



Tribute to our founder, Mr. Robert A. Mills

Retirement of a Spreader Pioneer

Cast your mind back to the 1970's. Fashion saw flared trousers and long hair, the emergence of disco music and the birth of the modern computer. Britain experience a period of uncertainty with strikes, unemployment, fuel, energy cuts and the three days week.

What Britain, and indeed the world needed during this period of uncertainty, where influential and forward thinking individuals who could see through and beyond what some would say were difficult times.

In Liverpool UK, a young steel fabricator and welding engineer was called upon to carry out repairs and improvements to container equipment belonging to shipping lines and stevedores at the Port of Liverpool. In a brave move and with a wealth of ingenuity, the engineer from Liverpool set upon making his first container lifting spreader and the rest as they say, is history.

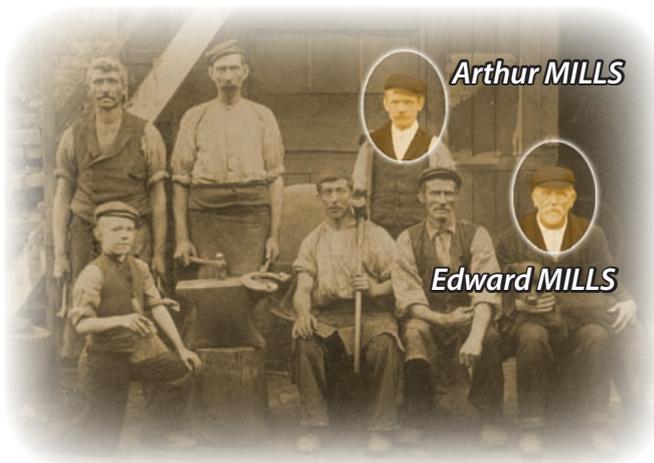
We are of course talking about the spreader pioneer, Robert A. Mills, who this year retires after over 40 years of manufacturing spreaders.

After joining the family engineering business from leaving school, Robert had the foresight during the early 1970's to diversify the business into manufacturing container handling equipment. From a lot of hard work, determination and foresight, Robert has over the years managed to build a globally competitive and an easily recognised brand within the container handling industry.

Now over four decades on, Robert can look back with great pride on his achievements, innovations and how much he and the company have contributed towards the container handling industry.



Robert's first MIG work



Founders of Ed Mills Mobile Workshop

Born in Crosby and brought up in Waterloo, both suburbs of Liverpool UK, Robert's family home overlooking the River Mersey was to form an influential part of his childhood, seeing shipping that frequented the Port of Liverpool.

During the 1960's Robert was often visiting the Liverpool docks with his father and had the opportunity of going on board all kinds of ships, from tugs to ocean going passenger liners owned by companies such as Cunard and Canadian Pacific.

Robert also witnessed the start of containerisation and the first container ships visiting Liverpool.

Robert recalls a captain of the Ellerman Line that was a lifelong friend of his father. The Ellerman Line were a major British shipping company at the time, and one of the first to utilise containers and container ships on their services to Iberia and the Mediterranean. Robert often saw and visited their ships. Robert reflected and recalled ***“it was the connection with the Ellerman Line that started the business link with containers and spreaders”***.



Robert's Model Railway

Robert's passion for engineering began as a young boy visiting the family business and his interest in steam locomotives, from seeing them at work around Liverpool and on the dock railway system. He enjoyed journeys as a young boy travelling to places such as Doncaster and Crewe to see famous trains such as the Flying Scotsman and Royal Scot still steam hauled.

Continuing his fascination, he built his own model railway in the basement of his family home. With the building of model railways saw Robert develop his skills for making models and scenery. In order to operate the model railway a control system was needed. This enabled him to develop an understanding at an early age of low voltage electrical

control necessary to operate the signalling, track circuits and switching points. Later this skill and knowledge became very useful in the 1970's, when Robert had to build his first spreader with a low voltage electrical control system.

