



Celebrating 50 years of excellence





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Thank you for being part of this journey and for helping us celebrate five remarkable decades.

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Introduction

A host of Sparrows



TOP LEFT

The three Sparrow brothers, from left to right: George, Gordon and Alf.

TOP RIGHT

A contract was awarded in 1985 to provide lifting services for the space shuttle.

BOTTOM

G. W. Sparrow & Sons on Lower Bristol Road, Bath, UK, 1961.

For the past 50 years, the words "cranes" and "Sparrows" have gone hand in hand. From the North Sea, to the Gulf of Mexico, through to West Africa, the Middle East, Singapore and beyond, Sparrows has forged a reputation for providing the highest-quality support to the offshore industry.

Yet it's not the cranes that sit at the heart of the Sparrows' business – it's the people. The beating heart of the company has always been its staff and its partners in the wider industry.

Speaking to people who have worked at Sparrows – both now and in the past – one word gets repeated again and again; and that word is "family". From its earliest days, the company has embodied family spirit, with workers rubbing shoulders with their bosses instead of standing on ceremony.

It's testament to the company's ethos and the way that it invests in its people that employees recommend Sparrows as a place where their relatives should come and work too. From parents encouraging their children to join the business through to workers who have enjoyed their time offshore encouraging their siblings to sign-up, it's hard to count the number of families who have passed through Sparrows' doors. Then there's the number of couples who have worked together on the payroll too.

One of the other reasons why that feeling of family has permeated through the company is that Sparrows had indeed started life as a family-run business. In his entertaining book, *Flying With Sparrows*, long-serving employee Frank Sumsion charted the company's global growth, from its origins in the West Country during the late 1940s through to its sale to British Electric Traction (BET) in 1985.

Brothers Alf, George, and Gordon Sparrow formally constituted their firm in 1955 at Bath, in the south-west of England, and focused on crane hire, along with a small number of associated businesses, including vehicle recovery, a filling station, and a popular transport café on the A4 trunk road. Back in those earliest days, the Sparrows

brothers used to build many of their own cranes, adapting old military vehicles to lift a maximum of ten tons.

Over the next 30 years, the Sparrows brothers built their company into the best-known crane business in the UK, with depots located around the country. The firm even owned and operated the first 1000-tonne truck crane in the world.

Sparrows was an integral part of Britain's construction industry, with its heavy crawler cranes involved in projects ranging from the building of the original Hinkley Point nuclear power station in Somerset through to the construction of an overhead section of the M40 motorway in London.

The company also spread its wings internationally, setting up its Rezatay Sparrow joint venture in the Middle East in 1974 and buying Houston-based Universal Crane Hire to mark Sparrows' entry into the United States heavy crane market. That expansion into overseas markets has been a key pillar in Sparrows' growth during all its various incarnations down through the years.

Sparrows was so well-respected that the company was awarded a contract to provide emergency lifting services for NASA's space shuttle. If the shuttle had been forced to land at one of its back-up airports away from its home base at the Kennedy space centre then Sparrows would have provided the crane to lift the shuttle onto the back of a specially-designed 747 jumbo jet to transport it to Florida. The service was never needed, but winning the contract was a huge feather in Sparrows' cap.

This book features some of the characters who have shaped the Sparrows' family, from visionary managing directors including Angus Lyon and Ken Scott through to members of the legendary "flying squad", who still travel offshore at a moment's notice to solve customers' problems in the North Sea and beyond.

1970s

Sparrows builds its nest in Aberdeen



LEFT

Graythorp 1, the jacket for the first of the four Forties platforms, floating in the flooded basin of the dry dock in Hartlepool, UK, 1974.



TOP RIGHT

Jeff Adams, one of Sparrows' first eight offshore crane operators, was assigned to operate the cranes on BP Forties Alpha in 1975.



BOTTOM RIGHT

Frank Sumsion helped negotiate crane operator provision for BP's North Sea rigs, leading to the creation and development of Sparrows Offshore Services.

Looking back over the past 50 years, it's easy to forget that the idea of drilling for oil and gas under the North Sea was absolutely revolutionary. Gas was found at Groningen in the Dutch sector in 1959, prompting the UK Parliament to pass the 1964 Continental Shelf Act and trigger the search for hydrocarbons in British waters.

Gas was discovered in 1965 at what became the West Sole field off the coast of East Anglia by BP's Sea Gem drilling rig, a converted steel barge. Just weeks later, the dangers of working in the North Sea were laid bare when the Sea Gem capsized, with the loss of 13 lives.

Its replacement, Sea Quest, the first purpose-built semi-submersible drilling rig, was launched from Harland & Wolff's shipyard in Belfast in 1966. It struck oil for the first time in 1969 at what became the Arbroath field.

