with all of his contacts, so I offered to buy the crane and phone but had enormous difficulty raising the money from the banks. In the end I leased the crane over three years, but half way through the contract, it needed a new £12,000 slew ring. After numerous discussions regarding who was to pay for the repairs with the leasing company, I eventually bought the crane."

A year later I injured my elbow and couldn't drive for about 12 weeks. I took someone on, initially just to cover the time I was out, but then decided that as the work was growing, to employ him full time. Over the next few years the company grew and although all three sons have been involved, only Simon is employed full time and can cover most aspects of the business."

Revenues have increased from £100,000 to £1 million and although Berry has had to downsize the fleet from eight to five machines as utilisation dropped as low as 40 percent, it is still profitable.

"Although last year's accounts showed slightly less revenue, profits were up nine percent," he said. "I don't discount rental rates and would rather have the machine sitting in the yard than putting it out at silly money."

According to Berry, a good accounts system has been one of the major factors behind his success. "Our book keeper is a qualified accountant and we have a good

computerised accounting system that I use daily, I know our financial situation at any time of the day or night."

Truck cranes

As already mentioned, Berry is not afraid to try new equipment that has yet to find favour with the larger crane hirers. So what about the new truck cranes on the market?

"I don't think that the new 40 and 60 tonne Faun and Liebherr truck cranes are the way forward. True the truck running costs should be lower than an All Terrain, but they are considerably more to buy and when fully loaded they are too big. The Tadano-Faun ATF65 is the best in its class being self contained but not too heavy," adds Berry. "If we need something bigger we cross hire from other tried and tested rental companies."

Customers soon get to know which crane hirers have which equipment.

"We get quite a few companies needing a 60/65 tonne crane for a job who ask us to quote for a 50 tonner, knowing that we will probably send the 65 tonne Tadano-Faun - hence getting the crane they need for less. There have been instances when the ATF65 is already out and we cross hire a 50 tonner which leads to some interesting conversations...."

Although I am not looking to buy at the moment, a 50 tonner would be the next machine on my list maybe for next April/May but the main problem is adding another driver.



The Böcker AK32/1500 has a good reach and enough capacity for most housing lifts



Berry has three Tadano Faun cranes - a 35, 40 and 65 tonne.

"At the moment business is OK but there are no signs that the recession is over. We have a 50/50 split between construction and other business so one sector is well down. Even if the builders press the go button now, it will still take at least six months to ramp up."

A passionate crane man

Neil Berry is a regular contributor to www.vertikal.net offering thoughts and views on the possible causes of various crane accidents. He always says it the way he sees it. Because of his background and passion for the industry he has identified many areas that 'could be improved'. Here are just a few of his thoughts (or rants....)

Berry on safe load indicators:

"One of the biggest problems at the moment is that most safe load indicators still need the operator to input the codes into the computer

to specify how it is rigged. If the wrong data has been entered it cannot be changed without stowing the boom and starting again. I see so many pictures on Vertikal.net where it is obvious that the operator has input the codes for normal width outriggers but then tipped over because it is short rigged. The Böcker does this automatically whatever the position of the legs, but most mobile cranes do not. In this hi-tech world I can't understand it - surely it is an easy way to reduce accidents?"

Berry on accidents:

"A lot of operators live in a very sheltered world and haven't seen a crane tip over or someone injured as a result of a crane accident. Until they have they don't appreciate the full consequences of what can go wrong. We live in a risk assessment world where everyone assesses the risks for you - and then think that a piece of paper will cover their backsides in the event of an accident."

Berry on pinning outriggers:

Many people are unaware that cranes still need to have their outrigger beams pinned and this is one of the major accident problems with modern cranes. So many operators either do not know or don't bother with this simple task that reduces the risk of a serious accident.



The 11 year old 8 tonne Tadano is still kept very busy

Berry on tandem lifts:

I disagree with the rules on tandem lifts where both cranes must have separate lift supervisors resulting in five people (operators and supervisors) involved in the lift. To me there are too many (five) areas

that can go wrong. With good radio communication that number can be reduced.

Berry on insurance inspections:

Most insurance inspectors say it is in the best interest of the crane

company to have the regular operator present for the inspection to liaise with the inspector so that he can pass on any of his concerns. Suppose the operator has damaged the crane during a lift and he doesn't want his boss to find out, he will do everything he can to divert the inspector away from the problem.

Berry on hot tubs:

I hate hot tub companies that tell its customers that the crane costs for an installation is a few hundred pounds which is not going to happen with a contract lift.


Berry on courses:

"You can do an Appointed Person course but that does not qualify you to be a Lift Supervisor unless you have done your slinger/signaller course. So as an appointed person

you can plan a lifting operation although not qualified as a slinger/signaller. So don't know how to sling the load safely and then can't supervise the operation as it was planned in the first place! The whole thing is a mish mash and the CPCS thought it could make money out of it. They haven't a clue."


"We need an apprenticeship scheme where a trained crane operator or slinger/signaller has to complete a year in the field, then does a crane supervisor course. After say another years experience the can qualify as an appointed person by experience and not the ability to pass a classroom-based test.

Berry is passionate and totally committed to providing the best crane service he can. Perhaps if we all had his pragmatic view the industry would be a more straightforward, less bureaucratic and safer place. As he says - common sense is currently not in the UK crane vocabulary.




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