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by Custom Equipment



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Low level on the move

In recent years the market for low level access equipment in Europe has changed beyond all recognition, with powered equipment now taking a significant slice of the market. The changes have so far been limited to just a few European countries with the UK possibly leading the way. Some seven years after the European Union's Work At Height Regulations came into law, the trend is gathering pace and developing still further but it has a very long way to go before it resembles anything like a maturing market.

One key casualty of the new Work at Height rules was the old two metre rule that was written into many local laws or regulations. Essentially it said that if work involved standing on something that was under two metres you didn't need to worry too much about regulations or standards - in spite of the fact that most injuries, including fatalities result from falls from two metres or less.

WAHR as it is known has changed all that of course, although in many countries it has yet to make any significant impact. In the UK the immediate 'knee jerk' effect and dire warnings from those looking to make a 'quick buck' caused something of a panic which had a number of contractors banning ladders from their sites as the myth developed that the use of ladders was no longer permitted. Mark

Darwin recently visited ladder company Abru that was acquired by US-based Werner Ladder in 2010 and finds that reports of the ladder's demise have been greatly exaggerated (see page 21). In fact they are making something of a comeback for certain low level work at height duties for which they are particularly well suited. There are also times and applications where they are not best suited and this is where low level powered access may be needed.

Meanwhile six years after the original Pop-Up introduced the concept of a simple, low-cost, push around scissor lift, the sector is finally spreading across Europe with a wider range of products including both push around and micro self-propelled models. Even some of the largest access companies such as JLG have taken an interest in the lower levels, while North American



Custom Hy-Brid push around



Pop Up Push 8

low level specialist Compact Equipment - which built its reputation with lightweight self-propelled low level scissor lifts - has been very successful with a European-inspired, push-around scissor lift in its home market.

In the UK a combination of a highly effective Health and Safety Executive and a strongly entrepreneurial private sector - using scare tactics as a form of marketing - coupled with the ready availability of rental machines, has dramatically changed the way most tradesmen work at height - at least on larger sites run by major contractors. The number of low level lifts available to hire in the UK must now be pushing the 9,000 plus barrier and continues to grow. Many rental companies are now moving into their second generation lifts as the units delivered between 2006 and 2008 are replaced.

The advent of automatic braking and the arrival of higher units without stabilisers has also been a catalyst driving this change. As a result a large number of first generation machines are now regularly being sold at auction where they can fetch as little as £250. Where they are all

going is a bit of a mystery, but is also of interest as it may well bring another level of tradesman into the powered access market? And yet at the same time the number of ladders sold in the UK is possibly up to two million a year and shows no sign of abating.

One interesting point on those first Pop-Up machines is that many were sceptical that they would last more than two years in a rental environment. Yet from what we understand, while the original switches and batteries soon needed replacing, the structures have held up well and are still in service - somewhere - more than five years later.

As we have reported before, the fact that contractors felt the need to replace their push around scissor lifts with models that automatically brake on lifting - in order to stop what is referred to as 'surfing' - suggests that there is a real need or desire from users to have the self-propelled capability.

Weight has always been an issue with this of course, but there are now self-propelled products on the market that weigh little more than the push-arounds. While some of

these have sold quite well, the fact that rental rates for the smallest push around scissors have now dipped to around £25 to £30 a week hardly encourages investing in these pricier solutions. However sooner or later contractors will find that for some jobs the ability to reposition even such small lifts without returning to ground level will more than justify the additional cost. Or perhaps a rush of back complaints blamed on all that pushing and the constant in and out of the platform, will spur a change over? Perhaps the cost of micro self-propelled lifts will fall as Chinese producers such as Dingli push into the market?