Then came the big one: Sea Quest discovered the UK's first large-scale commercial oil deposit in 1970 and laid the foundations for the country's offshore industry. The field was named Forties after the shipping forecast area where it was discovered.

Appraisal wells drilled during 1971 and 1972 outlined the massive size of the Forties field, but initially questions were still raised about the commercial viability of extracting oil in such a hostile environment. The oil crisis that followed the 1973 Yom Kippur War changed the economics of the North Sea, while innovative financial models allowed BP to borrow the money needed to develop the giant field.

Enter Sparrows: the well-established crane hire company had already supplied people and equipment to engineering firm John Laing's Graythorp site at Hartlepool, where the business was building Graythorp 1 and Graythorp 2, a pair of jackets that would eventually become the bases for the Forties Alpha and Forties Bravo platforms. The Graythorp fabrication yard and dry dock were built on the site of the former William Gray shipyard by a consortium called Laing Pipelines Offshore, formed by Laing and French design company ETPM.

Sparrows helped Laing to buy two 509-model 800-ton revolver cranes from American Hoist & Derrick for use in the yard and mounted them on special gantries built in France. To erect the first of the two cranes, Sparrows used its 500-tonne Gottwald and a Manitowoc 4100 300-ton capacity ringer and then used the first 509 to erect its sibling.

The company had also supplied cranes to BP's petrochemicals plant at Baglan Bay in South Wales. With its strong links to both BP and Laing, Sparrows was the natural partner to approach when the oil company needed staff to operate the cranes on its new oil rigs.

In his book, *Flying With Sparrows*, company director Frank Sumsion described how he travelled to BP's head office in London along with George Sparrow, one of the founding brothers, and Robin Shelley, the director of Sparrows' contract services arm. After a long meeting with BP's engineers to discuss what steps would be needed to train crane operators and service engineers to work in such a harsh environment, a site visit was the next step.

Sumsion and Shelley were flown by helicopter from Dyce to Sea Quest, which was still drilling in what would become the Forties field. They were impressed by the stability of the vessel even in high seas – and by the quality of the food served onboard – and reported back that they could provide the services that BP needed in the North Sea.

BP awarded the company its first crane contract and a new division – Sparrows Offshore Services – was born. Shelley continued setting up the division, which would go on to become the Sparrows business that's known and respected throughout the offshore industry today.

Graythorp 1, the jacket for the first of the four Forties platforms, was installed in August 1974. The deck, which had been built in the Netherlands, was added in October, using Thor, which – at the time – was the world's largest floating crane. It was later joined by Graythorp 2 from Hartlepool, followed by Highland One and Highland Two

from Highlands Fabricators' Nigg Bay yard, which were named Forties Charlie and Forties Delta.

The first oil from Forties Alpha flowed in September 1975, marking not only the start of Sparrows' 50-year presence in the North Sea but also the defining moment in the early days of oil and gas production in British waters. BP may have been pipped to the post by Hamilton Brothers – which landed the UK's first commercial offshore oil from the Argyll field via tanker in June 1975 – but it was the Forties field and its pipeline system that shaped the future of Scotland's and indeed Britain's oil and gas industry.

Jeff Adams was one of Sparrows' first eight offshore crane operators. In 2011, he told *Offshore Engineer* magazine: "It was 1 September 1975 when I was assigned to operate the cranes on Forties Alpha. We practically watched the Forties jackets being installed. Crane operation was considered the second most hazardous job offshore after diving. Sparrows' aim was to set a new standard in safety, and I think we succeeded."

Initially, Sparrows transferred staff from its crane hire division to become offshore crane operators. Men who had experience of handling heavy crawlers and the large mobile cranes were well suited to the oil rigs.

Later, Sparrows would recruit engineers with experience of working with agricultural equipment and other heavy machinery for its offshore crews. It also had success recruiting people who had worked at McDermott's Ardersier and Hi-Fab's Nigg Bay fabrication yards.

One of those early crane operators was to go on to have a massive impact at Sparrows. John Fraser joined the company in 1977 to operate cranes in the Forties field and became the driving force behind the development of key industry processes for the safety and integrity of crane operations. Fraser led the development of the Sparrows Offshore Crane Operator Training and Competence Standard in 1990, which – for thirty years – has been the industry's benchmark, with his work being recognised through an Above and Beyond Award at the 2018 Offshore

Achievement Awards, a year before he retired from his role as director of both human resources (HR) and health, safety, environment, and quality (HSEQ).

Sparrows' work in the North Sea expanded further when it won the crane contract for Shell's Brent field. Rather than simply providing crane operators, the company also supplied deck handling crews.

The cranes changed over time too. The original cranes out on the rigs were older cranes that had been taken off wheels and put onto pedestals, and were gear-driven, purely mechanical cranes with friction brakes. Eventually, they were replaced by hydraulics and subsequently electronics, with specialist mechanics hired to operate them.

