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CRANES UK LTD

TADANO FAUN GmbH
Postfach 10 02 64 · D-91207 Lauf
Tel.: +49 (0) 9123/955-0 · Fax: +49 (0) 9123/3085
Web: www.tadanofaun.de
E-Mail: info@tadanofaun.de

Cranes UK LTD
Unit 21 Shawfield Road - Carlton Industrial Estate
Barnsley, South Yorkshire S71 3HS
Tel.: +44 (0) 1226 731 500 · Fax: +44 (0) 1226 731 900
E-Mail: joelyon@cranesuk.net

on the cover:

A JLG Toucan Junior 8, eight metre self-propelled lift, owned by Alexandra Palace and used for internal maintenance work throughout the exhibition and events complex.



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Tel: +44 (0)8707 740436 Fax: +44 (0)1295 768223
E-mail: info@vertikal.net

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The Vertikal Press

PO box 6998 Brackley NN13 5WY, UK
Tel: +44(0)8707 740436 Fax: +44(0)1295 768223
email: info@vertikal.net
web: www.vertikal.net

In Germany:

Vertikal Verlag

Sundgaualle 15, D-79114,
Freiburg, Germany
Tel: 0761 8978660 Fax: 0761 8866814
email: info.vertikal@t-online.de
web: www.vertikal.net

Germany, Scandinavia, Austria and Switzerland

Karlheinz Kopp, Vertikal Verlag,
Sundgaualle 15, D-79114, Freiburg, Germany
Tel: +49 (0)761 89786615
Fax: +49 (0)761 8866814
email: khk@vertikal.net

Italy

Fabio Potestà, Mediapoint,
Corte Lambroschini,
Corso Buenos Aires 8, V Piano-Interno 7,
I-16129 Genova, Italy
Tel: 010 570 4948 Fax: 010 553 0088
email: mediapointsr.it

The Netherlands

Hans Aarse
39 Seringenstraat, 3295 RN,
S-Gravendeel, The Netherlands
Tel: +31-78 673 4007 Mobile: +31-6 10 901037
email: jfwaarse@planet.nl

UK and all other areas

Pam Penny
PO box 6998 Brackley NN13 5WY, UK
Tel: +44(0)8707 740436
email: pp@vertikal.net

France

Hamilton Pearman, GMT,
32 rue de la 8 mai 1945
F-94510 La Queue en Brie
Tel: 01 4593 0858 Fax: 01 4593 0899
email: hpearman@wanadoo.fr

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Editor:

Leigh Sparrow

Sub Editors:

Rüdiger Kopf
Jürgen Hildebrandt

Sales & customer support:

Pam Penny
Karlheinz Kopp

Production:

Nicole Engesser

Publisher:

Leigh Sparrow

Vertikal
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Letters, emails, faxes and
phone calls are welcome and
should be sent to:

The Editor,
cranes & access,

PO Box 6998, Brackley
NN13 5WY, UK

Tel: +44(0)8707 740436

Fax: +44(0)1295 768223

email: editor@vertikal.net



C&A

comment

Who is responsible?

The HSE has published its report on the tower crane accident in May 2000 that killed three Hewden employees.

The top roller of the climbing frame buckled, causing the crane superstructure to fall 120 metres to the site below. The HSE has said that while several violations were discovered,

there is no evidence that any of them caused the accident. It seems we will never know what really happened.

The sister of one of the men who died is understandably furious that there will be no criminal prosecution – no one to be blamed.

However, the HSE and Crown Prosecution Service are right not to waste taxpayers' money and resources on a prosecution that has no hope of succeeding. It is also wrong to assume that Hewden "got off lightly". The managers and co workers of those who died would have been traumatised by the accident. The notion that the managers responsible for that crane and those men, can just shrug off such incidents is nonsense. The lack of evidence will be hard on them too.

The accident has already cost Hewden over £4.5 million in a settlement with the contractors and was probably a catalyst in its decision to exit the tower crane business.

I am all in favour of throwing the book at guilty parties when violations of safety rules and good practice are discovered, particularly if an accident ensued. The key question is, was the culture at Hewden Tower cranes such that rules were habitually ignored? The two survivors and the management know the truth, and if they were, then they will have to live with it.

The team erecting the crane were said to be highly experienced. If so, why were they not using an anemometer to check wind speed? (It is no excuse to say one was not fitted to the crane). Why had they not used the slew cut-out connection? It is hard to imagine that they were not aware of the need to do so. As to the climbing frame, there was no record of a thorough inspection having been carried out. Why did the team not check this?

While blame clearly lies at the company's feet, for seemingly not drumming good practice into its employees and having systems in place that helped ensure it, the erection team, who would have claimed to be professionals, must also take responsibility for such violations.

Tower crane erectors are on a par with a crane driver. They do a highly skilled job, and if safety is ignored they can kill others as well as themselves. At the last CPA open meeting crane owners seemed to suggest that drivers did not want to take any responsibility for the lifts they carried out. It was also clear that some crane hire owners treat drivers as a commodity, rather than the pilot/captain of a sophisticated piece of equipment.

From the feedback that we receive, crane drivers would, in fact, prefer to be consulted more and would prefer to take responsibility for lifts, but crane hirers must treat them as responsible, standing by their judgement and never overriding their decisions when safety might be involved.

Surely in the case of such critical jobs as crane driver and tower crane or mast climber erector, there should be thorough training with a tough independently assessed test at the end of it, leading to the issuing of a licence. We now have NVQ qualifications for crane drivers, yet there is no industry programme to convert graduates from these courses into experienced crane drivers.

Talking of learning from accidents, it seems that some aerial lift manufacturers still refuse to react responsibly when a structural failure appears to have caused an accident. This is both irresponsible and short sighted, more on this in our next issue, if nothing changes.

Leigh W. Sparrow

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