



Crane People

Earlier this year, BBC Radio 4 reporter **Dylan Winter** spent two months making five programmes called "The Life of Cranes". It was an incredible journey around the history, engineering and human characters of the world crane industry.

I am old enough to remember when a well shaken box of Meccano made a satisfying clank of metal on metal. In those dark days, before safety officers ruled the world, Meccano was death in the home. It contained all sorts of sharp edges, choking hazards and dangerously looped screw driver type things.

Like most kids the first thing I built was a car – immediately followed by my first crane. Then a better one. And another. I soon learned that with a car or a model truck all you can do is to move things around. Cranes offer movement in a whole new dimension.

The philosopher

"They are the most wonderful of machines," says Malcolm Patterson, crane enthusiast and philosopher. "The lathe is called the king of tools – with a lathe you can build another lathe. For me the crane is the king of machines – I appreciate what it has done for civilisation."

It was Malcolm who told me about Scottish hangman John Derek, who plied



'Malcolm Patterson with his model collection'

his trade at Tyburn in the 18th century. He got fed up with dragging corpses up from the pit and designed a three-legged temporary scaffold to haul the dead bodies back up to ground level.

Malcolm is one of those gems you seldom come across in every day life. A steel erector by profession, with a brain as sharp as a pin, he has spent 40 years working with, on and around cranes. He is now retired and spends his days tending to his collection of 300 model cranes. They have taken over his study, his shed and most of his waking hours.

Right there are all the model cranes you have ever seen and lusted after – Dinky, Corgi, Triang, Hornby. Some of them are astonishing feats of engineering. He has a French-made clockwork

site crane which is almost a century old. It even has a pair of H gate control levers – slew left and right, raise and lower jib, raise and lower hook and finally forwards and reverse.

The model is so well designed and manufactured that it begs the question: Where has French engineering gone wrong in the intervening years? As a former 2CV owner I would dearly love to know.

Malcolm feels that cranes are the unsung heroes of engineering. "The public takes them for granted – that really annoys me that", he says. Malcolm tells a story of how he watched the demolition of one of the big Sunderland shipyard cranes.

"First they blew the legs off and it buckled over like a wounded elephant toppling to its knees. That thing had built ships for 50 years and that was all the thanks it got. Blown up and then chopped into scrap. It moved me to tears."

Malcolm also got rather emotional when I gave him a couple of model cranes for his collection. They were beautifully engineered replicas of Liebherr cranes. It was not until after I had handed them over that Malcolm told me that one model was worth £80 and the other could easily bust the £120 mark on the open market. Aaaaargh! Suddenly I found myself able to share in his emotion.

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◀ The manufacturer

Harald Muehlhauser, the head honcho of Liebherr in the UK, had kindly given me the models the day before when we went around the Sunderland plant. It is a wonderful place – massive sheds the size of aircraft hangers and twice as high. The whole place is lit by a combination of floor to ceiling windows and huge football pitch arc lights beaming down through the smoke of the welding kits.

For a radio man it is full of the brilliant sounds of heavy engineering. It is not the steady thrum of factory machinery but the random bashes and crashes, sparking arcs, rattling chains and reversing hooters.

Harald is proud of the Sunderland factory, his British engineers and of his beloved Mini Cooper. We went through a hatchway into the six-inch thick steel casting of the main engine room for a £4 million oil rig crane. The casting alone weighed 40 tonnes; inside, at the centre of a labyrinth of electrical cabling and hydraulic pipe-work, was a pair of huge electric motors. "They generate as much power as 150 Mini-Coopers", he said, using a measuring stick both of us could appreciate.

Harald has worked on cranes all over the world and in every extreme of temperature. In the Gulf the steel work gets so hot that it is impossible to touch. Every operators cab and engine room needs to be air conditioned just to keep the people and vital machinery running smoothly.

At the other end of the world, in Alaska and further North, the rigs are at risk from being swept off their moorings by itinerant ice-bergs. Teams of tugs are employed to patrol the area and herd and nudge the bergs safely out of the way. Harald describes them as ice berg cowboys.

I asked Harald if he would prefer to spend two weeks working in the heat or the extreme cold. Quick as a flash he said, "Can I have one week in each?" This is a man who loves his job.

