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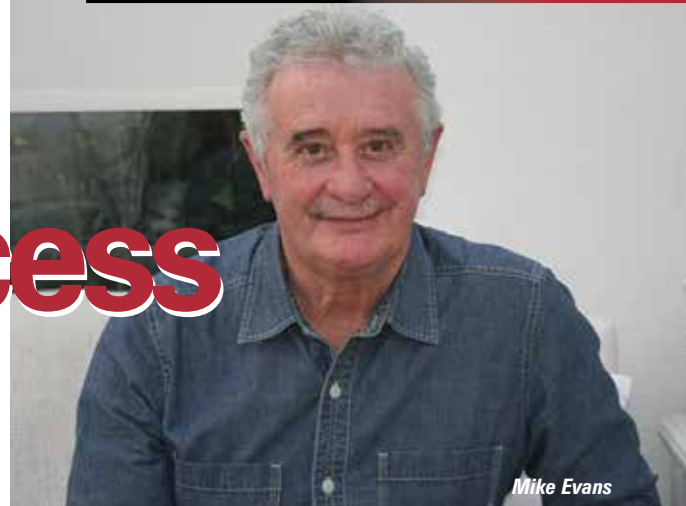
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# Mike Evans - 40 years in powered access

Ed Darwin travelled to Cardiff to speak with access industry veteran Mike Evans, currently an independent consultant with Riwal UK, about his 40 year career in the powered access market which dates back to the start of the industry in Europe.



Mike Evans

Evans also gave his views on the rental market, as well as his predictions on what the future has in store for the industry.

## A 'brief' history

Growing up Evans showed signs of being a promising rugby and football player and was even on the books for Cardiff City football club. His parents however encouraged him to pursue a more traditional career, although they were less than pleased when he decided to abandon his job working for the Cardiff City Council to work (for less money) at the Caterpillar dealership in Cardiff. He remembers his mother saying: "You will never make anything of your life if you make decisions like that!" Perhaps a case of famous last words?

Evans made the change from equipment sales to rental in 1969 at the aged of 21. He started out - where he insists everyone in the hire business should start out - on a hire desk for Harvey Plant Hire. In 1973 he joined Port Talbot Plant (PTP) as hire and sales manager and gradually worked his way up to managing director, helping the company become the UK market leader in powered access. Evans finally left PTP in 1989, joining David Price to set up GKN Powered Access but following

the departure of Price and the sale of the company to A-Plant in 1994 he left to reunite with Price at Nationwide Access (Lavendon). As director of Nationwide Access and Access Solutions, Evans was responsible, among other things, for forming the truck mounted division. He also worked in Germany and France for Lavendon and was a long serving IPAF and CPA Council member. In 2005 he became a consultant for the company and finally parted with Nationwide in 2011. After consulting for a number of companies, he has spent the last two years as a consultant with Riwal UK.

## Mentors, machines and markets

"Some things I feel that I must convey," Evans begins, "I have been very lucky to work with excellent mentors. David and Dorothy Mort (owners of PTP) were truly entrepreneurial and had a great feel for what was right and wrong in the business. They encouraged me to follow my instincts and offered in return honesty, loyalty and integrity. They had already developed a very successful quality based regional plant hire business and were ready to expand into new markets."

Although PTP operated a fleet of 12 Simon truck mounted lifts - a

relatively large number at that time - its main focus was in portable oil-free air compressors. Towards the end of the 1970's when the compressor market became more competitive, PTP recognised the potential of powered access. It changed its focus and embraced the opportunity, targeting the same steel companies, coal mines, petrochemical and automotive industries to which they had supplied compressors.

"The late 70's was all about identifying a market for a new product," says Evans. "Key clients were those who could appreciate a new way of working at height that was safer and more economical than towers and traditional scaffolding. The proposition was to demonstrate versatility, speed of access, cost savings and safety benefits."

