

Bigger than you think!

Sarens is one of the world's leading heavy lift and transportation companies operating in 60 countries with a fleet of around 1,400 cranes topped by its 3,200 tonne SGC-120. Mark Darwin visited its UK headquarters in Middlesbrough to chat with country manager, Grant Mitchell.

Sarens in the UK - just like the Sarens Group - prefers to keep a low profile, but is a lot bigger than many think. Whilst the family company goes back four generations to the 1930s, the UK division was formed when it bought the heavy crane fleet of

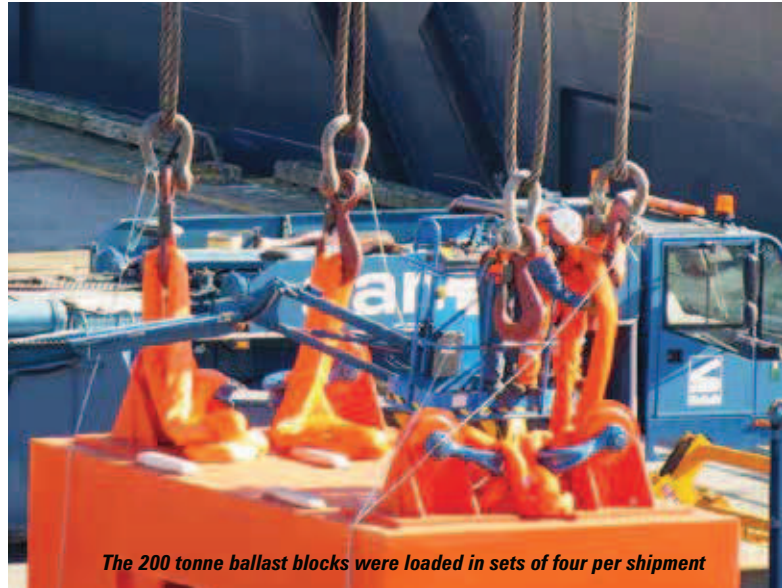
Initial GWS, around the same time (2011) that Ainscough acquired the GWS depot network and smaller crane fleet.

The UK operation currently has a fleet of around 50 cranes, but over the next few years, has plans to increase this to between 70

A Sarens gantry working over Europe's deepest shaft on the Lee Tunnel project in East London



Sarens provided its biggest UK mobile crane - the Gottwald AK680-3 - to load 24, 200 tonne ballast blocks onto a specialist vessel - the Olympic Orion



The 200 tonne ballast blocks were loaded in sets of four per shipment

and 80, while adding to its depot network with a second London location. What is surprising about the company is not only the amount of cranes in the group, but also the number of large capacity cranes - enough to carry out almost any lifting contract whatever its size.

Almost to emphasise this point the day after my visit with Grant Mitchell, the company announced winning its biggest contract ever - the \$36.8 billion Future Growth and Wellhead Pressure Management Project for the Tengiz oil field on the North Eastern shores of the Caspian Sea for Tengizchevroil. Sarens in the UK will be particularly involved in this project as Tengizchevroil is based in Farnborough, UK but it will also be supported by Sarens specialists in Kazakhstan, Belgium, Poland, Finland and Bulgaria.

Sarens is contracted to develop and operate two Trans-Shipments Bases - one in Finland and one in Bulgaria - where cargo will be offloaded from ocean-going vessels and reloaded onto smaller Russian inland waterway vessels for onward delivery into the region. At the

Kazakhstan site, the modules will be off-loaded, stored, stacked and transported to their final installation points. The project will start next year and run through 2020.

"This is the largest crane and lifting contract ever let in the world," said Mitchell. "Our largest crane will be onsite for three years. The group's resources are huge, for example it has about 80 cranes with capacities between 600 and 1,000 tonnes, eight CC8800-1 and two boom booster kits. Even in the UK we had 10 crawler cranes above 600 tonnes for many years."

Mitchell took over as UK sales director in 2011 and as managing director in 2013, after joining from Ainscough. Prior to that he worked with Baldwins Industrial Services and started his crane career with Sparrows Crane Hire.

