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Preserving the past

Although mobile cranes have been around for over a century, cranes as we know them largely date from the 1940's. While a few examples from the 40's, 50's and 60's have been preserved, most are left rotting in yards or worse still have been cut up.

The powered access industry is no better. Although a younger industry there have been some recent excellent examples of older truck mounted lifts being fully restored for promotional purposes.

The excavator has a shared history with lattice cranes, so we asked Arthur Smith to tell us about the work of the Excavator Preservation Trust in the hope that it might spur a few crane and access companies into taking some action to preserve historic machines of the past.

Since the 1920's the rope operated excavator has been one of the most useful and versatile machines in the building of modern Britain. The smaller universal excavator equipped as a shovel, drag-shovel, skimmer, dragline, grab or crane was from many years the mainstay of building and construction sites. Larger stripping shovels were employed in quarrying, obtaining the raw materials for roads and buildings. The biggest machines of all, the walking draglines, were engaged in removing overburden to gain access to coal deposits etc. Sadly, for those interested in all things mechanical, the excavators we once knew are disappearing. The first to go was the skimmer, replaced by wheeled loading shovels, then rope operated shovels and drag shovels were superseded by hydraulic excavators. Still hold-

ing their own, at least to some degree, are the larger draglines, grabs and cranes with models of the latter now capable of lifting loads of up to 2,000 tonnes and heights of up to 200 metres. The loss of these machines is sad but inevitable, as has been the loss of the British manufacturers which produced them, such as Ruston-Bucyrus, Priestman, Ransomes & Rapier, Smith Rodley and Newton Chambers.

We are fortunate however that a small number of people have recognised the historical importance of these older excavators and the undoubted interest in this type of machinery. Ian Hartland having found a use for an old excavator some years ago began collecting them at his quarry in Threlkeld, Cumbria. Then in 1985 he read Peter Grimshaw's recently published book 'Excavators' which directed attention onto the different types of excavators and their manufacturers. He promptly contacted Grimshaw, a life long enthusiast of these machines and put him in touch with Philip Peacock. Peacock lived in Hull, the former home of Priestman and had grown up with an avid interest in its machines, later becoming a plant fitter, driver and finally a manager with a crane hire company.

The three became instrumental in the formation of 'The Vintage Excavator Trust', starting with a

'portakabin' at Hillhead in 1997 and an advert in Camden Miniature Steam Services Book. Suddenly people who thought they were the only ones interested in old cranes and excavators were brought together, becoming members of the Trust. Hartland's quarry became its base and members started sending their own machines to join Hartland's collection. There are now over fifty machines on display, many of them in working order and others in the course of restoration. Each year, in May and September, a working weekend is held at the quarry where members of the public can see a variety of the machines in operation. Added attractions include a mining museum and the restored narrow

The second most numerous brand at the Trust is Priestman. Again the various models and types are well represented, many of them belonging to Adrian Patterson who has a well equipped workshop at Threlkeld. His collection boasts a complete range of Cubs from the MkI to the MkVI and a VC 15, a long reach hydraulic drag shovel designed by Priestman to replace the dragline on many duties. Other makes include NCK and Smith.

Until recently the emphasis has been on the preservation of rope operated machines, but it is recognised that early hydraulic machines are becoming historically significant and of course all of us have fond memories of the machines we knew in our formative years.

A few of the cranes & excavators at Threlkeld.



C&a historic cranes

A Ruston-Bucyrus 25-RBSC crane capable of lifting 30 tonnes.



A few of the cranes & excavators at Threlkeld.



gauge railway up into the quarry on which the Bagnall steam locomotive 'Sir Tom' can be seen.

The excavators include many models by Ruston-Bucyrus, with various front end equipment, including crowd-shovels, drag shovels, skimmers, draglines, grabs and lift crane attachments. Models include a number of 10, 19, 22 and 33-RBs, a 16, 17 and 38-RB, plus the massive 61-RB. Biggest of them all though is a 110-RB electric mining shovel, in the process of being re-assembled following its move from the Castle Cement quarry near Clitheroe.

It is therefore appropriate to have some machines that younger members grew up with. In addition to the aforementioned VC 15 other examples include a Priestman Mustang and Beaver along with two Ackerman face shovels. The Beaver was basically a MkVI Cub with the cable drums removed and hydraulic bucket hoist and drag functions fitted. The mechanical slew and travel functions remained. This hybrid arrangement was not popular with operators and subsequently few British attempts at producing hydraulic excavators were successful.

This 22-RB, recently restored by Richard Bragg, is a typical example of a dragline. Their long reach made them ideal for keeping waterways clear amongst many other tasks.



The cranes at Threlkeld are mostly crane versions of excavators. An example of a machine based on an excavator but designed specifically as a crane, is the Ruston-Bucyrus 25-RBSC, this consists of a 22-RB superstructure mounted on a 30-RB under frame resulting in a useful crane with a 30 tonne lifting capacity.

There are a number of smaller private collections around the country with collectors tending to concentrate on a particular manufacturer. Andrew Beaulah has a farm near Hull with a substantial

crawler tractor collection. He allows some Trust members to keep their excavators, mostly Priestmans, there and holds working days, in February and July.

Walking draglines are generally too expensive to be kept in working order for demonstration purposes, however a Bucyrus-Erie 1150B walking dragline has been preserved as a static exhibit at St. Aidan's near Leeds. This 1200 tonne machine fitted with a 215 ft. boom and a 19 cu yd bucket worked at the RJB Mining opencast site until 1988. After the site was closed and

flooded, RJB donated it to a trust set up by Leeds City Council with financial support from British Coal. This machine is maintained by the 'Friends of St. Aidan's B-E 1150-B Dragline'.

There does not yet appear to be a specific crane collection open to visitors although there are many interesting examples around. Most preserved railways have one or two, from large breakdown cranes down to small hand cranes, but where are the early mobile cranes, and the products of such companies as Coles, Jones and Ransomes & Rapier etc...?



The narrow gauge quarry railway is an additional attraction at Threlkeld. Here the steam locomotive 'Sir Tom' is giving a ride to the catering ladies who ensure that visitors do not go hungry on working weekends.

For further information on the 'Vintage Excavator Trust', or to join its 200 plus members and receive its quarterly newsletter, contact the secretary Philip Peacock 01482-875892, or membership secretary Pam Allarton 0121-5503160.

The 200 tonne 110-RB is the biggest machine at Threlkeld. Donated by Castle Cement it is currently being re-assembled.



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