Educated at Waterloo Grammar School, Robert left school to join the family business of Ed Mills & Son, whilst attending Bootle Technical College at the Department of Engineering for one year, followed by four years at Liverpool Technical College in the Department of Welding Engineering.

After completing two years of the welding course, he was awarded the Tiberman Prize for Welding by the Welding Institute, due to the highest marks achieved countrywide in the end of year exams. He was also invited to join the Welding Institute as a student member. After finally leaving college, he was asked to join the Walton Technical College in Liverpool as a tutor in the Welding Department.

Robert quickly excelled and establishing himself as a well sought-after steel fabricator and welding engineer in and around Liverpool, with a constant flow of work coming in which was built on both his own reputation, that of his father and the family business.



Robert At Work - Welding



Workshop at Salisbury Road - 1960

The family business of Ed Mills & Son, which had existed since 1876 was, as Robert recalls, ***“a major influence and a natural development for me to join the business after leaving school, as I had always been very close to my father”***. Robert became the fourth generation to join the family business and this year, ***“2016, is a very important milestone as it is the 140th anniversary of the establishment of the family business in Bootle”***.

Due to his specialised welding knowledge of aluminium Robert was often on board ships repairing aluminium lifeboats and even welding the hull of a Royal Navy minesweeper. His specialised welding covered many different types of materials from steel, through cast iron, copper, stainless steel and aluminium. From 1967 the first containers started to arrive in Liverpool often on-board general cargo ships. This resulted in Robert building a mobile workshop fully equipped for all types of welding and other processes required for on-site repairs to containers and other specialised work. The vehicle even contained an electric oven, kettle and most importantly a two way VHF radio for keeping in contact when on site. Robert explains *"The shipping lines found that the cost of repairs carried out by their normal ship repair companies to be expensive due to the restrictive practices carried out in the shipping industry at that time. They wanted a competitive and fast service, which Ed Mills & Sons provided."*



Ed Mills & Son Mobile Workshop



Model 2010 built in 1974

Due to the fact the business had mobile welding equipment and a reputation from an already well established company, Robert continued to build up good relationships with customers and by "word of mouth" for quality and trustworthiness, the company was asked to carry out repairs to the containers when they were damaged. The repairs were carried out on the docks or in transport depots that stored the containers.

In the early 1970's, as a result of from the growth of freight container repairs, Robert's father created a new dedicated company called Speke Container Repairers Ltd on Speke Road in Liverpool adjoining the then, Speke Freight Terminal

that belonged to their main shipping customer, Ellerman Lines. This allowed Ed Mills & Son to concentrate on its core historic business and the building of container spreaders. Robert recalls *"This new business enabled a fully comprehensive service to be offered, both for the repair of containers through to the complete refurbishment of containers as a fully equipped shot-blast and paint facility was set up at the factory"*.

During this period, as Robert's father who was sole proprietor was approaching retirement himself, more responsibility for the day-to-day running of business was on Robert's shoulders. This meant that the hands-on work of welding and steel construction, originally undertaken by Robert grew less and less.

In 1972, with Robert's knowledge and his experience enabled him to build his first container spreader. This was due to his understanding of the weaknesses in the designs of equipment he had repaired since 1967. In 1972 a 40ft semi-automatic spreader was urgently required by a customer in Belfast, Ireland, who operated short sea shipping services across the Irish Sea. The normal supplier wanted 8 to 12 weeks to produce the spreader, but the customer required it in two weeks. Robert took up the challenge and the new spreader was delivered to the customer in two weeks.