The late-1970s also saw Sparrows laying the foundations for success during the following decades. Rather than simply replacing parts on cranes, Sparrows' mechanics worked under contracts that incentivised them to use fewer spare parts and instead to service and maintain their cranes.

Carrying out high-quality servicing and maintenance, and spending less money on spare parts, meant a better profit margin for Sparrows. Some of those cost savings could then also be passed onto its customers when belts needed to be tightened during the oil price slumps in the 1980s.

Looking back on those early days, the contribution that Sparrows made was nothing short of revolutionary. The company pioneered the use of cranes on oil and gas rigs, developing innovative techniques and processes as it went in order to tackle the ever-developing challenges that it faced offshore. It's a fitting tribute to those offshore pioneers in the very earliest days of the North Sea that Sparrows is still flourishing today and continuing to set the standard for offshore lifting around the world.



John Fraser (centre), who joined Sparrows in 1977, received the Above and Beyond Award in 2018 in recognition of his commitment to developing competence and safety standards for crane lifting operations.



The original Sparrows Offshore coveralls, 1976.

1980s

Spreading its wings in the North Sea



Scott House, Aberdeen, UK.



Dave Buckham, regional operations director for Africa, joined as an apprentice mechanic in 1989.



Alf and George Sparrow at the offshore training school, Aberdeen, UK.

From the firm foundations laid during those earliest days in the 1970s, Sparrows' offshore work boomed in the early part of the decade that followed. The company's prowess was already allowing it to forge a reputation as the go-to company for running offshore cranes – a reputation that continues to this day.

The 1980s marked the passing of the baton between two of the most well-known names closely associated with Sparrows – from Angus Lyon, the managing director of the Sparrows offshore division during its earliest days, to Ken Scott, who would lead the transformation of the company until his untimely death from cancer in 2006 at the age of just 55.

Although the Sparrow brothers were occasionally seen in Aberdeen, staff from the early 1980s reported that it was Lyon who was the key driving force behind the offshore division. Initially, the company was based in premises further down Denmore Road in Bridge of Don from its current location, and the office was staffed by just Lyon and his personal assistant, Susan Gray, later Susan Fraser. Colleagues with memories of those earliest days remember Sparrows' offshore division being left largely independent by its parent company, effectively operating as a separate business.

The offshore division was popular with its owner because it generated large amounts of cash. Its big customers – such as the Forties field, Shell with its Brent field, and a host of drilling companies such as Bawden, Transocean, and Zapata – owned the cranes themselves and all the major spare parts, such as booms, while Sparrows essentially hired out the expertise of its crane operators.

The decade also featured a change in ownership that was to define the early chapters of Sparrows' story. Its parent company, G. W. Sparrow & Sons, had floated on the London stock market in 1968 to fuel its growth, but in 1985 it became the subject of a hostile takeover bid by British Electric Traction (BET), a conglomerate that, at one stage, owned businesses spread across industries ranging from construction and transport through to entertainment

and publishing. BET already owned rival crane company Grayston White, which it combined with the Sparrows crane hire business to create Grayston White & Sparrow.

While Sparrows' onshore crane hire services may have been a good fit for BET, colleagues from the period remember the offshore division having an uneasy relationship with its new parent company, sitting as something of an anomaly within the wider business.

There were some lighter moments during BET's ownership of the company. When the board of BET, including Conservative government minister Norman Tebbit, came to visit the head office, staff were told to be on their best behaviour. One of the workers arrived at the office at just the wrong moment though, having flown back to Dyce after working offshore and headed straight to the Spider's Web, a popular pub with Sparrows' staff. To keep the intoxicated member of staff away from the visiting directors, he was quickly locked in a cupboard until the board left.

Meanwhile, Scott joined the business in 1980 – on the same day as Malcolm Wilson, who went on to become operations director, and Alan Craib, who became head of purchasing – and took over as managing director of the offshore division in 1986. Scott is credited with developing the idea of "crane management services" – not simply supplying crane operators and maintenance personnel but running the cranes on behalf of the oil and gas platform's operator.

Crane management involved Sparrows running every step of the process, from advising on which cranes should be fitted to oil or gas rigs all the way through to operating and maintaining them. That expansion of the business required moving into larger premises at what is now known as Scott House; the building was named in honour of Scott following his death.

Colleagues fondly reminisce that air travel with Scott was an experience. Whenever he was flying, he would carry a briefcase with him, full of his apparatus. Inevitably, the briefcase was searched by airport security officers, and so Scott would spend much of the flight rearranging his set

squares, compasses, pens, and the other paraphernalia to put them back into their correct places.

That attention to detail extended to the company's flat in the United States too. Scott's colleagues would wind him up by rearranging the hammers, screwdrivers, and other tools kept in the flat, and then watch as Scott fastidiously put them all back again in their right places.

