

Alvan Blanch is one of the few
British grain drier manufacturers
still in existence

HOME & DRY

How do you transport a giant grain drier to Hungary? Easy: design it around a Nootboom trailer and hitch it up to a Scania R580

By Paul Wager
PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL WAGER



GROVE CRANES

Grove was founded in 1947 and has become a leading producer of mobile hydraulic cranes. It has manufacturing facilities located in Germany and the United States of America.



German-made Grove will lift the dryer onto the trailer



Crane gets into position for the upcoming lift



Stabilisers are used to keep the platform upright



The firm hired the crane from Sparrow's British branch

A mate of mine recently summed up UK industry as 'everyone trying to flog mobile phones and insurance to other people who don't want them', which when you think about it is frighteningly accurate. Mind you, the same bloke also lists as one of his rules in life 'never trust a man called Tony', which seems a touch unfair.

In some ways he's right, though: when you come across a company like Alvan Blanch, which is happily manufacturing things out of metal and exporting them right across Europe, you tend to take a mental

step back in surprise. It's big stuff too, made out of metal by skilled men with hammers and welders, not fiddly little electronics components or computer programming — and not a call centre in sight.

Germ of an idea

If you've spent much time around farmers and farming, the name Alvan Blanch will probably ring a bell — and if you can't quite place it, just look at the next grain drier you see.

Established back in the '50s, the firm has occupied the same piece of rural Wiltshire

ever since and is one of the leading names in crop processing all over the world. The company now boasts subsidiaries in most continents, with exports particularly strong to Eastern Europe.

One snag with building big stuff like this is that you need to get it to the customer, and something like a grain drier can't really be delivered in kit form. Yes, it can be dismantled to a certain extent, but however many parts you take off it, you'll still be left with a pretty big box to transport.

On the day we visited the factory, the firm's biggest drier model (at least, the



It's a tight fit in the yard: this is one of Blanch's biggest driers



The unit emerges from the factory...



...and pauses while everyone ponders how to make the turn



Special rollers are used under the drier

biggest it can deliver in one piece) was on its way to a customer in Hungary, with heavy-haulage specialist Richard Long doing the honours with a Scania and Nootboom kit.

With a background in agriculture, Long is ideally placed to understand the intricacies of transporting loads such as this and has the equipment to do it right. And that equipment needs to be more specific than you might think: after wondering how the hell they were going to get a massive grain drier safely across Europe, Alvan Blanch's

ALVAN BLANCH

British manufacturing company Alvan Blanch specialises in the design and production of machines and processing systems for agricultural produce and waste materials.



It takes a lot of hard work to manoeuvre the grain drier into position and onto the trailer

export sales chief, Nick Gaisford, suddenly had a brainwave one day and asked the guys in the design department how easy it would be to redesign the grain drier in order for it to fit a Nootboom trailer. With a background in the transport industry himself, he knew it would work and after supplying the designers with photos and measurements of the Nootboom set-up, they had a grain drier tailored to the trailer.

That gets things off to a good start, but even with the equipment designed around the trailer, the £105,000 drier — the largest

unit the firm ships out in one piece — is an unwieldy beast.

Money matters

It's a tremendous undertaking and the transport of the massive drier across Europe is an expensive business, involving some £4000-worth of costs for the various permits and mandatory escorts required during the journey, as well as the cost of the transport itself.

So how does a grain drier get from Wiltshire to Hungary? Well before it even



The Scania is kept out of harm's way while the grain drier is hooked up to the crane

GRAIN DRYING

Why would you need a grain drier, and what exactly does it do? The ideal moisture concentration for storing grain is around 14 per cent, and with a climate as unpredictable as that in most northern European countries, that can be difficult to achieve. Waiting for the weather to do the job for you can limit the number of harvesting days to just a handful in a year, but using a drier allows you to extend the number of harvest days by harvesting the grain in damper-than-ideal conditions and then drying it. Storing wet grain, of course, is inviting your precious crop to rot.

“ With a mushroom cloud of diesel soot as the ancient Henley forklift does its stuff, the drier inches out into the sunlight like an ocean liner. ”



Changing direction needs brute force to move the rollers



Jacks and lump hammers change the drier's direction



The lift begins as straps are attached to the drier

gets as far as the trailer, the hard work starts. With a unit this large, you'd need a factory the size of an Airbus plant to be able to load it up inside, so the first task is to get the completed drier out into the yard.

For this, the Alvan Blanch crew fired up a tremendous forklift. Wearing a 1971 registration plate, it's a British-made Henley, the firm later acquired by Lansing Bagnall — but despite looking like a refugee from a WWII airfield, it has enough grunt to pull the grain drier out of the factory on wooden blocks and rollers.

