What's in a name?

Heavy transport and lifting company ALE (Abnormal Load Engineering) has unveiled its new global brand aimed at unifying its rapidly expanding €150 million business which has grown ten-fold over the last seven years. Cranes & Access attended the relaunch and found out more about the company from executive directors Mark Harries, Michael Birch and Ronald Hoefmans.

An A frame gantry in Chile lifting 85 metre long columns

Historically marketing has taken a back seat in favour of concentrating on doing a good job and growing the business. The appointment of a specialist marketing consultancy and the rebrand means there is now one unified universal ethos which benefits both the company and the customer.

Over the past seven years the ten-fold growth has included three sizeable acquisitions - Brambles Heavy Contracting division, including Econofreight and Lastra; the distribution services division of Alstom Power Service UK and John Gibson Projects - all of which are now unified under the new, cleaner, modern-looking ALE brand and logo.

The 'new-look' also includes a change in nomenclature for its heavy-lift AL.SK cranes, aimed at reducing the confusion in the market-place that has existed since their launch in 2008. The original design brief for the AL.SK series was to lift a 130 metre long, 10 metre diameter column weighing 3,000 tonnes.

The original SK90 is now the SK190 - the figure indicating the crane's maximum load moment of 190,000 tonne/metres. ALE also has designs for a big brother, the 354,000 tonne/metre, 5,000 tonne maximum capacity SK350. Putting both of these huge cranes into perspective, the largest Terex crane, the CC8800 Twin has a maximum lift capacity of 3,200 tonnes and a load moment 44,000 tonne/metres.

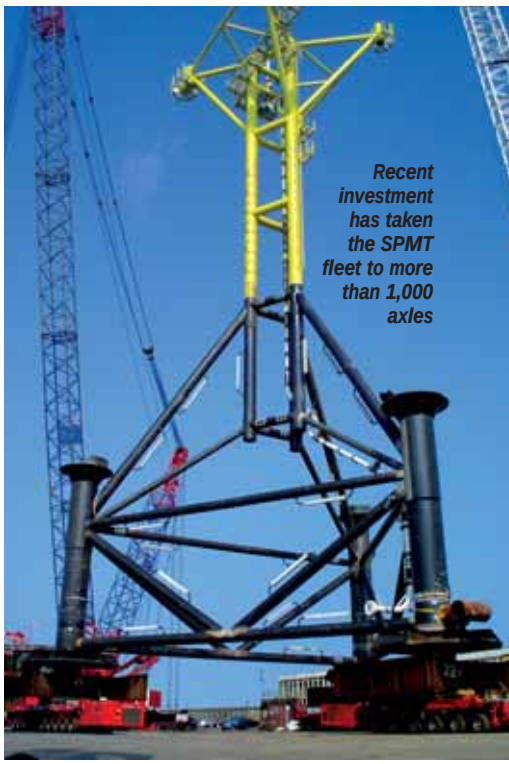
The crane remains the same

Cranes & Access has previously taken on the challenge of comparing the SK cranes with the recently announced Mammoet 120,000 tonne/metre PTC120 DS and 160,000 tonne/metre PTC 160DS. The PTC cranes are large, twin boom ringer cranes whereas the ALE SK is a more radical design which uses the counterweight as its centre of rotation which according to the company provides a much larger working envelope.

SPMT's transporting a component for the greater Gabbard offshore wind farm

"The cranes were originally called the SK90 and SK120 because of the 90,000 and 120,000 tonne/metre load moments as measured from the boom heel pin," said technical director and designer of the SK cranes Ronald Hoefmans. "However, we decided to measure the cranes' lifting performance in the same way as the industry standard - from centre line of rotation - so that we are now comparing like for like."