In the early 1980s, Sparrows had around 50 members of staff working from Aberdeen. Crane operators would work shift patterns of two weeks-on, two weeks-off, and would be accompanied by a mechanic, who would carry out the day-to-day servicing and maintenance. In the days before survival suits and lifejackets, workers could even still smoke in the helicopters as they were being flown offshore. Workers would stay in four-man cabins and would have to buy a phone card and then queue for hours to make their one phone call home each week. Before satellite television arrived, entertainment consisted of watching a video together and then playing snooker with a cup of coffee. In the early days, when most of the work focused on drilling rigs, the food was second to none, with the American workers demanding the best quality steaks.

As well as providing crane management services, Sparrows also began spreading its wings to take on bigger jobs. The operations department continued to handle the contract engineering work for large ongoing customers while the engineering department carried out ad-hoc work for other clients.

One of their early challenges was jacking up the cranes to replace the slew bearings, the giant rings that allow the cranes to rotate. The material from which the slew rings were made was fine for onshore cranes but wasn't tough enough to withstand the low temperatures often encountered offshore. Sparrows became the first company to replace slew bearings offshore without needing to use a large crane barge.

The solution was to weld brackets to the crane's pedestal and then build a frame before jacking up the crane. The bearing was loosened, slid out, and then the new bearing slid in, before lowering the crane back down again. The technique made its debut in BP's Forties field and Sparrows then repeated the process throughout the British and Norwegian sectors of the North Sea.

Engineers who worked on those projects described the early rigs as "big Meccano sets". On Britoil's Thistle platform, the team not only jacked up the crane but then chopped off its pedestal, replacing it with tubular parts better suited to conditions in the North Sea. Some of its larger jobs also included replacing cranes' booms.

During the mid-1980s, Sparrows was also becoming involved in other lifting projects offshore during shutdown periods on rigs. These included replacing compressors and lifting other pieces of heavy equipment.

Sparrows' massive expansion during the 1980s created opportunities for workers to progress through the company. Ewen Kerr joined Sparrows in 1987 as one of the company's first two engineering design apprentices and rose through the ranks to become engineering director, replacing Dave Cockburn, the man who had originally hired him.

As the 1980s drew to a close, one of the darkest chapters in the North Sea's history unfolded. On 6 July 1988, the Piper Alpha oil rig exploded, claiming the lives of 167 men.

While no one from Sparrows was killed in the disaster, the incident sent shockwaves throughout the industry and acted as a stark reminder of the dangers of drilling offshore. The ensuing Cullen Inquiry made safety recommendations that continue to shape the industry to this day.



TOP

Slew bearing change out on the Brent Bravo platform's east crane, UK North Sea.

BOTTOM

Company button hole badge and stickers featuring safety mascot Super Sparrow.

1990s

Weathering the storm



LEFT

Line boring in the Aberdeen, UK, workshop.

TOP RIGHT

Stuart Smith, Gillian McGough and Arnie Anderson, part of the design team in Aberdeen in the late 1990s.

MIDDLE RIGHT

Cold-cutting of pipe using a Sparrows' "splitring" machine tool.



BOTTOM RIGHT

Keeping track of who was working on which platform in the North Sea using peg boards, Scott House, Aberdeen, UK.

Resilience has always been a key tool in Sparrows' kit. As oil prices have fluctuated and the economics of exploration and production have shifted, the company has been able to innovate in order to support its offshore customers, giving them the levels of service and value for money they have needed to make their operations financially viable.

As the offshore sector continued struggling to recover from an oil price collapse in 1986, the industry came together to slash exploration and production costs to make the North Sea more attractive for investment from the world's major oil companies. Those efforts were led by the UK Offshore Operators' Association, which launched the Cost Reduction Initiative for the New Era (CRINE) in 1993, triggering a wave of closer partnerships between operators and their contractors.

Against this wider industry backdrop, Sparrows was at the forefront of innovation by becoming the first company to retrain its mechanics to also operate cranes on North Sea production platforms. The efficiencies and cost savings were immediately attractive to Sparrows' big clients by giving them the chance to tighten their belts, but without compromising on performance or safety.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the jobs of crane operator and mechanic had been separate roles, with teams dispatched to platforms to operate cranes and carry out day-to-day maintenance. Sparrows then trained its electrical, hydraulic, and mechanical engineers to not only maintain those cranes but to operate them too, reducing the number of people needed on each platform and cutting the associated costs. Dedicated crane operators remained with Sparrows and were instead redeployed to specialised tasks, such as operating cranes on drilling rigs.

One of Sparrows' distinctive features has always been its "flying squads". While its residents on board platforms would carry out day-to-day maintenance, the "flying squad" would carry out bigger jobs, such as replacing major crane structures like booms, or slew rings, and also troubleshooting and repairing all systems. In the early days, many members of the flying squad were drawn from

the mechanical, machine, and fabrication workshops in Aberdeen but, as the company grew, more and more men were needed, and so members of the flying squad would be based at their homes throughout the UK and would then travel to Dyce to head offshore.