"Early successes included the automotive sector, with the construction of Ford's new engine plant, petrochemicals, where oil refinery maintenance was very safety driven and ship repair where speed and manoeuvrability were vital. These gave us the confidence to go out and sell the concept to anyone who would listen. In the early pioneering days a boom rented quite easily at £10 a foot a week, (40ft = £400, 60ft = £600 and 80ft = £800) and customers saw the advantages of using the equipment and paying those prices."

The introduction of new machines like the 40ft JLG 40F self-propelled boom, and 200ft Simon Galaxy truck mounted lifts also prompted this change - although Evans was not completely convinced with the new JLG lift stating at its first demonstration: "It's a great idea but I can never see it taking off!"



The JLG 40F - "It's a great idea but I can never see it taking off!"

Another example of famous last words?! Nevertheless PTP quickly built up a sizeable fleet of self-propelled booms and scissors, centred around JLG, along with a number of truck mounts.



Evans with Benford managing director Graham Musson agreeing on a large order of Benford LM50 diesel scissor lifts

## GKN

PTP, which later changed its name to PTP Aerial Platforms, was sold to BET in 1987 with Evans becoming managing director of the new division that encompassed PTP and the Scott Greenham aerial lift business. 18 months later Evans left with nothing lined up - contrary to popular belief at the time - soon joined David Price at GKN to create a powered access rental company in the UK. GKN eventually decided that the powered access didn't fit in with its strategy and sold it to A-Plant, with Evans playing a key role in the disposal.

Determined to create a national powered access company in the UK, Price was introduced to Nationwide



The original 200ft Simon Galaxy was launched at Bauma in 1986 and was worth approximately £400,000



Access owner David Wraith. Knowing both David's well, Evans played a part in closing the deal and the rest, as they say, is history.

**If the Price is right**

Speaking of Price and his decision to buy Nationwide Access, Evans said: "David is one of the most inspiring persons I have had the pleasure of knowing. As well as driving people hard he has a great awareness and strategic mind and he believed the powered access business was ready to really take off in the UK. He felt if someone was able to deliver quality and reliability from a large depot network then they would sweep the board - so that's what we set out to do."

"We embarked on a rapid growth plan and targeted market sectors that would grow and identified the different requirement in those markets. We were quick on our toes, swift with machine turnaround and had an extremely dedicated and motivated workforce who were all made to feel important in the roles they were fulfilling. The best people in the industry were keen to join and expansion was almost seamless."

Nationwide Access under the banner of Access Solutions, also become the UK end user dealer for Grove Manlift, providing new and used equipment, after market service and repairs as well as operator training. These divisions were run by Evans who was also responsible for key rental accounts for Nationwide. Then in 1995 he was asked to set up the 'Skylift' truck mounted division.

**"Retirement"**

"In 2005, following the retirement of David Price I started my own business, with an agreement to provide consultancy services to Nationwide for key accounts and major project initiatives. That arrangement lasted beyond expectations, and ended six years later after the recently acquired businesses had all but been fully integrated and a strong team formed to manage their ongoing strategic initiatives. My relationship with Lavendon has always been first class."



David Price

*Price: "For me, Mike Evans is one of a very small handful of people who could be described as a true pioneer and promoter of the powered access industry in Europe. He was there during those early, formative years of the 1970's, and has played a role in the evolution and progress of both the equipment and the market-place ever since."*

*"Mike's knowledge of the industry is second to none, and he has consistently been the principle sounding board for me and many others, including colleagues, manufacturers, the press and customers alike. Consequently he has deservedly won respect from all sectors of the industry, both at home and abroad. His enthusiasm, integrity and talent for the business are widely acknowledged. On a personal level, I see him as a confidant and a good friend, whose company I enjoy very much. I congratulate him warmly on an outstandingly successful 40 years in the business. He and his family can be very proud of his achievements, and he may be sure that there are many of us, who are very appreciative and thankful for all the help and support he has given us along the way."*

On leaving Lavendon, Evans offered his consultancy services to Riwal UK to assist its growth and help establish the business in the UK market. "Working with Riwal is brilliant and so enjoyable. An industry experienced management team is forging a reputation for quality and reliability. It is developing well and winning more



In 2011 Lavendon consolidated all of its UK operations under the name Nationwide Platforms.