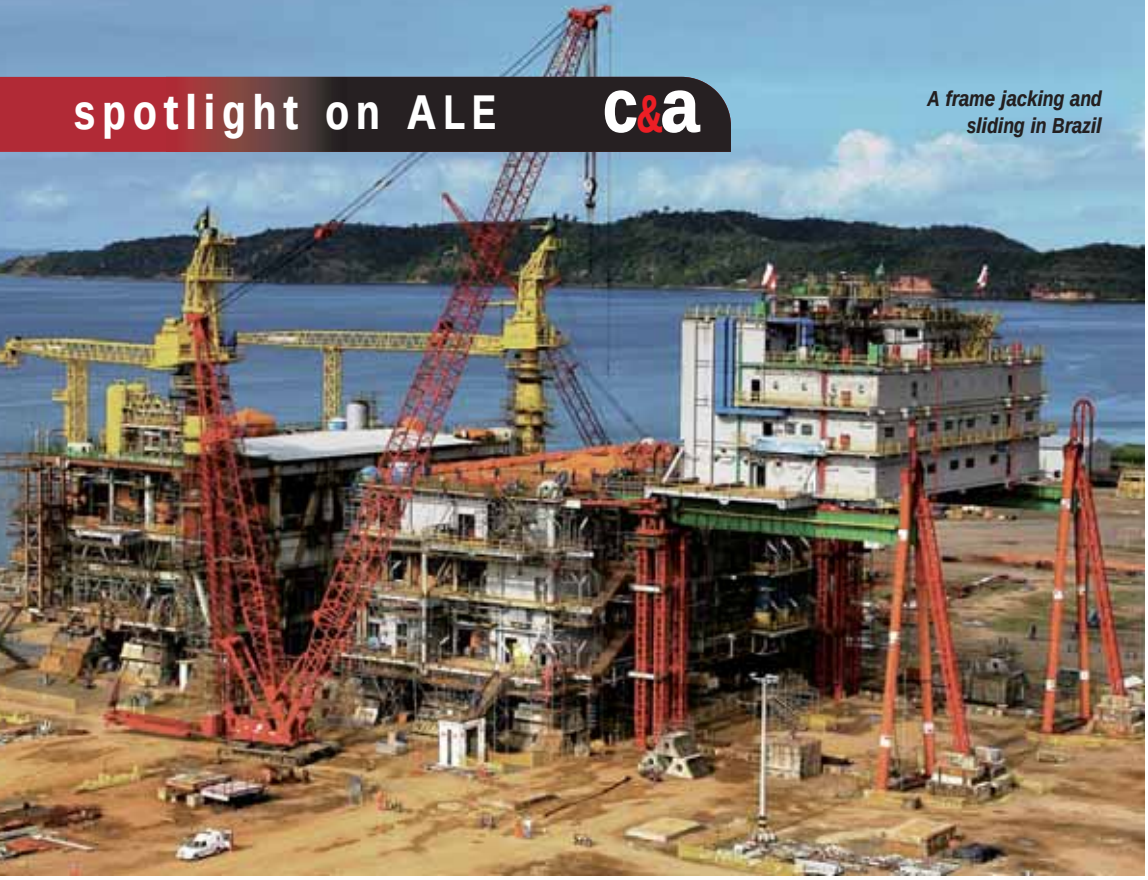
The first AL.SK190 went to work in early 2009 and is currently in Thailand. A second unit is being built this year and when completed will give ALE much more contract flexibility. There are no plans yet to build the AL.SK350 - the larger version of the AL.SK190 - which uses many common components together with a longer back mast, while the base is increased from 13.6 metres to 18 metres.



Recent investment has taken the SPMT fleet to more than 1,000 axles

ALE is in negotiations for three possible contracts that would use the AL.SK350 - in Europe, USA and Asia - but until one is confirmed, it will remain on the drawing board.

"Big cranes from major manufacturers such as the Terex 8800 Twin are very wide machines and very difficult to move unless operating on a very open site," says Birch. "As well as having almost



A frame jacking and sliding in Brazil

four times the load moment, the AL.SK190 is much easier to erect, operate and transport and can be relocated on site by skidding or by self propelled modular transporters (SPMTs) when fully assembled and rigged."

Both cranes are equipped with a standard quick winch system (150 metres/hour) for loads up to 600 tonnes and a strand jack lifting system (10 metres/hour) for loads up to 5,000 tonnes.

ALE was originally an engineering company delivering solutions to customers and not a crane rental company. "We do have a big tool kit behind us, but it is our engineering know-how that enables us to solve customers' problems," says Birch. A big tool kit is a good way to describe its cranes and equipment. Because of its background, it has never owned a fleet of smaller cranes and has no telescopics, renting in any cranes it needs up to about 500 tonnes.

€22 million investment

Size-wise, after the SK190 ALE's next biggest crane was its 1,500 tonne Gottwald MK1500. However the company has filled that gap with its recent 11 million purchase of a Terex CC8800-1 which has been delivered to Portugal and is being made ready for 1,500 tonne inaugural lift in March.