It could be quite a disruptive way of life – working offshore for two weeks, then being home for a day or two, before suddenly being sent offshore again. In recent years, Sparrows has created positions like the operations superintendent to help strengthen links between the flying squad and the head office.

The flying squads would also enjoy a laugh and a joke when they were offshore. Each member of the team would take turns to go to the "bond" – the bonded store or shop on the rig – and buy sweets and cans of juice for their friends. On one memorable occasion, one of the guys decided to wind up his supervisor, who always enjoyed a Cadbury's Flake and a can of Fanta – he crumbled the Flake and shook the tin of juice, so that both treats sprayed everywhere when the supervisor opened them up.

Other offshore crews joined in with the fun too. Once when a supervisor warned his workers that he didn't want any hydraulic oil "leaks" from his crane, one of his men played a trick on him by going to the galley and borrowing some "leaks", which he tied to the crane, before telling his boss: "You'd better come and see – there are leaks everywhere".

Having both resident mechanics and flying squad engineers meant there were lots of opportunities for people to move around within the company. Mechanics, electricians, and welders would often spend three or four years in the workshops before going offshore to do ad-hoc jobs and then eventually joining the offshore teams full-time.

Keeping track of who was working on which platform in the North Sea was a massive job, which fell to Angela Birnie and her team at Scott House. Giant peg boards – one for each platform – took up two walls of a big room in the logistics department, which occupied half of the ground floor. You couldn't have pretty nails if you were working on

the peg boards. Nowadays, the Vantage onboard tracker software makes the task so much easier.

Before emails or even faxes, organising crew changes had to be done on a telex machine, a device that could send text messages down telephone lines. Reams of paperwork were also needed to make sure everyone's training was up to date – nowadays, computer systems send automatic reminders and alerts.

As well as keeping track of workers on the peg boards, they needed to be tracked down in real life too. That meant lots of calls to people's landlines at home, ringing and ringing and ringing until someone answered. Being in touch so often with workers and their families meant that close relationships could be built up – which made it harder if workers hadn't told their partners on which day they'd be coming back onshore, so that they could spend extra time with their mates in the pub instead.

Another illustration of Sparrows' resilience can be seen in its willingness to embrace diversification. While the company's name has always been a byword for quality in the offshore arena, its expertise has been sought out by businesses working across a range of other industries too.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Sparrows began that diversification into other fields. Its specialist on-site machinists – who would usually travel to North Sea platforms to carry out work that couldn't be done onshore – worked on projects that included Sizewell nuclear power station in Suffolk and the turbines at hydro-electric power stations in the Highlands such as Aigas, Cruachan, and Pitlochry during the summer months, when demand for electricity was lower. Many of the tasks were one-off repairs, and so the company's machine shop in Aberdeen had to make up any fixtures that were needed for each job.

Central to Sparrows' success was its dedicated training centre at Tyrebagger, an old quarry on the outskirts of Aberdeen, which the company began turning into its education facility in 1988. Today, Sparrows' training centre has become a resource for the wider industry, with around three-quarters of its courses being delivered for external delegates. Trainees flock to Aberdeen from throughout the world because the centre is recognised for delivering the gold standard in the crane industry.

In 1996, Sparrows changed hands again, when Rentokil mounted a £2.2 billion hostile takeover of BET, which – at the time – was one of the largest takeovers in British corporate history. Swapping from one conglomerate to another meant Sparrows still felt detached from its parent company – but at least rumours of changing the name of the business to "Rentokil Offshore" never came to pass.

One Sparrows tradition that sadly ended in the 1990s was the famous staff canteen in Aberdeen, where workers could rub shoulders with management – as long as their overalls weren't too dirty. The site where the canteen once stood is now affectionately known as the "canteen yard".



LEFT

Sparrows stand at the 1991 Offshore Europe exhibition and conference, Aberdeen, UK. L-R: Ewen Kerr, Sparrows; Billy Chatwood and John McDonald, Aberdeen Scaffolding; John Rodway, Sparrows; Steve Farma, ACL; and Gordon McCombie, Sparrows.



TOP RIGHT

Offshore employee handbook, issued February 1990.



BOTTOM RIGHT

Alan "Tokens" Forrest (left) and Colin Clark completed annual maintenance inspections in Doha. Due to the heat, both swapped their full beards for a bold moustache-only look!

2000s

The sky is the limit



Ken Scott, Sparrows managing director from 1986 to 2006, at the training site at Tyrebagger, 2002.

Sparrows' innovative approach has allowed the business to endure whatever the economic climate has thrown at it down through the years. That resilience – combined with its stellar reputation – has attracted the attention of many different suitors in recent decades.