The salesman

While Harald sells cranes costing millions of pounds each, Bill Green generally works at the opposite end of the market.

I had arranged to meet him on the windswept industrial estate that was once Upper Heyford airforce base – at one time, the epicentre of the UK nuclear strike force. Bill turned out to be the dapper sort you find on car fore-



Bill Green - shrewd judge of man and machine

courts across the country. He is a shrewd judge of both men and machinery. He

has made his living by putting the two together.

We walked down a line of eight or nine taxi-cranes of varying ancestry. Some were almost 30 years old. At least five of them had already been under Bill's penetrating gaze when they last changed hands.

He is a walking Glass's Guide to cranes, familiar with the common faults and benefits of each and every one. He would reckon an initial price and then adjust it up and down according to the hours and miles on the clock, the state of the cables and the ownership history of each machine.

We walked up to one F-reg 20-tonner. Bill clearly loved the machine. He suddenly forgot that I am a journalist and started treating me like a potential buyer. "It lifts like a horse, the drivers love it, very maneuverable, fast on the road, the owners like them," he said. Then came the clincher, "This crane has earned a lot of people an awful lot of money."

I could feel my wallet tingling in my pocket.

Bill admits that he loves cranes. "People in this business love to talk about cranes – we can talk about them all day and all night."

While he is driving his 50,000 miles a year he will sometimes spot a taxi-crane jib sticking up above the roof-tops. He finds it almost impossible not to stop and take a look to see whose machine it is, what sort of work it is doing, how old the machine is. He will go up and chat to the driver and get as much information out of him as possible. He loves cranes, but he loves a deal even more, and you never know when those nuggets of information can be added to the catalogue of lifting machinery he carries around in his head.

Bill has a million great stories about cranes, drivers and sales stunts. There is one thing about him though. Bill just can't resist a double entendre or bit of innuendo. There are times when his manner is slightly reminiscent of Maltese Mickey from the Fast Show. He will tell you, just by the way, that women like the look of an erect jib or the vibration of a powerful engine.

One careful lady driver

I would love to be a witness to Bill's reaction should he spot a crane jib and find Caroline Brett at the controls. Caroline, you see, is Britain's only full time female taxi-crane operator. She works the building sites of Kent and has come across and dealt with every sexist comment you could possibly dream up.

I met her on the Isle of Sheppey working on the roof trusses (cue Bill) of a new housing estate. Caroline is petite, blonde and the right side of 25. Not the sort of woman you would immediately associate with crane driving.



Caroline Brett

Her father operates a small crane hire firm of his own so Caroline has been driving them since she was 16. She loves the work, but did not fancy being employed by her father, so she has now joined the mighty Ainscough operation. She drives a 25 tonner and would like to run larger machines, but concedes that the ancillary equipment associated with larger cranes is too big for her eight-stone body to handle.

Like all crane drivers, Caroline has to put safety first. There are times when driver has to call a halt to the operation because the wind is too strong or the ground is too soft for operations to continue. To tell a team of piece rate roofers that there will be no more work today takes a lot of bottle.

"You have to very calm, you have to let things roll over you at times, just carry on with what you are doing," she says. "But it has all been good humoured, they never know that a woman will be turning up to do the job. By the time I have arrived and started setting up the moment is passed and they just have to accept you as the driver."

Caroline says that they will watch her carefully for the first ten or fifteen minutes. Then, she says, the novelty wears off and all the roofers are interested in is how quick, safe and accurate she is. So far, she has a perfect safety record and her bosses at Ainscough declare themselves to be very happy with her work.

Caroline's ultimate boss is Martin Ainscough, scion of the mighty crane dynasty that emerged from its humble origins in a Lancashire scrap yard. He and his bothers James and Brendan now run the company started by their father.

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Martin Ainscough

The business man

I went to the Ainscough head office, a beautiful oak-beamed and panelled farm house near Wigan, keen to get an idea as to how much a crane costs to hire – not easy information for a journalist to screw out of an Ainscough representative at the best of times.

Martin, who looks as though he has a cupboard full of suits and wears the shiniest shoes this side of the Horse Guards, patiently explained to me that each hire is priced by the job – so that covers not just the weight of the lift and the distance involved but also the weather, the ground conditions, access and a thousand other criteria.

