

# XXL

M Large Tree Services Ltd is now Extra Extra Large – having acquired Clarke Cunningham Tree Maintenance Ltd, one of the biggest privately owned tree surgery contractors in the UK. With its fifty-strong workforce, Clarke Cunningham will continue to run as a separate company, and as a competitor to the tree surgery element of M Large. Although each business is a separate entity, the acquisition will allow them to work together in areas such as procurement, and to share resources, including equipment, administration and training.

The acquisition makes M Large the largest business of its kind in the UK – an amazing achievement for Michael Large who, as a young man, stood and watched some tree surgeons at work, and thought, "There must be a bit of money to be made from this tree business."



*Michael Large.*

Michael Large has come a long way from that young, married man who, in 1970, started his own tree surgery business. Not thinking he would qualify for credit, he bought his first chainsaw, a Stihl 050 costing £112, using a Provident cheque acquired by his father. At this stage he was not in a position to give up his day job, and his new business consisted of one man with a chainsaw, working part-time, often walking to jobs and having to hire or borrow a van at the weekends to move the wood.

Michael's tenacity paid off. Ten years on, he was working full time. Twelve years after that, M Large Tree Services became a family-run, privately owned, limited company.

From Michael's humble beginnings, the company has now reached a point where it is one of the most successful in the sector. Continuing to build on the firm foundations laid down by Michael, it has continuously expanded its portfolio of products and services. The list of brand names of which it

is a distributor, dealer, or manufacturer, is impressive and comprehensive.

It is this diverse range that helps M Large to fulfil its philosophy of being able to offer customers products that are viable, durable, affordable and, above all, available.

On entering the yard, it was as busy and full as usual. I suggested to Michael that it must be a good feeling to see all that stock and machinery. In his typical droll humour, Michael said, "It would be a better feeling if it was all out somewhere, bringing in a bit of money."

You couldn't help but notice the large crane parked on one side of the yard. Michael informed me that one of the main changes they have seen in tree surgery over the last couple of years has been an increased use of mowps and cranes with cherry pickers on.

Michael puts this trend down to a move towards greater safety and efficiency. Working from the platform of a mowp reduces the exertion needed to access the tree. Using a crane to position the climber in a tree, or using a crane with a cherry picker attached, is quicker, safer and reduces fatigue on the climber.

One of the cranes, which is available for hire, and is also used



*The LMS range of tree shears is designed and developed in-house.*

to carry out the service contracts the company undertakes, is the Hiab XS700 E7 HI Pro with fly jib attachment, mounted on an Iveco truck and incorporating the latest control technology and safety systems. Multiple hydraulic extensions allow a one-tonne lift at 30 metres or a 17.6-tonne lift at 3.3 metres. A 9-metre stabiliser span keeps the whole vehicle steady, even when working to the very limit of its reach and power. As well as tree work, the cranes are hired for applications such as the positioning of industrial tanks and heavy plant. Probably the most unusual task performed was the lifting of a submarine!

Tree surgery may be where M Large has its roots, but the company has evolved into one of the largest suppliers of new and used firewood processing equipment in the UK, with well over 500 machines sold each year. Michael told me, "Firewood is still very much on the up. The season is

getting longer and customers are keeping stocks up and buying throughout the year. Our customers need to have equipment that will process timber quickly and efficiently."

Not content with being the dealer and distributor of a wide range of machinery, M Large designs and develops the LMS range of time-saving accessories that can be used standalone or as part of an existing setup. These include the LMS Scorpion 440 tree shear, an excavator/crane-mounted attachment that can cut through trunks up to 440mm in diameter. It attaches to most excavators or teleporters and features a built-in limb support and 20mm Hardox shearing blades. The Scorpion 220 is a smaller, lighter version of the 440, cutting wood up to 220mm, and is designed for use on lighter or less powerful machines.

The LMS Woodbuster 870, with its 26-tonne splitting pressure and 870mm jaw opening, pre-cleaves oversized timber sections for



*The Hiab XS700 E7 HI Pro mounted on an Iveco truck incorporates the latest control technology and safety systems. A 9-metre stabiliser span keeps the vehicle steady, even when the crane is working to the very limit of its reach and power.*

stacking or processing. The unique 'sweeper arm' design ensures timber never remains lodged on blades. Ideal for those who already have a base machine, these attachments offer a relatively low-cost alternative for efficiently processing oversize timber, and also give the possibility of performing other processes such as land clearance where there is already an excavator on site.