The turn of the millennium marked a monumental shift in Sparrows' business. In September 2000, private equity investor 3i backed a management buyout (MBO), which was led by managing director Ken Scott, financial director Adrian Bannister, operations director Malcolm Wilson, and engineering director David Cockburn, who together owned around 30% of the company's shares.

Spreading its wings from Rentokil gave Sparrows greater opportunities to expand into international markets. At the time of the first MBO, Sparrows was servicing 82% of the UK's offshore crane market, with 435 staff supporting 114 offshore installations. As well as its BP contract – which included deck handling and acting as its lifting technical expert, as well as crane operations and maintenance – the company's client list stretched from Shell, Texaco, and Total Fina Elf through to Britannia, Enterprise, and Marathon. Existing overseas contracts included crane management for Chevron in West Africa and state-owned Adama Opco in Abu Dhabi, and a small branch office at Perth in Australia.

Africa was a key early focus for expansion. Although the company had entered the market in 1996, it began collating its work in 2004, with six contracts spanning three countries, serviced by around 100 workers.

To begin with, around 75% of the workload was in Nigeria, with the vast majority of the remainder in Angola. Shortly after the company's African projects were organised into a separate business unit, Sparrows won major contracts in Angola from both ExxonMobil in 2005 and BP in 2007, which transformed its operations, with around 70% of its business on the continent today coming from Angola. Other contracts have included work for Chevron, Shell, and Total, with the business diversifying into the Congo, Gabon, and the Ivory Coast.

Lessons learned in Africa were also transferred to other parts of the business. Rather than simply operating and maintaining cranes, Sparrows began supplying deck handling services to Shell in Nigeria and then repeated that success with BP in Angola and Repsol in the Far East too.

Work off the coast of West Africa included crane inspections on Transocean's drilling rigs. Sparrows' expertise in crane management meant it won contracts for broader work, supervising lifting and evaluating the condition of cranes.

Sparrows marked its return to the United States market by buying Houston-based Martec Crane Company in 2002, with the company renamed as Martec Sparrows. In order to expand into the Gulf of Mexico, Sparrows not only needed to operate and maintain cranes but needed to build them too.

The business' American expansion moved up a gear in March 2003 following a second MBO, this time backed by venture capitalist firm London Merchant Securities (LMS), which took a 93% stake, diluting management down to 7%. The value of the company had risen from £10.5 million during 2000's MBO to £25.6 million in 2003's MBO, with turnover rising from \$37 million in 1999 to \$70 million in 2003.

LMS already owned marine crane builder American Aero and its subsidiary, Titan Industries, and brought the brands together in August 2003 with Sparrows under the Energy Crane International (ECI) banner, the vehicle LMS had created to buy Sparrows. Ken Scott, Sparrows' managing director, led the expanded company, which had revenues of \$100 million.

Staff from Sparrows' Aberdeen head office travelled back and forth to a test facility in Louisiana to integrate the two new companies into the wider business. Many of Sparrows' processes – including safety inspections – were more advanced than those used in the Gulf of Mexico due to the difficult nature of operating in the North Sea.



Terry McNeill (centre) and Hamish Mathieson taking it easy on the Britannia platform in the UK North Sea, 2004.



TOP LEFT

Promotional material distributed on a CD-ROM in 2001.

BOTTOM LEFT

Martin Noble (left) and Scott Fraser share a laugh offshore in 2006.



RIGHT

Craig McKean's first offshore trip to the Britannia platform in the UK North Sea in 2007.



Celebrating a £5 million contract in 2005 to operate cranes for Shell. Contract team L-R: Lee Holland, contract manager Dave Cooper, Ewen Kerr, Duncan Anderson and Pietro Fong.



LEFT

Dave Buckham and Dave Cooper at a family barbecue and fun day at Kippie Lodge, Aberdeenshire in 2005.



TOP RIGHT

Duncan Anderson, Pietro Fong, Chris Kruitbos, Ewen Kerr and Brian Smith wait patiently for a project engineer to complete his search for an elusive long stand in Scott House, 2002.

MIDDLE RIGHT

Graham Lowe, Ian Booth and Ian Shand celebrating Burns night in 2005.

BOTTOM RIGHT

Bill Kintrea, Bill Hector and Alan Kidd celebrating Burns night in 2005.

Expansion continued, with the acquisition of Aberdeen Hydraulics Services in August 2007, followed by Marine & Mainland Cranes a month later. The deals took ECI's turnover to \$232 million in 2007.

ECI changed hands again in 2008, with LMS selling its stake to fellow private equity house Close Brothers in a deal that valued the company at £142 million. The MBO kicked off another round of acquisitions, with ECI taking over pipelaying specialist Baricon and continuing its US expansion with the acquisition of Dynamic Cranes. Following industrial giant Caterpillar's takeover of Bucyrus International in 2011, Sparrows also bought the intellectual property rights to Bucyrus Erie's marine cranes.

