

# Fish to the North, Sheep to the South

In what we hope will become a regular feature that looks at local hire companies that are changing and evolving their businesses, Pam Penny visited North Wales based Bob Francis Crane Hire.

**Bob Francis entered the news recently when it purchased the first Kobelco built Manitowoc crawler crane in Europe. In the past two and half years the company has invested heavily in crawler cranes bucking the trend for mobile hirers to leave crawler crane hire to specialists.**

C&A joined three generations of the Bob Francis family at their Rhuddlan base as they proudly took delivery of the Manitowoc 80 tonne 8500E. The new crane takes the crawler fleet to seven, ranging from the five tonne IHI CCH50T to the new 80 tonner. The 27 unit mobile fleet ranges from eight to 100 tonnes.



*Bob Francis and Neil Roberts, Crane Operator with the company for 15 years, next to their beloved Hydrocon 8T Marksman bought in 1972 - "I want it refurbished" said Bob Francis.*



*(L to R): Luke Francis, Mark Francis, Karl Kirkpatrick (Crane-Credit), Ross Wilson (Grove Europe) and Bob Francis*

**C&A** face to face

## A bit of history

The Bob Francis Crane Hire company started in 1981 and expanded on the back of the A55 development starting with the five year Conwy Tunnel project. As the sole providers of cranes for the project, the work was guaranteed and introduced it to 'blue chip' companies, such as the British Nuclear Group.

"The geography is not brilliant here - fish to the north and sheep to the south and neither want cranes!" says Bob Francis. In spite of this the company now employs 52 people at three locations, Rhuddlan, Anglesey and Deeside. It is considering adding to its depot network to expand into new areas, particularly as the company is a member of the National Crane Hire Group, providing national coverage for its customers.

Business predominantly comes from the construction sector, but the company is working hard to maintain a healthy mix across various industries, including the electrical and transformer markets. Growth areas for the company include air-conditioning and contract lifting plus specialist lifting frames for moving thousands of caravans every year which secures a steady flow of business from tourism.

## Why Crawlers?

Ten to fifteen years ago the company had 30 tonne NCK Pennines which 'reached their sell-by date and simply died off'. Then, spotting a niche in the market some two and a half years ago, the company decided to invest again in crawlers. The demand created justified further investment. The Francis family say that the crawlers are opening up new avenues with contractors, "the company is becoming a one-stop shop for mobiles and crawlers. For example we currently have three crawlers and four mobiles on a shopping centre site in the North West.

Demand for smaller cranes has fallen, Hiab type cranes and telehandlers are now used for house-building, taking mobile cranes off of housing sites" says Mark Francis.

## What Next?

The company has invested £2 million in new equipment this year and is planning to expand its transport division with specialist trailers. "We don't want to stand still. If you want a successful business you have to keep it moving" continued Mark. It is also considering adding training services.

### The Head of the Family

During our visit Bob Francis sat at the head of the table smoking his pipe, relaxed and happy to talk about the company, his family and even himself.

"I've been told 'I'm old fashioned' and I don't use email". He has one of those faces that holds character and as he talks about his working life which included the police force and a spell as a private investigator, he recalls his first days in the crane business with 19 hour working days and few health and safety rules to adhere to. He speaks his native Welsh and is a firm believer in really knowing his customers.

He refers to his wife Hefin of 49 years as 'she who must be obeyed' and you get the distinct impression that this man, who has built his business on traditional family values, reputation and service is still doing just that 25 years on.

### Ready for Change

Bob's son, Mark Francis, 39, has now taken over the commercial and operational reigns of the business and is implementing some fresh ideas, including a new logo, livery, and communication materials including a revamped website. He does however hold firm with the traditional company values of giving a good service, knowing people's names and keeping personalities to the fore. He has worked with the company for twenty years and has just returned following a four-year absence.

Luke Francis, Mark's son, won't be entering the crane hire world just yet. "I want him to learn the business ropes elsewhere first and get a trade so he is off to work as an apprentice carpenter" said Francis.

### Why Manitowoc?

Getting back to the new Manitowoc 8500E we asked Mark Francis why the company had



The new 80 tonne Manitowoc 8500E.

chosen to purchase this crane from Manitowoc, rather than Kobelco? Availability perhaps?

"We have dealt with Grove for many years and they have always supported us very well. We have always had a good relationship with the management team. Having the machine and the credit facility supplied by the manufacturer was an obvious choice for us. The terms were excellent and the deal was good", he replied. Karl Kirkpatrick of Crane Credit, (Bank of Scotland)

worked directly with the Francis family to secure the deal.

Ross Wilson, of Grove/Manitowoc was keen to point out that "unlike most companies the Manitowoc group has local people on the ground with local knowledge". There are no doubt many challenges for the Francis family business in the ever evolving crane hire industry but one thing is certain - they get to know their customers and it seems those customers keep coming back for more.



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