The suppliers

If you are looking for a small lift with a working height of between 2.8 and five metres you now have a wider choice than ever before. The four largest 'players' on the world market are probably Pop-Up/Snorkel and Power Tower in the UK, Bravi in Italy and Custom Equipment in the USA. However Chinese-based Dingli might be close to overtaking them, given that in addition to its home market, it has had some significant success in North America, including a very substantial 'unconfirmed' order from a large retailer. Other suppliers of note include UK-based Youngman which now produces both push-around and self-propelled models, Edmolift which won this year's IAPA award for its mast-type push around AIR product, Imer which now has both push around and self-propelled versions of its Easy Lift and not forgetting JLG and its LiftPod which, while ingenious and very portable, has yet to gain



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the 'traction' that a product of this type needs to do, if it is to change the market. In fact this is, we think, the next big challenge for powered access. There are still plenty of users and applications that lend themselves to a light weight, low cost, low maintenance forms of powered access. The applications are currently being covered by step ladders, podiums and low level scaffolds although these products have already lost a little ground to push-around scissor lifts. New rules affecting podium steps that come in this June could present a further opportunity, but ideally it needs some radical new products in the 1.5 to two metre area that are simple, low in weight, require little or no external power to operate and that are priced at a level that puts them in contention with the podiums and folding scaffold bases. The LiftPod is almost there and is certainly an excellent alternative to a step ladder. But for all its awards it is just not quite capturing the imagination of end users or rental companies.

The surprise of recent years for very different reasons has been the Power Scissor from Russon Access with its manually powered spring assisted scissor lifts and steps. Speedy Hire, a company that has taken a significant share of the low level rental market in the UK, has so far taken all of the production and we understand that the units are developing a reasonable following, especially for their indoor/outdoor capability. While these take the push around and non-powered concept outside they



Dingli JCPT 3.0



JLG LiftPod FS60



Youngman BoSS X3X-SP

are not likely to take on the podium. When it comes to these smallest lifts, the rental companies most likely to gain the most from the growth over the long term are the general/tool rental companies such as Speedy, HSS, Hire Station and the like. Although specialists such as Lavendon, AFI and others will still do significant business in this area, they are likely to focus more on self-propelled versions.

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The ladder is dead - long live the ladder

c&a

low level



Part of the massive range of ladders available from Werner

Stories about the death of the ladder have been greatly exaggerated. True the humble ladder has had some rough press over the last few years particularly from some major contractors and the 'working at height' lobby keen to promote powered low level access equipment. This 'bad press' led to the misconception that ladders were banned from being used. However as the Health & Safety Executive has subsequently been keen to point out, this is far from the case as in many instances, the ladder - in all of its various forms - may still be the best access method for the job whether in the Do It Yourself, trade or industrial sectors. Cranes & Access visited Derbyshire-based Abru - the UK's leading ladder manufacturer, producing over half a million ladders a year - and now part of the world's leading ladder manufacturer Werner.

Abru was founded in 1968 and although it sounds Scandinavian, the name derives from its two founders - Frank Abbey and John Bruton. Bruton left the company in 1984 but his son Paul is the company's business development director. Since the early days it has had various owners, but in 2010 it was acquired by USA-based Werner

"It's great being owned by 'real ladder people' again as previous owners did not have ladders as their core business," says Bruton. "The name over the factory in Belper, Derbyshire is currently Abru, although in time this is likely to change to Werner UK as we become more integrated."

"Abru in the UK is more synonymous with the DIY market



A fibreglass, eight tread swingback stepladder.



The current fibreglass production line at Abru in Derbyshire with a finished four tread swingback stepladder in the foreground

whereas Werner is very much a global trade and professional brand. We previously traded under the Promaster brand to the trade sector but this will be phased out as the Werner brand grows."

The two founders were originally involved in the aluminium industry and decided to make aluminium ladders. When looking for a location for their production facility they found that grants were available in South Wales or Cornwall - opting for the latter and remained there for many years.

Next owners were the 'garage and shutter door' Henderson group,

which was in turn acquired by the building materials company Hepworth. In 1995 the company's current site in Belper was owned by Hepworth and producing Glow Worm solid fuel boilers which were being phased out. The plan was to install an aluminium extrusion plant in Belper and bring Abru (still in Cornwall) and two other group companies dealing in extrusions together at the same site. Abru moved to Belper in 1998. Its central UK location, combined with the on-site extrusion facility, has enabled the company to provide excellent levels of service.



Werner also has a large range of stepstools and work platforms



The aluminium extrusion plant at the Belper facility



This amount of aluminium is sufficient for one day's production

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"This was very good for Abru because the business was not a core product for the expanded heating group so we were allowed to make our own business decisions," says Bruton. "When we were subsequently purchased by Werner we were the only non-heating company remaining in the Valliant group. Valliant had invested heavily in the Belper site, in product development and equipment, but the management was happy to be part of a ladder company again."