A gathering of fresh faced access veterans at an annual Lighthouse Dinner at the Grosvenor House in London

customers as it expands and fills a role in the market place," said Evans.

**Market Predictions:**

When asked to give his personal opinion of where he sees the market and what part national and regional rental companies will play, Evans replied: "I think ever since the financial meltdown in 2008 there has been a lack of investment in replacement equipment. While there has been significant investment in small electric scissors the mid-range core equipment (booms and scissors) seems to be getting older and older and companies need to invest heavily to catch up. Fortunately, as the economy continues to recover so too will the market. The UK is also predicted to be one of the strongest growth regions in Europe but how 'leading companies' achieve growth and by what means it is achieved it will be interesting to see."



**Rates, replenishment & consolidation**

"New machine prices will rise and specification demands from UKCG companies and additional technological requirements will further add to costs. As a result hire rates will need to improve to encompass these changes and to encourage capital investment. The lack of price discipline during the downturn has made price increases harder for some companies, but the

sooner you start to increase them the sooner you will get back on track. My message is 'be brave', everyone within the rental industry wants rates to rise in order to maintain quality - if you know you deliver a good product with a good service then ask for the right price."

"The market is continuing to grow and niche markets requiring niche products to specialist sectors will prove rewarding. However, with interest rates likely to increase making borrowing more expensive and with manufacturers unlikely to fund fleet expansion with low finance offers, due to past mistakes of flooding the market, it's possible we will see further consolidation in the rental sector. Ageing fleets will have to be replaced before the next dip in the cycle as no one will want to be, or can afford to be, in a fast moving market with old and unreliable hire stock. I suspect some companies will be judging the curve to plan an exit."

**Nationals Vs Regionals**

Evans begins by saying: "There will always be a place for both national and regional companies. Nationals are driven by systems, procedures and dealing with volume at the most cost effective way for them. They do not always get the customer relationship element right. A lot of investment in fleet replacement seems necessary as



"five gallon overhauls" still leave you with aging fleets and customers coming out of recession now appear to be looking for improved quality and reliability."

"The challenge for nationals is, as always, to balance their customer portfolios with more keenly priced volume business, while being able to deliver local high quality service and derive best rates in local markets. Nationals always have to raise the bar and stay ahead of the regional players who often provide a friendlier and more responsive local service."

On the regional companies he adds: "They have to be able to deliver the financial returns to permit investment. Well run businesses with strong balance sheets should be able to raise the finance to expand, although others may struggle to keep up with the growth in the market. Discerning end users will probably continue to see the value in enhanced service delivery and will still be prepared to pay a premium for the comfort of knowing

that their productivity improvement and delivery of statutory safety requirements are met."

It seems as though finding a happy balance is key with Evans concluding: "It's always good to encourage change, you must always have the ability to get new ideas and a fresh look on things - otherwise we would all be doing the same things as we were doing in the 70s. It's important to get the correct balance between being transactional or customer oriented, because in the end it will change the way you react to customers and how customers react to you. A lack of perception of what customers are looking for is a dangerous thing."

#### What's next for Evans?

Evans confesses he is uncertain what the future holds however he feels once he completes his open ended consultancy agreement with Riwal UK, it is unlikely he will seek to turn his hand to another company: "I've probably done my stint," says Evans. "I turned 65 last September and I've reached an

age where I don't need the stress of saving or building up any other companies - I've got the book AND the T-shirt! My wife Val and I are very much looking forward to spending time with our family and grandchildren. Nothing brings me more pleasure than playing football or rugby with my grandkids and I would like to spend as much time with them while they are young enough to enjoy my company!" He concludes: "The lessons I

learned from David and Dorothy Mort and David Price have been invaluable throughout my career and I think I have repaid them well for the benefits I gained - great partnerships, great fun and wonderful successes. I have also worked with great people in all disciplines of the hire business and without the full support of everyone the businesses I have worked in would not have been as successful."



Evans with his wife Val, his son and daughter and five grandchildren

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