With a mushroom cloud of diesel soot as the ancient Henley does its stuff, the drier inches out into the sunlight like an ocean liner, pausing only when it's time to make a turn. The shape of the yard means they need to turn the drier as it emerges to avoid everything else and provide a safe lift for the waiting crane.

The crane itself is a German-made Grove on hire from the local branch of Sparrow, and is needed to lift the grain drier onto the Nooteboom trailer. It's not a straightforward lift though, as the shape of the yard means

the crane operator has to swing the unit in a big circle to avoid demolishing any of the other equipment in the yard — or indeed, the Scania. There's a gantry crane, another grain drier and a set of railings in the way, plus a split-level to contend with — but before any of that can be grappled with, the drier needs to be chained up properly.

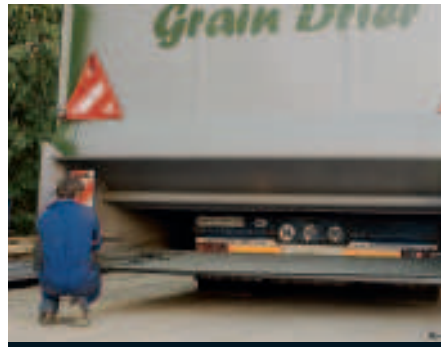
Raising standards

Despite its size and weight, the drier is remarkably fragile and is essentially a big sheet steel box, which means spreaders





Blanch has designed the drier to fit the Nootboom trailer



The outfit finally inches out of the yard



Nootboom is a specialist trailer manufacturer



Grain drier and trailer are a tight fit down the Wiltshire lanes

“ There’s much delicate lifting, joggling and repositioning by hand before everyone’s satisfied the drier is sitting centrally on its sleepers. ”



The Scania is provided by Richard Long, which has transported many of Alvan Blanch’s driers across Europe



Despite its bulk the drier is fragile, so spreaders are used at the top to prevent the straps crushing the sheet metal

are needed to avoid the lifting straps crushing the sides as they take its weight. There’s no easy way to do this, so hard hats and ladders are the order of the day as the spreaders are secured in place before the crane gets the all-clear to finally drop the drier onto the waiting trailer.

Although the drier is designed to fit the trailer, it’s crucial to get it aligned properly from the start and there’s much delicate lifting, jiggling and repositioning by hand before everyone’s satisfied it’s sitting centrally on its sleepers.

By now the early autumn sun is beginning to fade, but Richard Long’s driver, Tom Wiersma, isn’t worried. Rather than setting out into the Friday night traffic, he’s more than happy to park up for the night in the rustic surroundings of the Blanch yard and set off in the morning.

On the move

Despite the rural location, it’s a pretty easy trip to the drier’s Hungarian destination, with only a short narrow section for the outfit to negotiate before joining the A419 at

Cirencester. From here it’s either dual carriageway or motorway all the way to the port.

By Monday morning the grain drier will be in Holland, meeting up with the convoy van at midday and heading off East. By 6 pm the Scania will arrive at the German border, with four or five hours worth of driving left.

The next leg of the journey has to wait until nightfall, but crossing Germany overnight is the easy way to get a load like this down the crowded



Once out of the lanes, it's dual carriageway and motorway most of the way to the port

UP AND RUNNING

Installing the drier is a bit more involved than asking the driver to put it just there, please, and turn it on. Alvan Blanch driers are designed to be as near as possible to a simple plug-in installation, but it's not just a case of fitting a 13 amp plug. There are hefty electrical connections to wire in, all the electrics and sensors to install and calibrate, plus the heating oil supply pipes for the furnace. Once Long's Scania has safely delivered the drier, the Alvan Blanch team will spend a good couple of weeks on site getting it up and running.



The outfit is an intimidating sight for oncoming traffic!

autobahns without causing grief or a gigantic 50 mph pile-up, and after some seven hours' driving the outfit pitches up at the Austrian border.

Just 4.5 hours sees Tom through Austria, and by the time he gets to the Hungarian border he's less than seven hours away from the customer and his eventual destination.

At this point, things get interesting: there's only one way to the customer, which involves threading the grain drier right through the centre of Budapest. The city does have a ring road, but as Tom laughs:

"it isn't finished yet!" — which is why the grain drier needs a police escort to navigate the city's inner ring road.

According to Tom, this is quite an experience as all the traffic stops and the Scania and grain drier power down the middle of the ring road at 70 kmh.

The last leg

With Budapest behind him, Tom is on the home stretch, and later that day the drier will be offloaded by the Hungarian customer in a reversal of the process we've just

witnessed — except there will be no shiny Grove crane on hand; more likely an ex-Soviet military rocket launcher converted for use as a crane and an altogether less high-tech approach.

It's not just a question of offloading the drier and plugging it in, either. Once it's delivered and off the trailer, Nick and his engineers will spend at least a couple of weeks commissioning the unit. It's all a long way from people flogging mobile phones and finance to other people who don't want them. ■