Abru claims to be the only ladder manufacturer in Europe to extrude its own aluminium, buying aluminium billet and carrying out the entire, mainly automated, process on site. This, the company says, allows it to react very quickly to customer demand.

"Prior to having the extrusion plant an order for 5,000 ladders may have taken eight to 10 weeks to complete, most of the time spent waiting for aluminium from the extruder. Now it can supply a similar order in about five days even if it wasn't in the forecast," says Bruton. Total factory capacity is 3,000 tonnes of extruded aluminium a year but this could be increased with

shift work. Currently around 2,500 tonnes of end product is produced each year but as the factory already runs around the clock, seven days a week it would be relatively easy to add another shift should demand increase significantly.

American-based Werner is the leading ladder supplier in North America and acquired Abru as part of its international expansion strategy, with the intention to use it to access markets across Europe. Werner now has a R&D and engineering team in North America, Europe and China which interact on product innovations.

First Werner ladder - 1950

Werner has a history dating back to 1922, producing its first ladder in 1950. In 1963 it produced its first fibreglass ladder at a time when the market was predominantly timber and aluminium. Now the US market is 60 percent fibreglass and 40 percent aluminium. Compare this to the UK where it is 95 percent aluminium and five percent fibreglass. By 1970 Werner had become the largest ladder manufacturer in North America and is now the largest in the world with between 20 and 25 percent of the

market. It is strong in North America, Australia and Asia and with the Abru acquisition, Europe.

"In terms of ladder production, Abru is about twice the size of the next largest ladder manufacturer," says Bruton. "I think we will probably diversify into other products in the future and we are currently evaluating a number of options."

"Overall the aluminium ladder market in the UK is stable and has reached a plateau but the growth is in fibreglass largely driven by the working at height directives. If you are an electrician or plumber your risk assessment should result in not using an aluminium ladder because of its conductivity," says Bruton. "There is still the misconception that trades cannot use ladders on site but this is where the site health and safety manager needs to see risk assessments and allow ladders which are the right products for the job. There is a place for all types of access but it is still hard dispelling the myth that ladders are not allowed on sites."

Fibreglass the future

In Europe fibreglass has traditionally been more expensive but Abru will look to install a fibreglass plant on the Belper site at a later date. A major feature of a fibreglass ladder is it is warm to the touch - a major benefit when working in cold conditions - and it does not 'black' the hands - essential for painters and decorators. The current Abru Werner fibreglass range of ladders sold in Europe is assembled in Belper, with fibreglass supplied by Werner's main manufacturing facility in Juarex, Mexico. The company also has two manufacturing facilities in the USA and one in China that produces products for the North American market. It has three extrusion facilities in North America along with a pultrusion facility for fibreglass in Juarex, which produces 65 miles of fibreglass and 22,000 ladders a day.

Existing products new markets

"One UK product that has done very well in North America is the two metre, three extension compact ladder, which we launched around 10 to 15 years ago. It has been a huge success there, with tradesmen wanting to carry compact ladders inside smaller vans rather than on the roof."

Risk assessment

"Working at Height legislation has not had a direct effect on UK sales but it makes users reassess their risk assessments to decide on the correct type of access needed," says Bruton. "This will help the growth of fibreglass and we will be launching a range of fibreglass extension ladders later in the year. These are predominantly used by the commercial sector such as British Telecom etc. Our aim is to almost eradicate the historic cost gap between aluminium and fibreglass."

Test laboratory

Abru also has its own test laboratory which is used by other companies in the Ladder Association doing work on standards.

"We think our test lab - which is purely set up for ladders - is the best in the industry," says Bruton, "the BSI regularly uses our facility to do our Kitemark testing rather than in their own labs. A ladder is like life support equipment so we have a full time engineer on hand to answer questions such as which is the right ladder for the job. We also visit sites to investigate accidents."

Warehousing and distribution is carried out from the Belper site with up to 80,000 ladders in stock at peak periods. A fleet of Abru/Werner liveried delivery vehicles are run by an external transport company.

As we said at the beginning of this article - news of the death of the ladder has been greatly exaggerated. It would appear to be more popular than ever.

The Lock-In accessory system allows a wide range of tools to be used safely.