Working for BP also took Sparrows' staff to Sakhalin, a Russian island lying to the north of Japan. Facilities were very basic at the time – dirt roads, only satellite phones for communication, and workers were living in an old sanatorium. Staff would bring tins of food out with them from the UK, and anything they could use to add flavour to the dire food. A bear and its cubs were even spotted in the sanatorium's garden, eating scraps of food thrown out by the cooks.

Football was a universal language – no matter where in the world Sparrows' staff travelled, most local workers had heard of Rangers and Celtic, and would ask for football shirts to be brought back for them during the next visit. Sadly, it seems that Aberdeen shirts were less popular.

While waiting at Norwich airport for a flight back to Aberdeen, one crew was even mistaken for a football team. The green and yellow Sparrows' bags shared the same colours with Norwich City's football strip. When a lady asked the workers if they were "The Canaries" – Norwich's nickname – they simply replied: "Close – we're sparrows".

Back in Aberdeen, Sparrows' footprint was changing too. A fire in the workshop and fabrication shop in April 2002 led to the company expanding onto new sites. Scott House on Denmore Road and the hydraulics workshop on Woodside Road were joined by three other buildings at different points along the street.

While Sparrows is synonymous with cranes, other work has stuck in colleague's minds. A big project around 2000 involved a valve change out on the Ninian Central platform, using pneumatic air skates – in effect, mini hovercrafts – to manoeuvre a 20-tonne valve around the spider deck of the platform.

One of 2009's big jobs involved reviving an old crane for ConocoPhillips that had been out of action for 10 years. Obsolete components had to be found from around the world, and the old levers were replaced with an electronic control system.

Working for Shell in the Northern North Sea led onto work for the company in the Southern North Sea and the Dutch sector, where Shell wanted a common standard of maintenance applied across its fleet of cranes.

Those continuing successes for Sparrows at the start of the millennium would set the pace for the decades that followed. Its dominance in the North Sea and its growth in export markets were about to be recognised at the very highest level.



LEFT

Expansion continued with the acquisition of Aberdeen Hydraulics Services in 2007.



TOP RIGHT

Sparrows Baricon Systems team, 2008.



BOTTOM RIGHT

Malcolm Wilson, chief operating officer, 2005.



Crane change on the Claymore platform in the UK North Sea, 2004.



Hamish Mathieson at the controls of the Stothert and Pitt OS200 north crane on the Britannia platform in the UK North Sea, 2004.



TOP LEFT

Stothert and Pitt crane at the Tyrebagger training centre, 2005.

BOTTOM LEFT

Pictured during the Liebherr crane install: Greg Clark (centre), his dad Colin and Greg's uncle James Cruickshank who have all worked for Sparrows.

RIGHT

Installation of the Liebherr BOS 2600 pedestal crane at the Tyrebagger training centre in 2006.

The Tyrebagger training centre's pedestal crane is mounted over a flooded quarry. This unique set-up provides a 'hands-on' experience and enables trainees to practice and build their skills in the offloading and backloading of supply vessels.

2010-2020s

Sparrows join the seagulls



Doug Sedge, Sparrows CEO from 2009 to 2014, with the Queen's Award for Enterprise (International Trade) in 2010.

After years of the ECI name being in the spotlight, the Sparrows name re-emerged in 2010 when ECI's four brands – Sparrows Offshore, Energy Cranes, Aberdeen Hydraulics, and Baricon Systems – were all rebranded under the Sparrows label. The company's decade of overseas expansion was also rewarded in 2010 when it received the Queen's Award for Enterprise (International Trade) in recognition of trebling its exports to £78 million over the previous six years. Chief executive Doug Sedge headed to Buckingham Palace in London with one of his crane operators from the Total contract to collect the award from the Queen.

Yet there was no time to rest on its laurels. As Sparrows' business continued to mature, the company not only sought international contracts but also expanded some of its support functions overseas. The firm already had staff in India, and opened an engineering office in Mumbai in 2011, during Sedge's tenure as chief executive, helping to relieve the burden on the busy engineering office in Aberdeen.

During the early days in India, the power supply to the office wasn't always reliable, and so Sparrows bought its own generator as a back-up supply during power cuts. When the head office back in Aberdeen asked for a picture of the new generator, as a joke one of Sparrows' staff sent back a photograph of a rusty old engine that had been left in a field.

International expansion didn't always run smoothly. Sparrows had to rebuild its team in the United States after scores of staff left to join a rival firm. Chris Dixon moved from the UK to the US to help rebuild the business, working with Doug Clement and the remainder of the team in America.

There was still life in the North Sea too. In 2011, Sparrows completed a double crane swap on BP's Magnus platform in the culmination of an 18-month project to select and buy the two replacement cranes, as well as design a support structure for a third crane to remove the old cranes and install the new ones.

