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# Customer driven

**Janet Entwistle took over the reins of one of Europe's largest crane rental companies - UK based Ainscough Crane Hire - 16 months ago. She recently granted her first interview to Cranes & Access editor Mark Darwin.**

Entwistle was appointed chief executive following the resignation of Robin Richardson in September 2016. A lawyer by training she was previously head of property services group Knight Square Holdings and prior to that created and was managing director of BT Fleet as a standalone business.

"I like doing different things," she says. "Yes, I did start life as an in-house company lawyer involved with business development and new ventures. It was very much a commercial rather than academic legal role which made me approach things in a logical way. Many industries think they are different but there are many common elements at Ainscough that feel familiar, including a depot network and vehicles - true they are a lot bigger - however at BT I ran a network of 60 garages across the UK with similar workshops."

"I think there are advantages in not having sector experience in that you question everything to understand how and why things are done in a certain way. Specific knowledge of cranes isn't essential - it is about customers, providing a service and making sure that you have a proposition that has real value. All my roles to date have had common elements - large numbers



of employees where you are entirely dependent on their interaction with the customer who judges the service provided. It is about understanding how your service slots into their business to deliver the solutions they need. Another theme is working in a business that is, or wants to be the best, where there is potential to build on that."

"The legal work I did in business development involved creating new ventures and services. At BT Fleet I created a sound and professional in-house operation but it was also about seeing the potential to provide external services. The experience in Knight Square - a business with real customer service and relationship issues - involved making something better out of what was there. Whatever the sector, for me it is about the team with the right mix of skills."



Janet Entwistle



## Working for a market leader

"There is a real responsibility with working for a dominant market leader but I am not sure whether it is any easier or harder. I do not feel any pressure being market leader but we have to take it seriously, we have an important role to play in the industry to work with others to improve and strengthen it for everyone - if you don't want that then you are in the wrong job."

"The crane market is regional with many reputable regional rather than national competitors and that brings extra challenges. The demise of Hewden means we are in an odd position as the only truly national crane company. That may change, we could see consolidation while others will grow organically. Most other industries have a number of larger players, each with their own USPs, then smaller niche players. I think the crane market will change

but this will be driven by customers and their needs."

## A year into the job

"I have been at Ainscough just over a year and have spent a lot of time seeking to understand the business, industry and customer needs and I think I now have a good handle on it. The Hewden experience happened only a few months after I joined and we spent quite a long time analysing what it meant to us as a company, before and after they went into administration. We have also seen the uncertainty of Brexit and the challenge of the current economic environment."

## What customers want

"This is an industry that is very focussed on the crane as you would expect. People get excited about the products, but talking to customers they expect a quality crane and operator able to do the job professionally and safely -



(L-R) Andrew Winter, operations director Heavy Cranes, Janet Entwistle and Derek Gow, sales and marketing director



these are givens. Being easy to do business with is our goal. It is not all about price but about the value you bring, including safety, quality, sustainability and environment. I see a huge opportunity to work differently with customers - it is not just about the crane and people, it is also about how you work with customers. What is surprising is how transactional most crane hire is. Cranes are huge complex, high value assets with highly trained operators and support staff, but carry out lifts that may be just a small but absolutely critical part of a project. And yet clients expect the crane to be available at the 'drop of a hat', often booking it the day before, almost as an afterthought. To me this is absolutely barking! There will always be some last minute requirements, but hiring a crane in the same way as a small hand tool is really weird."

"This approach from customers dictates how we drive our business, but not knowing until the last minute makes it difficult to plan. Major projects need earlier inputs from

specialists such as ourselves, which could save money, by changing the erection sequence or position and therefore size of the crane."

"Most service companies look at how the customer works and how they can work together more cost effectively - saving costs, time and effort - something that is more prevalent in other industries. In our sector this happens more on the larger infrastructure projects, but needs to apply to all contracts. If we can deliver a better service or save costs through using a smaller crane then they will come back the next time. That means having the best crane fleet, people and processes."

**Rental rates?**

"It boils down to value not rates. It is all about providing a safe, reliable, high quality service - right across the capacity range. It is about customers wanting the expertise we can bring. Customers will pay a fair price if we can demonstrate the value. We have to focus on delivering that value rather than moaning about the headline rates."



**Do you feel the need to provide a full range of cranes?**

"The benefit of coming from outside the industry is that you ask that sort of question, I feel having a wide range of cranes that we control is the best way of giving customers the service they want. There are many factors that affect profitability and a full product range that we deliver ourselves is a key element of what we do. We do some cross hiring, but not a lot and I am perfectly happy with that."

demand is. I don't get hung up about the fleet size or number of depots, it is about servicing the customer. All our competitors are affected by the current market indices which are all going downwards, and therefore it is about having the right resources - cranes, people, skills - to meet current demand. There is a tendency in the industry to focus more on cranes than people, which are equally important. The fleet will go up and down depending on the market."

