

GOING SOLO

Nick Drew reports from Dorset on one man's journey to becoming his own boss

Like so many in the industry, Rob Williams grew up around plant. His father Graham spent his working life as an operator, particularly with Gilbury Plant Hire at Callingham in Dorset. In the early and mid-1990s, young Rob used to spend all his Saturday mornings on site with his dad and others long periods during the school holidays.

Rob has great memories of break times on site, when the 'have a go lad' culture was still in vogue. During this period, his father operated a wide variety of machinery, including an early JCB 3CX, followed by classic excavators of the time such as a Poclairn 60 and Hitachi UHO63, FH120 and EX150 models. He later spent time in a Poclairn 90 and then a Cat 215B.

There was never really any doubt that Rob would follow in his father's footsteps and join the plant game, but first he learnt how to operate the spanners, starting for an NVQ5 in plant mechanics at

Rycotewood College. He was taken on as an apprentice by Kedgeworth, the large independent dealer in Komatsu parts, repairs and used machines.

SPANNERS TO LEVERS

In 2000 Rob started work with a well-known local company, Mark Farwell Plant Hire, initially in their workshops. In due course he was deployed on day-hire jobs, as an operator of a 3CX backhoe/loader. He must have been impressed, as the odd day here and there eventually led to longer-term

hires to the local council and Wessex Water.

However, the lure of a full-time seat was strong and in 2003 a job opportunity came up with the civil engineering firm CJ Lee.

Rob was placed on a Daewoo DH220 excavator for starters, but it wasn't long before he was rewarded with his first new machine, a

Hitachi ZX130 straight out of the factory. Over the next five years, Rob worked on a variety of excavators with Lee, including a Hitachi 20-tonner.

After a couple of moves to other firms, Rob joined Bartlett Contractors in 2008, operating their JCB JS220.

Rob said, "With Bartlett's I worked on pipelines, heavy civils and agricultural work, so as you can imagine it offered a lot of variety. I loved it and gained a lot of experience from the job. I was also lucky enough to spend some time operating the larger Caterpillar machines on the fleet, including the 323D and 324D models. This exposure to the Cat products made me want one of my own even more."

Rob had wanted to own his own machine since he was a little boy, recalling how a real digger was always on his Christmas list! He continued, "I almost went for it around 12 years ago, when I considered buying my

"YOUNG ROB USED TO SPEND ALL HIS SATURDAY MORNINGS ON SITE WITH HIS DAD AND OFTEN LONG PERIODS DURING THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS"



Rob Williams has expanded his fledgling fleet with the purchase of a used Cat 312D excavator from Finning.



MEN & MACHINES ROB WILLIAMS

The 312D mini-excavator is the machine Rob Williams has depended on for building, then with the purchase of a second 312D excavator from Fleming.



Rob Williams works in the outdoors and Rob family gets out the driving there. Rob had been working on his own business.



"PORTRAYING A GOOD AND PROFESSIONAL IMAGE IS VERY IMPORTANT TO ME AND THIS MACHINE LOOKS THE BUSINESS WHEN I TURN UP ON SITE"

→ **OWN JOURNAL.** But I wish I didn't have enough experience under my belt.

"In 2012 I started negotiating about going into what I think was a hot market, and I asked a number of people in the industry for advice about starting up. Of course, we were all in a recession at the time and I found I got a lot of suggestions about going for it.

"The wife Fiona was the driving force behind me. She pushed me all the way to give it a go. And, in all honesty, I am so glad she did, as we have never looked back since."

So in July 2012, Williams Plant was born. Without a machine of his own, Rob started out

as an operator. He had been offered a six-week trial on a groundswork job and, although it was more of the same, it proved to be a good start for his fledgling business. This was followed by a few jobs as a relief operator and he also completed a few of the smaller groundswork jobs himself.

OWNER-OPERATOR

But the hooking for his own excavator was next project, so Rob started to search for his first machine. "After three weeks I knew I was in it for the long haul, so I decided to buy a brand new machine. Rob did the sensible thing and looked for a decent second-

hand model. The work has led to further, but longer projects and where his wife Fiona still works. They had a Fiat-Isuzu £90,000 excavator available, which was in good order. Rob was well aware of the machine's history and the fact that it had been well looked after.