From the building of his first spreader, Robert comments *"The whole business of making spreaders was one of gradual development from making the first model in 1972. The knowledge for the first spreader resulted from the repair work carried out over the previous five years, and how I could see the designs could be radically improved, to help reduce damage and improve reliability."*

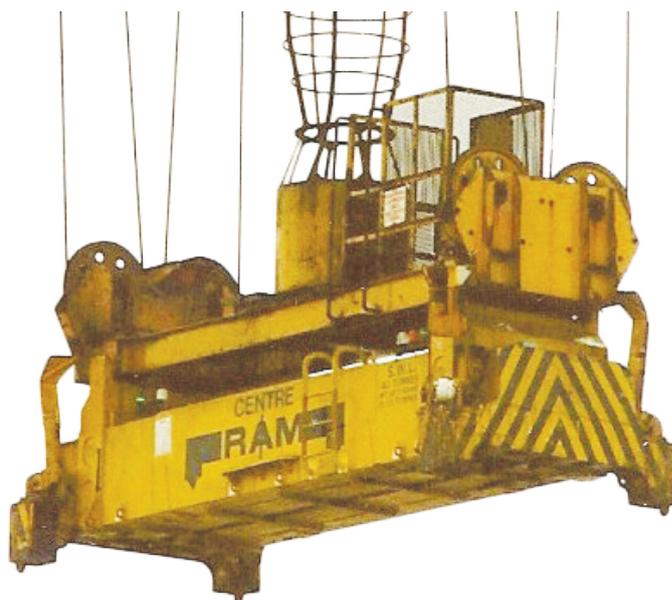


Model 1320 built in 1986

“Over the following ten years, the spreaders manufactured were all derivatives of the first unit, with the design adapted to match the customer’s requirements. For example, by 1975 the spreader design had been adapted, so that the spreaders could be carried by heavy duty fork lift trucks. These versions gradually were improved by the inclusion of hydraulics and electrical systems. Only in 1982 was the major step of building telescopic spreaders considered. This was due to a conversation with a senior manager in the Port of Felixstowe who stated “why can’t I buy a good, reliable British built telescopic spreader for a QC crane”.

The business Ed Mills & Son was going from strength to strength and in 1982, relocated to a factory building located in Speke, Liverpool close to the airport. This also enabled Robert to refurbish complete container cranes. By 1985 Robert began building the first of a family of telescopic spreaders suitable for all applications resulting in 1986, the building of his first telescopic spreader for a QC crane – in answer to the wish from the Port of Felixstowe! During this period Robert began using the brand name of RAM Spreaders which was taken from the initials of his name.

In 1990, due to the growth in the number of telescopic spreaders being manufactured, the company took advantage of a DTI scheme (Department of Trade and Industry) for a stand at the SingaPort 90 Exhibition in Singapore. Robert attended the Exhibition, and during the visit met a representative of NatSteel Engineering Pte Ltd (NSE), and so began the relationship that would, two years later, result in a new joint venture and the creation of NatSteel Engineering (UK) Ltd and with it, the new spreader department in Singapore and the UK business moved to Skelmersdale in Lancashire UK, which was ideally located to the motorway networks.



Model 2420 built in 1990

In 1995 the company moved into a purpose built factory in Skelmersdale that was designed as a final assembly and test facility for the spreader structures.

In the factory the main structural components would be shipped in ready for final assembly. This method of manufacture continued until around 1999 when it became apparent that the lower manufacturing costs in Singapore had to be used and as such general manufacture in the UK ceased. Thereafter, only special or prototype spreaders were manufactured in the UK until that work was also transferred to Singapore.

In joining NSE, it enabled Robert to develop his ideas in a manner that would not have been possible in his family business due to the small size of the company.

Reflecting on his well deserved retirement, Robert’s hobbies keep him busy with still a keen interest in steam locomotives and model railways. Robert still has that passion and commitment in whatever he sets his heart to, and believes he is still no different to the person he was over the years dealing with developments of container spreaders. Robert explains *“I am very proud of all that has happened but fully realise that while I may have been the person that originally planted a handful of acorns that turned into a forest of oak trees, without the company and the dedicated team of people in the RAM family none of what has happened would have been possible”.*

From Robert’s humble beginnings in Bootle Liverpool, today we live in a different world but the core values of RAM still continue from the support of a fully dedicated team. With the recent merger with SMAG, Robert’s opinion is *“the company will go from strength to strength achieving the position of becoming the largest manufacturer of lifting equipment between crane and load”.*

Reaching retirement on such a high note, Robert reflects *“it is a dream come true”.*