Crane and resource utilisation is



*The Ainscough Heavy Cranes depot in Leyland, Lancashire*



*One of the latest crane additions - a Spierings SK1265-AT6*

**Will Liebherr remain the main crane supplier?**

"Today we have a mainly Liebherr fleet but we do work with other suppliers. We want market-leading products and will look at all products and suppliers on their merits. However any supplier to Ainscough will have to support the quality service proposition that we want to offer customers."

**Fleet and depot network**

Ainscough has 30 depots around the UK and 460 cranes, is that likely to change? "You need to be accessible to the customer and where the

critical and we I believe we measure these more closely than anyone, and can be increased by working collaboratively and being clever about how you work. Technical capability improves all the time so do we need to replace or refurbish older cranes? Do we need so many different capacities? I think you will see a process where we slim down and simplify the fleet mix as we go forward."

**Recent additions**

"All fleet additions are customer driven, recent purchases include more mobile self-erecting tower



cranes, including a Liebherr MK 140 and Spierings SK1265-AT6. Each is aimed at slightly different uses, but both are proving to be good cranes. We also have a couple of 450 tonne Liebherr LTM 1450s in the pipeline."

"One area of the crane that I think should be improved is the carrier cab I have challenged our suppliers to look at the best truck cabs and drive systems and incorporate them into their cranes."

At one time the average age of the Ainscough fleet was 55 months however more recently purchasing has been sporadic, oscillating between years of substantial additions and years of none, creating a lumpy fleet. A plan is being developed to smooth out the age profile and refresh the fleet.

"Older cranes are usually sold direct to overseas buyers, we also have a refurbishment centre and can refurbish an eight or nine year old crane to give it an additional five years life. One of the differences between us and competitors is our engineering competence and capability, with all refurb and maintenance work carried out in-house."

see your patch and when you come up you find the world has changed and you have been left behind. You have to do both and I enjoy both - the challenge is to get the right balance between the two."

"I love getting out and about seeing customers, depots and equipment. At the end of my first week with Ainscough I was being shown how to operate a 1,000 tonner! You need to really understand what it is like for everyone delivering your services to customers, you always learn something which is absolutely vital. But my role is also to look at the longer term and the bigger picture, and that includes looking outside. We have lots of stakeholders who want to be confident that we are making the right long-term decisions."

"I am happy with the team I have around me. However we have a challenge attracting young people into an industry with an aging workforce. We have an apprenticeship scheme for fitters and we are keen to establish a career path for crane operators and we are involved in the development of lifting apprenticeships."



### Management style

"I think work needs to be fun and satisfying. To do a good job you have to do top-down and bottom-up. If it is all high level you risk introducing things without appreciating the full impact on those on the ground. Equally if you are permanently on the ground you only

### Attracting young people

"Different people get excited by different things, but I think a big crane is quite exciting - but the whole proposition and career options are as important. We have to recognise what young people want in terms of working environment and work-life balance.



*Ainscough carries out all of its own maintenance*



*The well organised workshop in the Leyland depot*

We are looking at everything we do to attract young talent, retain existing talent and bring more experience in."

### Working for a private equity owner

"Some of the challenging environments to work in can be family businesses, while PLCs are driven by the next quarter's figures and the presentation to the City. The advantage of private investors - whether family or Ainscough's private equity - is that you can set your own timetable and are not under the same constraints. If you are successful it should make no

Entwistle was a board member of the Freight Transport Association for six years and is not averse to being more involved in her industry. "I would consider getting more involved. When I joined I didn't know the industry well enough, and I don't get involved unless I have a good level of understanding and can contribute. In my BT days all our garages were MOT test stations and I have worked with government bodies to drive up standards in all my jobs."

### The future for Ainscough?

"I think you will see more of the same. We have a more



*A more recent fleet addition - a 300 tonne Liebherr*

difference whatsoever who owns the company."

"Let's be honest, Oaktree Capital Management bought the company in early 2015 and then faced a crash in the oil and gas industry - a big part of our business - yet their enthusiasm for the business hasn't diminished. They are practical and recognise the challenges including it being a cyclical business. We need to be successful through the peaks and troughs and that is part of my job."

### Crane MOTs?

"It is astonishing that there are cranes on the road that do not require an MOT - it is just not acceptable. A majority in the industry would like to see better standards and we all need to play our part in making this happen."

focussed strategy so expect us to continue as market leader, running the business more effectively and therefore delivering a better service. We will work collaboratively with others to drive standards up and broaden services. It is not just about the crane it is about the service that goes with it. The uncertainty of Brexit, Hewden's demise and impact of exchange rate movements, have had a massive influence on the business. This uncertainty also affects customers. Fortunately the UK has several huge infrastructure projects coming on stream, but smaller projects are being put on hold. Our owners are interested in building a company over the long-term and are very supportive."