"When I took over, Sarens in the UK was very much a lattice boom crane company. Between 2010 and 2015 the company had won several large contracts which meant having 10, 600 tonne plus crawler cranes based in the UK. The advantage of this was that we could

offer our equipment against lowest mobilisation rates whereas other companies had to bring them in from mainland Europe.”

The fluctuating economy does not perhaps have as much effect on Sarens in the UK as other companies, in that it buys very little equipment itself, using the majority from its parent company.

“When work for the large cranes slowed we were fortunate that Sarens could use them around the world. Apart from our fleet of crawlers we have invested heavily over the past five years - spending more than £18 million in the UK last year - on mobile cranes.

The company already has numerous larger All Terrains, including an 800 tonne Liebherr LTM 1800, and 550 tonne LG 1550, a 700 tonne Terex AC700 and two Liebherr 500 tonners and recently added two 750 tonne LTM 1750s, another LG 1550 and three more 500 tonne Liebherrs. It also has a 400 tonne Faun, two 300 tonne Groves and a new 220/160 tonne Terex along with a 160 tonne and a couple 100 tonne Liebherrs.



Sarens UK had 10 crawler cranes above 600 tonnes in its fleet for many years

“We still have a policy of keeping to cranes of 100 tonnes and above” he said. “We may keep a low profile but our heavy crane fleet is second to none.”

Mitchell would also like to expand the business for cranes between 100 to 250 tonnes. “We have a couple of 100 tonne LTRs and 160 tonne Liebherr LR 1160s but would like to expand as there are only

a couple of UK companies in this sector.”

The cranes are usually purchased by Sarens headquarters in Belgium and then leased to subsidiaries. “Sarens is still a family business and the owners love buying cranes,” says Mitchell. “Together we decide the required type of cranes and specification we need for each specific market. This gives us

maximum flexibility and a well-balanced fleet.”

Brexit?

For Sarens in the UK the only problem relating to the Brexit vote is the volatility of Sterling. The exchange rate has both pluses and minuses. The company does a lot of work in the wind sector and these contracts are priced in Euros. Foreign-based competitors who

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work solely in Euros would also be less interested in working in the UK resulting in more work for UK-based companies.

Rental rates

Currently workload in the UK is holding up but the rates could be a lot better. Mitchell has been in the crane business since 1975 and can remember the 'good times'.

"In 1987/88 Grayston White and Sparrow owned a Gottwald AK680 and carried out a contract over the Easter bank holiday lifting a chiller unit for one of the banks. The crane started to set-up on the Thursday carrying out the lift Saturday then de-rigging and leaving site on the Monday. The charge for the lift was £100,000. Now move on 20 years and we did exactly the same lift in reverse, taking out the chiller unit with a 500 tonner and we charged £12,000! So has the industry progressed? You will only make money with cranes if you have something no one else has. At Baldwins we were the first to get the 400 tonne Liebherr and made very good returns for two years - then others entered the market and the rates come down."



The aim in the UK is to increase the work of the engineering solutions division, which deals with projects using gantries, jacking, skidding and SPMTs

Favourite crane?

Being in the industry 41 years, Mitchell has come across many cranes - but which is his favourite? "In the early to mid-1980s there was the ground-breaking 200 tonne capacity Demag HC510 but only a few were sold in the UK. It was unheard of to have a 200 tonne crane on six axles - they were usually eight or 10 axles - and

with its 45 metre main boom and 48 metre luffing jib and 5.2 metre outrigger spread, it was great working in London erecting tower cranes that other cranes couldn't do."

The future?

"One aim in the UK is to expand the crane fleet and add a couple of depots. However the main drive

over the next few years will be to increase the work of the engineering solutions division, which deals with projects using gantries, jacking, skidding and SPMTs," he says. "Instead of the odd engineering job we want to build up the engineering equipment permanently based in the UK. Eventually growth in this area may account for about 40 percent of the UK turnover."

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