

Alf Sparrow 1921 - 2012

Alf Sparrow, founder of the Sparrows Crane hire business which became one of the world's largest crane rental companies has died following a short illness. He passed away at his home in Cornwall on Monday February 20th, having suffered a stroke and entered a coma a week or two earlier. He celebrated his 90th birthday last August. His nephew Leigh Sparrow, publisher of Cranes & Access, takes a look back over his life.

Alf Sparrow, the third child and eldest of three sons in a family of seven children, was born in Bath, Somerset, to Edith and George William Sparrow in 1921. G W.

Sparrow was a local entrepreneur who tried his hand at a number of ventures to earn a living. When Alf was born GW was a haulier, initially with a horse and cart with steam and diesel trucks coming later. The young Alf used to accompany his father on regular trips to London - a three day excursion in those days, travelling at around 15 miles an hour. His next venture was a makeshift transport café in Bath to which he soon added petrol pumps to serve the growing number of cars on the road. He and the family built the business into one of the largest petrol retailers in the south west, selling up to 14 different brands of fuel from the one forecourt.

Vehicle repairs and servicing - a natural extension - were added with every family member expected to help out if they were of working age, this was in addition to their day jobs. Shortly after the start of the war, Alf was keen to play his part as a fighter pilot and volunteered for the Royal Air force. However the fact that his formal education had ended at 14 - thanks to his father - meant that he failed the obligatory maths exam and having little time to study and do a retake, never achieved one of his greatest ambitions. However, having volunteered for the forces he lost the protected status he would have had at Walters Engineering where he was working and was recruited into the army. His skills led him into the Royal Engineers and he served

in North Africa, before joining the allied advance up through Italy, spending some time in military hospitals in Italy and the UK, before being demobbed.

After the war Alf and middle brother George started a heavy vehicle recovery and repair business with army surplus recovery trucks. One of the earliest was an ex-US Army twin boom wrecker on a Mack truck purchased for £300 which could lift sixteen tonnes over the rear or eight tonnes over the side. The Mack was sprayed red and on their fathers advice, sign written in the same



The 16 tonne Mack recovery truck



The Sparrows home-made crane fleet circa 1950



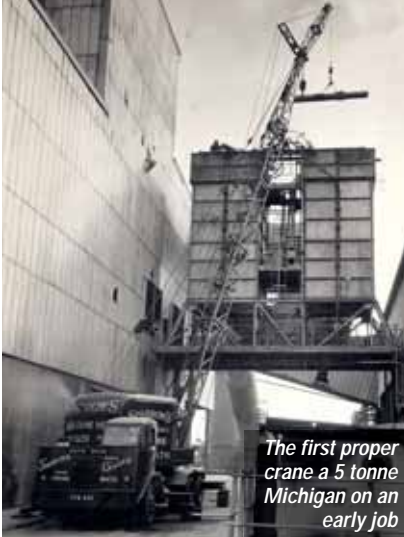
Alf Sparrow in 1981

elaborate lettering as his Showmen customers - giving the early machines a bit of a 'circus-look'. Although the brothers soon changed to a more simplified lettering, that first unit established the company's famous red livery with cream sign-writing that was to become its trade mark around the world.

In addition to heavy recovery work, the brothers increasingly used the

wrecker for a wide range of lifting jobs, from unloading machine tools to placing concrete lamp stands in Devizes and Bristol - two of their first contracts.

Alf soon realised that the heavy wrecker was not ideal for some of the lifting jobs and set about building his own crane. He fabricated a 24ft/7.3 metre boom from angle iron and attached it to the front bumper of an ex-army Quad gun-tractor building the machine without the benefit of a large drill or a proper welder. The crane worked well and at least two more units were built before the brothers decided to purchase their first 'proper' crane, a second hand truck mounted Michigan Power Shovel which cost £2,000. The unit had been used for demolition work and was set up for high speed cycle work - too fast for regular lifting duties. Once again Alf's engineering skills served him well as he modified it, even fitting powered boom luffing, something that only became a manufacturer's option some time later. This was possibly the last of the home built/modified cranes as the young company - now joined by youngest brother Gordon - started to buy cranes specifically designed for the type of lifting they were doing, from manufacturers such as Coles Cranes. Throughout this early period the two brothers also took turns to drive a taxi - often through the night - in order to keep their father off their back as they ploughed their lifting earnings back into the business.



The first proper crane a 5 tonne Michigan on an early job



Alf Sparrow (R) with one of the first new cranes



Alf proudly stands next to a new Demag CC4000 crawler crane in Brazil.



Alf Sparrow at the controls of a Coles 5 ton Mark VII placing a glass lined tank at Harveys of Bristol



Business is booming the three Sparrow brothers taking delivery of a new Coles Leda

The brothers built the company rapidly throughout the post war building boom, eventually becoming one of the largest crane rental companies in the world. They achieved many 'firsts' along the way, acquiring the latest and largest cranes before others dared. These included the first 22 and 45 tonne Grove truck mounted telescopics in Europe; the first 110 tonne Lorain lattice truck crane, the world's largest at the time then the first 500 tonne and later 1,000 tonne Gottwald mobile cranes - to name a few.

The company built up an enviable reputation for the quality of its operators, its service and the condition of its cranes. It was also well ahead of its time in terms of marketing, building up a strong brand image. Operations were opened in the Middle East and the USA with joint ventures in France and several other countries. The company also developed a substantial division providing crane operators and servicing for the offshore industry, which still exists today. The business was floated on the stock market in 1968 with the family retaining a majority holding.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the brothers having built the business, the registered company remained as G W. Sparrow and Sons Ltd, even though their father died from a heart attack in 1952, aged 52 and all seven children held an equal share in the business.

The financial challenges of the early 1980's, coupled with family differences led to a hostile takeover of the business by BET in late 1985. This also led to the departure of the three brothers. Alf, at that point was 65 and moved into retirement. He remained active though with a couple of non-executive directorships while improving his golf.



The Sparrows were ahead of their time when it came to marketing - here an open day to launch the new 500 tonne Gottwald and two of the first Grove TM800s in Europe - note that while now a publicly quoted international crane business, the original filling station is still there, although now with just one brand - Texaco.

On the personal front he was married three times, fathering three daughters by his first marriage to Joyce - Wendy born just before he went off to war, then Lesley and Nicola. His second marriage to Anne gave him a son, Stephen, who has made him very proud, becoming a

highly skilled international lifting engineer, now based in the USA. Finally he spent some of the happiest years of his life married to third wife Pat, who was at his bedside when he died peacefully at home in Looe, Cornwall. He was determined not to spend his last days in hospital.

Sadly I missed the chance to spend any time with him as an adult and until recently never appreciated quite how much he had achieved in his earlier years and how much the success of the Sparrows crane business was based on his early ingenuity, hard work, high standards and respect for people - no matter their background. He loved cranes but had other passions as well. He never quite got over being turned down as a fighter pilot, but was later delighted to break the record at the Bristol & Wessex flying club, for the time taken to qualify for solo flying. He also acknowledged that if he had been accepted, he may not have survived the war and it is almost certain that the crane business that bore the family name would never have been. His long life touched a large number of people and he will be fondly remembered as one of the founding members of the crane rental industry.

More information on Alf Sparrow's life story can be found in his book 'A Lifting Legend', published by KHL.



Sparrows was often the first with new cranes including this 45 tonne Grove - the first in Europe and the world's largest telescopic at the time.



A recent photo with third wife Pat