In desperation, I invented a job. I told Martin that I had just built a 30 foot boat in my back garden and that it needed to be lifted over my house and onto a low loader. He asked for endless details, but did not want to come up with a ball park figure. I mentioned that arch rivals Baldwins had given me an extremely competitive price. “We’ll do it for £4,000 then,” he said without a further moments hesitation.

Ainscough is never slow to miss a trick – and for all those cranespotters out there, Ainscough has set up a website at www.ainscoughspotters.co.uk. Here, crane enthusiasts can meet and talk. People like David Tanner, who hired a machine from Ainscough to take him to the church on his wedding day.

Cranespottting

I went to see David and his wife Lindsay. In their wedding pictures, Lindsay looks beautiful, slim and perfect in her ivory silk wedding dress, smiling into the camera. There stands David beside her – but his gaze is directed to the crane behind them.

Lindsay told me that whenever David spots a crane he will turn off the road and take a closer look. There have been times when he has driven into every motorway services they pass just to see if there are any cranes parked up.

David took me up to his study to show us his model cranes. They covered every surface of one half of the room. The other half was a shrine devoted to Lindsay’s collection of soft toys. Him with his cranes, her with cuddly bears.

They are the happiest couple I have seen for years.

I like cranes, but I am not ready to join the ranks of the crane spotters.

The Radio 4 programmes also covered tower cranes. My boss at the BBC confessed to being an inveterate crane watcher. From his office window he can see at least half a dozen. He thought he was all alone in this until he met another BBC producer who worked on the floor above.

A chance canteen comment was followed by an orgy of emails. It turned out that they both had a tendency to anthropomorphise tower cranes. They said that red ones were male, and blue ones female; that you could tell how they were feeling by the way they stood relative to each other.



London’s skyline – scene of giant domestics?

In the sad, crazed and deluded minds of the BBC producers, the cranes would be “having a tiff” if their booms happened to be pointing away from each other. Sometimes they would appear to affect a reconciliation.

I started to talk about the men who work the tower cranes and the way they work with their banksmen far below. The producers did not really want to hear about the people. For them, the tower cranes are individuals in their own right. Giants carefully tending the growing tower blocks of London.

Shaping the city

It was on one of those cranes that I met Bill Bostridge, who has been working tower cranes for 25 years. He is a quietly spoken Irishman who has watched the London skyline changing over the past two decades.

He was working a French Kier crane high above the Strand. I spent half an hour with Billy in his cab, while his banksman down below gave radio instructions. The unloading bay down at street level was right beside a Plane tree. Each load had to be lifted and carefully swung out over the street without damaging the tree, the growing building or any passing pedestrians or double deckers.



Dylan Winter in the cab with Bill Bostridge

Billy had built much of London’s skyline – the NatWest Tower, Barclays, the London Fire Brigade building. Over 20 of London’s skyscrapers had been lifted into life under Billy’s careful hands. Watching him work made you realise how in tune man and machinery can become. But he conceded that without a decent banksman a crane driver is lost. A banksman and operator are like two halves of a perfect machine.

I also spent some time with banksman Bill Hunt and operator Derek Lowry who work at Canary Wharf – London’s leading crane forest.

“It is a beautiful thing,” says Bill Hunt, “to see a two-tonne load snaking its way across a building site. There are times when I stand there with my mouth open at the brilliance of some of these drivers.”

Derek Lowry, who spends his working days 200 feet above ground level, has the confident smile of a man who enjoys the admiration of his colleagues. “But I can only be as good as my banksman will let me be,” says Derek. “I want him to tell me what I need to know and no more. There is nothing worse than a banksman who is always chattering away on the radio.”



Derek Lowry and Bill Hunt, operator and banksman at Canary Wharf

The burning question

There was just one more thing I needed to know about tower crane operators – the loo question. I had been told that they would sometimes stand by the rail and let it fly. “Never”, said Derek. “We would always use a milk bottle and then empty it when no-one else was around – unless there was some-one we hated. But that was in the old days. No-one would behave in such a way anymore.”

Then I switched the mike off and the real stories began. ■