

Old school rules

Graham Black visits *EARTHMOVERS* reader Craig Pope at the Wrotham sand quarry in Kent.

Although Maidstone-based Craig Pope is a couple of years away from celebrating his 40th birthday, he has over 30 years' experience of sitting in the cab of a dozer. Even before he was old enough to go to school, Saturday mornings used to be spent on his father's knee experiencing the sights and sounds of an old Cat blade. A few years later he was driving machinery and at 16 left school to become a dump truck operator in his father's company.

After learning the ropes on the tippers he moved on to become a dozer operator, a passion that remains with him to this day. Once he had proved himself on the machines he became a foreman within the company, which focused on landfill engineering.

In 1999 Craig started out on his own with a dozer acquired from his father's fleet and soon picked up cross-hire jobs on the RailLink project and with John Jones and McAlpine. A Komatsu 210-6 excavator was purchased and the focus of his activities shifted away from general hire to constructing fishing ponds.

A Volvo A25C ADT was then acquired, and then another, as he started to work on behalf of Biffa Waste to construct landfill sites.

The decision to get out of general plant hire and focus on contracting work seems to have paid off, as Pope Plant had a turnover of £1.2m last year and is on target for a similar figure this year.

SITE VISIT

We caught up with Craig in a quarry near Wrotham in Kent, his first job on behalf of Hansons. The 16-week contract is a straightforward muck-shift of around 300,000 cubic metres of clay. This is being excavated from a temporary fill area that needed to be cleared to allow access to a fresh deposit of fine white sand and the arisings used to reinstate an adjacent part of the quarry.

The job started on the last day of August and by the time of our visit – late October – 130,000cu.m had already been shifted. An unexpected period of good weather was ideal for muck-shifting and Craig

was pushing his team hard to take full advantage of the conditions. Recognising that winter weather may force a temporary stop in proceedings later in the year, his immediate goal was shift sufficient material to allow the quarry's conveyor belt to be extended into the new face.

Six 25-tonne capacity Volvo ADTs were on site, averaging over 100 loads each over a 10-hour shift. Craig's target was a cycle time of five minutes; lunch and tea breaks were kept to a minimum as the race was on to take full advantage of the autumn sunshine. The older A25C models were still providing excellent service, but Craig has more recently added four A25Ds to the fleet, the youngest being a 2006 model.

Although 25-tonne capacity haulers have proved their worth over the years – providing a high degree of versatility – Craig admits that this job could really have done with 30-tonners. Depending on future work, he has started to think about larger ADTs joining the fleet. Saying that, the A25D with

Six 25-tonne articulated dump trucks from Pope Plant are currently working on a development and restoration project at Hanson's sand quarry at Wrotham, Kent.



Older Volvo A25C articulated dump trucks are still providing sterling service, despite having a few hours on the clock and being worked hard on this site.



greedy boards and a tailgate that was working on this site was probably shifting closer to 30 tonnes of material in any case.

The tippers were being loaded by a Volvo EC360B excavator, with an EC210C on standby and to perform odd jobs around the site. The EC360B was purchased with 4500 hours on the clock from Euro Auctions, as was the majority of his 13-strong fleet. Craig owns his fleet outright, with nothing on finance.

Craig said, "Volvo has a superb back-up service and always seems to have parts on the shelf. If anything goes wrong they will try and diagnose the probable fault over the phone and despatch their service van with the appropriate parts. This

An EC360B excavator is currently the prime excavator on site, loading tippers with clay from a temporary fill area.



minimises delays and doesn't incur a separate call-out charge for the mechanic to come on site to see what's wrong with the machine.

"My father ran Volvos from the old 861 model onwards. Their resale values remain high and Volvos have proved to be very reliable over the years."

Of course over a period of intense activity and with a previously unblemished record, a few days before our visit the EC360B – now with 9500 hours on the clock – decided to throw a wobbly and junk a hydraulic pump. A new Doosan 380 was cross-hired in to provide immediate coverage and this has proved to be an impressive workhorse, particularly when temporarily fitted with the larger bucket that Craig uses on his Volvo.

The EC360B in the meantime has been put back together again, but still wears the smaller bucket that was originally supplied on the Doosan. This is a temporary measure, as within the next few days a relatively new 5000-hour Komatsu 350-8 excavator that has recently been purchased takes over loading duties.

OPERATORS

Finding, training and retaining suitable operators is still a major headache for such businesses. Craig tends to recruit local people that either he knows, or come with a recommendation from a friend. Last year he took on two individuals and gave them an opportunity on the tippers. Once they had shown that they were capable he put them through a formal CPCS training course.

The other side of this equation is that he has sadly taken the decision to retire his old D6 dozer and scraper box. Although it still is a most efficient method of shifting dirt, he just can't get the operators with sufficient skill and experience.

Craig said, "I look for operators who are reliable, look after the kit and can actually drive the machine to its full capability. It is then my job to get enough work to keep hold of them."

Deep down, one gets the impression that Craig

still regards himself as an operator, preferably on a dozer, but earlier on in the day he was piloting the EC210C excavator.

Craig concluded by saying, "The size of the business and the nature of work that we undertake is driving me out of the cab. With general paperwork and progress meetings with clients, there is less opportunity to spend a shift driving. If I'm on site as the foreman I easily get bored and want to jump on a machine at every opportunity."

Right: Owner Craig Pope still operates dozers and excavators, but with a company that turns over £1.2m is increasingly finding himself doing paperwork and meetings.



Below: At the tip site, a Cat D6RXW with 30in-wide track pads is spreading and compacting the material as part of the restoration project.