The company also has a 1,200 tonne Gottwald AK912 dating back to 1984, although this has just undergone a total, £1 million refurbishment. Other large cranes include a Liebherr LR 1800, four Terex CC2800s, a Terex CC2600 and Terex CC2000.

"The Gottwald MK1500 is a pedestal crane but we are looking at putting it on crawlers which will give it a load moment comparable to the CC8800-1 (21,000 vs 24,000 tonne metres)," says Hoefmans. "It won't be able to lift a 1,600 tonne column but at 800 tonnes it has the same working radius as CC8800-1."

Part of a complex delivery to Staythorbe Power Station in the UK involved a 28 axle girder frame trailer

ALE's new Terex CC8800-1

ALE has also just spent a further €11 million on another 150 lines of self propelled modular transporters taking its SPNT fleet to more than 1,000 axles. Obviously the company hasn't heard of the global economic crisis.

"We think there is a strong market out there - 2010 may be a quieter, flat year but 2011 and onward we think will be very positive," said Mark Harries.

"The launch of our new brand marks an exciting turning point in ALE's 26 year history and gives us a single, clear identity and cements our position as a global leader," he adds. "Our new strap-line - Smarter, Safer and Stronger - was chosen deliberately to reflect what ALE stands for and our determination to remain at the leading edge of our industry."

Another innovative development is a mega-jack system for the load-out of platforms and jackets for offshore

Mark Harries

The AL.SK190 working in Saudi Arabia

Transporting a 471 tonne, 60m long, 9m diameter column for the Salalah methanol Plant in Oman

One of ALE's Terex CC2800

involve transporting and delivering components weighing up to 11,000 tonnes for the two ships - the HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales.

Company history

Roger Harries, a mechanical engineer by trade, started the UK-based company 27 years ago. After almost 10 years of organic growth, he realised that a full scale operation in the Middle East to service the oil, gas and power industries in the UAE was the best way to continue the company's expansion and opened an office in Abu Dhabi in 1992. Three years later, son Mark joined on the finance side, initially to sort a few problems out but decided to stay. In 2000 the company recognised that its lifting capability needed strengthening.

"We were weaker than the competition because we were hiring in this critical equipment rather than owning it," says Mark Harries. "In 2000 we bought a crane company in South East Asia which included six cranes with capacities up to 1,500 tonnes. Two years later we purchased Brambles Heavy Contracting effectively doubling the size of the business which increased our presence worldwide. We paid a high price for the business as it gave us the critical mass to go and win the larger contracts and become a real player in the project market."

The Distribution Services Division of Alstom Power Service UK was added in 2004/5 and work started on the design and development of its AL.SK cranes in 2006. A year later weighing and ballasting specialist John Gibson Projects was acquired. The business has 20 offices around the world, employs 700 people with revenues of €150 million.

Current climate

"We expect this year to be good but flat overall, before growth starts again in 2011. We expect the Middle East to come back strong, driven by the oil price and global demand for oil and energy, which I think will continue for some time," says Harries. "Customers need to have confidence when deciding to use a company and therefore look for a track record and a depth of supply. If they need 100 axle lines they like knowing that we have 1,000 in our fleet just in case."

"Luckily, our jobs are planned so far in advance that we get a good view of the future. At the moment, tenders are out rather than just enquiries."

"We need to stay focussed on the bigger lifting side of the business, that is where our true skills lie. I suppose it goes back to the fact that we are primarily an engineering rather than a plant hire company. We are currently looking at a couple of businesses to acquire within our current areas of expertise," he adds.

The future - more of the same?

"We have changed our balance from heavy transport to a project business but we are still light on the crane side which we need to bolster.

The drive behind the development of the AL.SK was the huge cost of big cranes from the major manufacturers and the need for more lifting power than a CC8800 Twin. Containerised shipment was also important to cut costs and improve the speed between jobs. We realised that we were not going to get this from existing crane manufacturers. Users are very pleased with the SK190, the design is very thorough as shown by the few changes needed during the building of the second crane. We need to make sure that we have the resources in place to maximise next year's growth."

"Our challenge is that we have to think outside of the box, offering more innovative solutions than our major European competitors and the rapidly developing local companies."