

Offshore on track

The cream of the Offshore industry gathered at the Ardoe House Hotel for more than just the picture postcard highland scenery. The great and the good were gathered in pursuit of excellence in offshore crane management, safe operations and world-class performance. And the onshore industry can learn a lot from their passion, dedication and enthusiasm.

There is a far greater emphasis on all aspects of safety offshore than there is onshore. The reasons are several: it's a smaller industry, which means that past accidents have generated more of a furore; it's a high-profile industry, so ditto; and therein lies the secret of their success – because each rig is a 'closed shop', it is easier to require stringent safety measures and to ensure that they are carried out.

Highland fling

The dinner at the Offshore Crane Conference is an important event in this closeknit community and was a delight. The delegates, mostly from Scandinavia, had truly embraced the spirit of Scotland and cut dashing, magnificent figures in their highland attire!

We were a little late for Burns' night, but we celebrated nonetheless in traditional style with Peter Mitchell's eloquent (if incomprehensible!) rendition of the great poet's 'To a Haggis' complete with stabbing and toasting of the 'beastie' before we tucked into our haggis, neaps and tatties. After our traditional Scottish fare, we had fiddling the old fashioned way and then the full glory of The Bucksburn and District Pipeband – marching, drumming and pipe playing majors and majorettes doing things with drum sticks that have to be seen to be believed. Our grateful thanks to Marianne Nordli of the Norwegian Lift Technology Institute who organised every last detail with such passion and perfectionism.

Sophie Morton believes we can learn a lot from The 7th North Sea Offshore Cranes Conference



25 per cent of accidents are due to equipment failure

Geir Borge Johnsen and Geir Jacobsen, ExxonMobil crane operators, suggested that since 25 per cent of accidents are due to design/equipment failure, it is essential that crane operators, who are responsible for all aspects of crane safety, maintenance and operation offshore, be consulted in the DESIGN stages rather than at crisis point. These proponents of the 'stitch in time saves nine' philosophy taught us (with considerable humour – what a great double act!) to "TaTo". Their argument is that since 12 per cent of offshore accidents are caused by hazardous operation we should Take Two. This means taking the time to think it through and to plan what, where, how and who, rather than rushing in where angels fear to tread.

Simulators

Time and again discussion at the conference came back to crane simulators. Only a year or two ago, these were breakthrough technology. Now they are an integral part of the training process. These highly sophisticated machines simulate very real situations and dilemmas (high winds, high seas, crowded decks, moving objects) to create a true sense of the difficulty and danger a crane operator can, and invariably will, pit himself against during the course of his career. They free up expensive equipment, lessen the danger of actual damage to same, and equip

the operator with more confidence and greater productivity in the field.

The most elaborate simulators incorporate operator chairs in "cabins" that judder and move in realistic imitation of a real crane. Others are portable and can easily be moved from one place to another. Julian Jones of Drilling Systems gave an excellent presentation on the benefits of this form of training – and he's right, simulators are used in every training facility involving high cost, high maintenance equipment (aviation, space exploration, defence and engineering) – so why not cranes? Instead of looking at the initial outlay, we should be counting the savings we can make by halving real training time with the use of simulators said Jones. While his arguments are right up to scratch, his equipment is not yet. The crane operator's capsule is a faithful reproduction of the real thing; his software doesn't match up. With no shadows and no true hard surfaces, it's impossible to get any real sense of perspective or distance. But Jones assured us it will all have been corrected by the time you read this.

Hitec O, on the other hand, is indisputably the market leader. Its software is incomparable. Its expertise immense. It is a truly eye-opening and mind-expanding experience, working with their simulator. One gains an incredible perspective on just how difficult and challenging this job is. The expert operators fulfilled the challenge task on the final day within 3 – 5 minutes. Your correspondent took 18!

The other thing that the offshore industry definitely has in its favour, is Lloyds Register of Shipping. Dr. John Maguire presented some fascinating insights on residual life assessment of off-



Interview

Chris Dixon of Sparrows Offshore, the major crane management contractor, was a speaker at the conference. He gives **Rosie Gordon** his views on the event.

Q: What were the objectives of the conference, and were they achieved?

A: Really it's about finding out what's new in the industry. Also, because Norway is a different operation area, we work in different ways and can give each other advice or take on new ideas. I think that the British have a tendency to think "if it's not invented in the UK, it's no good". But we can learn a lot from each other.

Q: Do you think the conference covered enough ground?

A: In my opinion, there was too much covered. Perhaps the conferences should focus on certain topics year on year. That would actually make it easier for companies sending their staff along – they could make sure the right people are going. Over the three days I noticed people were targeting presentations and the audiences kept changing.

I enjoyed it – but a bit more focus would be good.

Q: What are the real worries in the offshore lifting industry at the moment?

A: The real issue is probably that despite our high profile and all the attention on accidents, people are still getting hurt or killed. If you look at the figures for offshore injuries, a huge percentage of them are a result of lifting work.

It's my opinion that industry standards are very important, but we really need the emphasis on people. Accidents are generally happening on routine lifts, not special jobs, and it's down to poor attitudes and bad working practices.

Q: Do you think the annual conference serves to change much in the industry?

A: Well, a lot of people go away with a lot of ideas. It's difficult to tell how effective an event like that is, but the great thing is that it reassures people that they are up to date and doing all they should be.

Q: Which were the best, or most important, speeches?

A: The most important speeches were those about new legislation, such as the CEN standards. It's always good to hear from the HSE – Jim McFarlen is very good at explaining it all. If anything, I would have liked to have heard more from him.

The best, as in the one I most enjoyed, was Liebherr's. It was very entertaining. They started off with a history of cranes, right back to Leonardo da Vinci, which for a crane spotter was excellent! The company is obviously very organised and has great resources. The graphics and animations used were outstanding.

Q: What did you speak about?

A: I did a presentation about a job called the Ninian Crane Upgrade – we stripped an old platform crane right down to its chassis, then installed new components (see pics). We were trying to show how, for our clients and the set of circumstances, this was the best and most cost effective thing to do, rather than get a new crane.

Q: Having read a survey by the conference organisers, I see that someone suggested that Sparrows crane operators should be asked to speak next time. Do you think this may happen?

A: We would definitely encourage that. A 'Day in the Life of...' type thing would be excellent. When engineers talk it is of plenty of interest, but to a limited number of people – e.g. crane designers. When operators talk it benefits everyone.

OFFSHORE CRANES

shore cranes using acoustic emission monitoring systems, while Richard Stuart provided unparalleled entertainment and levity, cutting a dashing figure in his clan tartan and brandishing his hand-crafted and amber knobbed dirk!

While offshore incident rates are falling, onshore accident and incident rates are on the rise. There is scope to harness the expertise of the offshore industry and apply its stringent practice and expertise to the onshore crane and access industries. Perhaps the onshore sector should also be looking to industry leaders to demand an efficient and effective umbrella regulator to enforce safety throughout the sector. ■

