

PRESS INFORMATION

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32 YEARS AND STILL WORKING

SIRDAR REPLACES ATLET TRUCK WITH LATEST MODEL

Yarn supplier Sirdar has recently replaced a 1978 Atlet very narrow aisle truck, one of two which have been in continuous use since that date. The latest model from the same company was delivered in 2009. In celebration of the longevity of the two original VNA trucks, Atlet salesman from both deals met long-term Sirdar employees at their Wakefield warehouse to discuss the changes in both businesses over the years.

“We’re very proud of the long term continuity we have in this business,” says Ian Stead, Sirdar’s financial director. “The original trucks provided an excellent solution to our requirement and have proved very reliable.”

Originally a family business founded in 1880, Sirdar is one of the UK’s best known and most popular suppliers of knitting yarn to retailers including independents and the major multiples. The £14 million turnover business is owned by three of its directors following a management buyout in 2007. It retains the family values that have led many of its 120 employees to remain with the company for decades. Traditional knitting yarns form the bulk of its products but Sirdar also produces technical yarns for specialist applications such as cut-resistant gloves.

Sirdar built its current warehouse in 1977 and took a bold decision to configure it for very narrow aisle operations. This was when VNA was a new concept and well before it was widely adopted. Sirdar saw the advantages in terms of storage density and load selectivity. The project took into account factors such as the layout and configuration of the racking and the introduction of special pallet-sized wooden boxes for storing the yarn and known throughout the business as palcons. Crucial to the success of the warehouse was the choice of VNA trucks.

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The Atlet salesman at the time was David Ruxton. He had joined the company two years previously and became sales manager in 1978, before moving to France to take up a series of senior positions for parent company Atlet AB. Like the trucks he sold to Sirdar, David is still working hard for Atlet. He is now Regional Export Manager for West Europe with additional responsibilities for some Eastern European markets.

David was familiar with VNA and he suggested a solution based on what was at the time one of Atlet's most advanced warehouse trucks. This featured a special carriage with extending forks that allowed a palcon to be positioned to either side of the aisle. The operator remained at ground level and the mast was at the opposite end of the chassis to the cab. This meant the load rose between the two, a completely different arrangement to most modern trucks. Guidance was provided by an unusual C-channel running down either side of the aisle to engage with guide rollers mounted on the truck chassis.

"VNA was very innovative at the time," says David Ruxton. "But this was a totally new concept which combined our trucks with the palcons."

The warehouse was configured with six aisles just 1500mm wide, narrow even by today's standards, and six beams with the highest almost nine metres high. Palcons are double stacked at ground level only. The result is around 6000 storage locations with stock organised in groups, by colour and range, for simplicity.

The assessment at the time suggested that two trucks would be needed. Both remained in operation for over 30 years, one often acting as back up to the other, before Sirdar decided it was time for a replacement. Atlet had also supplied ride-on pallet stackers and powered pallet transporters as part of the original contract and these were replaced in 2003. The relationship between the two companies has remained strong. Although Sirdar approached other potential suppliers for the replacement VNA truck it was Atlet that once again provided the solution.

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For the new VNA truck Atlet's National Accounts Manager Andrew Murray proposed the latest version of the company's Omni DCT man-rising order picker. This is different in many ways to the 1970s trucks. Ergonomic design, push-button controls, mini-steer wheel and computerised on-board management have replaced the mechanical controls and levers of the older trucks. More striking still is the design of the modern Omni DCT. The operator rises with the load which provides a much clearer view of the load and racking so that the palcon can be placed or retrieved on either side of the aisle. Atlet also fitted special rollers to the new truck so that it could be guided by the existing C-channel.

"The ability to handle the palcons, which do not have a bottom bearer, was critical and we proposed a special carriage and fork combination," says Andrew Murray. "Only one other Atlet truck in the UK has this configuration as we generally handle parameter based load carriers."

The trucks are used up to eight hours a day. Their performance and reliability is crucial because if Sirdar cannot access the palcons, the warehouse and the business will stop. The original Atlet trucks proved very reliable over the years and Atlet's local service engineers provided call-out support whenever required. Even though the majority of palcon movements are now completed with the new truck, one of the two originals has been retained to act as a back up and provide auxiliary handling during the busiest periods. Maintenance manager Bob Taylor has been at Sirdar for over 35 years and remembers the original trucks being delivered.

"We're very happy with the long term support we've had from Atlet," says Bob Taylor.

"Whenever there is a problem they are always here quickly to sort it out."

The switch from man-down to man-rising trucks presented a major change for Sirdar's warehouse team. The four operators are dedicated to the specific trucks they use which helps promote responsibility and ownership. As part of this, they were involved in the evaluation of the potential replacements. After the new truck arrived Atlet provided retraining and familiarisation to help them make the transition as smoothly as possible. One of the operators is the current warehouse manager whose father also fulfilled that role previously.

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Operations at Sirdar have changed dramatically over the past 30 years. The company has introduced many new ranges and colours to meet contemporary design tastes. With some celebrity support, knitting is undergoing a resurgence with younger people taking it up for the first time. The added variety of products means that warehousing and stock control have become more complex. Very little product is made on site as it was in the 1970s and warehouse operations have had to adapt. Instead of a steady flow of items from an adjacent spinning hall, product typically arrives bulk packed in containers.

After stripping the containers the yarn is placed in a palcon and transferred to the VNA warehouse where it is put away using one of the trucks. Traditionally Sirdar has picked orders at ground level by pulling full palcons down to vacant positions when required. However, the introduction of man-rising trucks would allow picking from any location in the warehouse without the need to handle the palcon should Sirdar wish to do it. Each pack of yarn generally weighs one kilo or less which means a full palcon of around 100kg might contain hundreds of items.

Sirdar operates a first-in, first out stock rotation policy and aims to fulfil orders quickly. Picked orders are transferred on special hand trolleys to despatch areas in a simple and efficient process.

“We rely on continual movement of stock,” says Ian Stead. “If we ever have problems there is always someone there to put it right.”

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