Also included in the LMS range are the Trident log splitter, which can handle tree rings of unlimited diameter, the LMS log bagger and the pallet tine and three-point-linkage grapple adapters, which allow rotating grapples to be used with a wider range of available equipment. The pallet tine adapter fits over loading forks, enabling them to operate a grapple.

To add to its product range, M Large has recently become the official distributor in the UK and Ireland for Finnish-made Biojack energy wood grapples, and, most recently, Nokka's well-respected forwarding trailers and cranes.

The competitively priced Biojack grapples work in a similar way to a harvesting head, and are designed to make harvesting wood simple and fast, without the need to change attachments. The grapple grabs a tree, cuts and delimits it before loading the log or stacking it at roadside. Thanks to its diverse functions, it can also be used as a grab only, for loading, without any additional installation work, as the Biojack grapple can be locked in the grab position, disabling the blade and tilt mechanism. The range is extensive, from the nimble and light timber-crane/tractor-mounted 150 to the excavator-mounted 300 series. The easy-to-fit modular grapples feature a host of options, including delimiting, bunching and cutting knives.

M Large has embarked on a strong rebranding of the company. The new brand name, 'M Large', reflects that they are now much more than 'tree services'. Their new logo reflects the origins of the company – the tree rings depict its surgery beginnings, and the triangles represent the growth into the various machinery elements.

The rebranding is not the only aspect of the company's profile that Tim Wilson, IT and Marketing Manager, has been working on behind the scenes. A new website is also being developed and is soon to launch. He is keen to make it visual, informative and user-friendly

as well as full of product information, and it will include demonstration videos, easy search processes and information on the use and application of the machinery, as well as advice on tree work.

There will be a steady flow of machinery features, opinion pieces and show information posted on the blog, and Tim will be constantly monitoring and evolving M Large's digital presence to maintain and increase brand awareness.

M Large offer a full spare parts and maintenance service on the products they sell. They have been investigating the implications of making some spares and consumables available online, but this has to be weighed up against the personal touch that many of M Large's customers benefit from and in fact actively seek. The company, and in particular Michael, feel that personal contact, offering advice and information, is an important part of the service, and even though they're aware that this more traditional method can be more expensive, sometimes, as Michael says, "It's just worth it." However, with many off-the-shelf items – bars and chains, for instance – where stock holding is high, it is considered that being able to order online will increase customers' options, and this is expected to be a valuable sales tool.

Another area that Michael and Tim have been working on is ensuring that the staff's specialist product knowledge is always available to assist customers with their decision



*The Biojack energy wood grapple grabs a tree, cuts and delimits it before loading the log or stacking it at roadside.*



*The stores area; M Large is considering making some spares and consumables available online.*

making. The use of smartphones and tablets makes it possible to tap into this, wherever staff are located, and they are already being used extensively throughout the business. Being able to deal with customer enquiries quickly and efficiently is paramount to good customer service, and often shortens the sales process.

Michael had one more acquisition that he wanted to show me. The company has recently purchased a whole site of business units. At present they are using one of the units for storage, and they hope to expand into another. Those remaining are leased out to other small companies.

Michael believes strongly that keeping good levels of machine stocks is vital to meeting customers' needs. He told me, "With most products, when a

customer has bought it, they want it now!"

With such a diverse range of services and products, I asked Michael what was his bread-and-butter trade, and what was the cream. His initial quick reply didn't surprise me: "Not much cream in anything at the moment, Anne."

The real answer was, "The machinery sales have no limit to them. We can sell as much stock as we can bring in, both in existing products and new lines. On the contracting side there is a limit; the work can be more intermittent. Acquiring Clarke Cunningham has given us a good balance. They have around 50 guys who are always out working. As companies, we may be competitors, but we also cooperate with each other, and we don't cut each other's throats now."

I asked Michael if the acquisition of Clarke Cunningham was a move to take out the opposition. He replied, "No, they were the only good company out there to buy. We have spent a bit of money on it already, putting in place whatever was needed, making it a strong company, equipped now to go forward into the future."

As M Large as a whole continues to look at ways to push the company forward, both in working practices and in their search for new and exciting products, I am sure that its latest achievements will guarantee its longevity as a key player in the industry.

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