To cut a long story short, a deal was done, the right money prepaid and signed over and Rob became an owner-operator, with Williams Plant well and truly up and running. There are only one slight problems he didn't have any work! Time to make a few phone calls.

Rob didn't have to wait long, as Steve Fox, a friend of the family, offered him work

with Birmingham-based civil engineering contractor CJL Construction. This initial job turned into a decent run of work for Williams Plant.

As workload increased, Rob was able to purchase an additional machine, in the form of a 15-tonner Volvo. He admits that the small mini-excavator was purchased for a bit of fun at the weekend, to use during the day. But it has proved to be a profitable addition to the fleet, as it hasn't stopped working since it arrived.

In recent months Rob has taken on a 100-employee groundworks contractor

operator. He now undertakes the smaller groundswork jobs and the occasional heavy work. This has allowed Rob to concentrate on getting his business further.

LATEST PURCHASE

With everyone busy, Rob had felt a bit tight, enough to regard his small fleet, but this time with a bit more excitement. Steve Fox is now working with Quantam Civil and offered Rob a long run of work on a new site in Parkstone for a 15-tonner. Even better, it was working alongside the old crew from CJL, who Rob knew from years ago.

On the strength of this offer, Rob spent a few 'spare' evenings visiting a number of dealers. He says that, unlike some, the treatment he received at Fleming's main depot at Catorock was fantastic. Rob and his dad were shown a selection of used machines, but what caught his eye was a 312D with 4000 hours on the meter. It was still in its run-in period of the site condition, but Fleming would put it through a Caterpillar-certified used equipment inspection, with repairs made where necessary and the 15-tonner prepped for work.

Sales rep Peter Adams offered Rob a deal that seemed great and the paperwork was...



NEW PRODUCT // BELL B30E



"MY WIFE FIONA'S INPUT HAS BEEN INVALUABLE. I KNOW I COULD NOT HAVE DONE ANY OF THIS WITHOUT HER HELP, DRIVE AND AMBITION"



With 4900 hours on the clock when Rob bought it and benefitting from a Finning makeover, there's plenty of life left in this 312D.



Rob's armoury includes a Dromone quick coupler and five buckets.

→ duly signed. The 312D went into the workshop, where it had a full mechanical check-up and refresh, followed by a trip to the body shop.

From Cannock the excavator was shipped to Finning Cardiff, where it came under the scrutiny of the depot's used equipment manager, Sue Deary. Rob describes her as an absolute star, with a real eye for detail. While it was being sign-written a few scratches were noticed in the paintwork, which were quickly dealt with.

The excavator came with a Dromone quick coupler and a 900mm bucket. Four new buckets were supplied, including a grader/re-handler, in addition to 450mm, 600mm and 1200mm-wide digging buckets, complete with removable cutting edges.

Rob said, "I think the team at Finning has done an outstanding job with our latest machine and I am very pleased with my choice. Portraying a good and professional image is very important to me and this machine looks the business when I turn up on site."

SITE VISIT

The smart-looking Cat 312D was delivered to the leafy suburbs of Parkstone, where Quantum is undertaking all the groundworks and infrastructure for a block of retirement apartments. The site was derelict for many years, but it overlooks the luxurious Sandbanks area, home to the rich and famous. It was here on site that we caught up with man and machine.

Rob initially said, "It's so smooth and light to operate and has plenty of power when needed, I am very happy with it."

But Rob was busy. And no wonder, as I was not prepared for what was in front of me; a quarry-sized deep hole in the ground. This is a result of the extraction of many thousands of tonnes of high quality sand. One of Rob's first jobs was to make a ramp down into the pit, to allow a crusher to be moved into position. This



will recycle all the hardcore on site, which will then be used for the piling rig mat required on site. But first, Rob had to pull down the bank of sand, which was then compacted in layers to form a stable ramp down into the floor of the workings.

It really was early days on this site, but it was clear to see there is plenty of work ahead for Rob and his Cat. During a break Rob said, "My wife Fiona's input has been invaluable. I know I could not have done any of this without her help, drive and ambition. She works in the industry too, so she knows exactly what is needed to succeed. I'm very lucky."

"Being an owner operator definitely has its highs and lows. Breakdowns can be a headache and we had a few of those in the early days, but having said that, I wouldn't want to go back to being employed. I love what I do and to me it's more like a hobby than a job."

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