The final MBO took place in 2012, when AEA bought Close Brother's stake in the firm, which was valued at around £150 million. The deal provided further fuel for expansion.

While offshore crane management has always sat at the centre of Sparrows' business, the company has continued to diversify over the years, including work on projects at power stations and in dockyards. Given its offshore expertise, expanding into the burgeoning renewable energy industry has been a natural step for Sparrows.

In February 2017, the business won its largest renewable energy contract when it signed a deal to supply 103 cranes for ScottishPower's 714MW East Anglia One wind farm – one for each turbine and one for training. The cranes were designed and built by the company at its Aberdeen base.

Later that year, Sparrows underlined its commitment to the renewables market when it acquired Danish wind energy specialist Alpha Offshore Service. Alpha's specialisation in the inspection, maintenance, and repair of offshore wind turbines mirrored Sparrows' own niche engineering expertise.

Along with all the tales about life offshore, stories about the social side of life at Sparrows are seldom far from colleagues' lips. While some of the family feeling of the business has naturally faded over the years as the company has got bigger and bigger, many of the long-serving members of staff have worked hard to keep the social side of Sparrows going.

Both current and former employees speak warmly about the legendary Christmas parties and barbecues. Some of the earliest gatherings took place in the workshop, with the staff building a stage for the band. Even today, while each department has its own separate Christmas meal, the whole Aberdeen company still meets up in a pub afterwards.



LEFT

Sparrows staff guide a cooler unit into place on a Floating Production, Storage and Offloading (FPSO) unit offshore Angola, 2011.



TOP RIGHT

Iain Greig gives his approval to the newly installed Kenz crane on the Cormorant Alpha platform in the UK North Sea, 2011.

BOTTOM RIGHT

Rental crane team in the US, 2018.



Rental crane in Scott House yard, Aberdeen UK, 2014.

The annual Sparrows golf outings have also become fond memories, with current and former members of staff travelling throughout Scotland and England – as well as further afield to Ireland and Portugal – to play a round or two. Other social activities over the years have included Burns' Nights, trips to Perth racecourse, and bowling.

After more than 20 years of MBOs backed by a range of private equity houses, Sparrows was taken over in 2022 by Altrad, the international industrial services giant. Private equity firms tend to only own companies for a short spell, often around five years. In contrast, many colleagues hope that being acquired by a company from within the wider industrial services industry will provide Sparrows with the stability needed for longer-term growth and also create opportunities for further diversification.

That diversification is likely to come onshore as well as offshore. While the expansion of Alpha Offshore will help Sparrows to capture a larger slice of the renewable energy market as oil and gas transitions towards the world's 2050 net zero targets, the company is also focusing on its onshore expansion, eyeing strong demand from nuclear power stations, chemical refineries, and other large industrial plants.

Like Sparrows, Altrad takes its name from its founder; Mohamed Altrad launched his business at Montpellier in France in 1985 and today, 40 years later, still leads the company that carries his name. Speaking at the time of the acquisition, he welcomed Sparrows' 2,000 people to the Altrad family, praising their skills and knowledge, and recognising what a valuable addition they would be to the group.

Steering Sparrows through its major period of diversification were chief executive Stewart Mitchell and chief financial officer Neil Johnson, who each served from 2014 through to 2023. During that period, they oversaw the takeover of Alpha Offshore and Sparrows' acquisition by Altrad, before handing over the reins to the current senior leadership team.

That senior management team is led by managing director Matt Corbin, George MacKenzie, regional manager – Middle East, Charlie Topp, global strategic director, Nicola Anderson, finance director, and includes three regional leaders who started out as apprentices at Sparrows or joined the company early in their career, before rising through the ranks, demonstrating how strong training can lead to career progression, when a company values and invests in its staff.

Dave Buckham, who is now the regional operations director for Africa, joined as an apprentice mechanic in 1989. Tim McKelvey, the European regional manager, signed up as a graduate engineer in 2005, while Adam Wood, senior vice-president for the Americas, came on board as part of the Marine and Mainland acquisition in 2007, having previously worked offshore.

As Sparrows celebrates 50 years of managing cranes in the North Sea, the defining thread that continues to run through its story is its people. The high calibre of the people who have worked at the company down through the years has attracted the best and the brightest to the business, with workers often choosing to stay for most or even all of their careers. Maintaining that level of camaraderie will be key as Sparrows eyes its next 50 years.



TOP LEFT

Susan Fraser and John Fraser perform Band Aid's Do They Know it's Christmas for 2010's company Christmas charity fundraiser.

BOTTOM LEFT

Sparraz Arraz darts team who took part in the 2013 Corporate Decathlon.

RIGHT

Richard Wilson and Ewen Kerr are the chefs for another Sparrows barbecue in Aberdeen in 2013.



Design and manufacture of offshore wind turbine cranes in Aberdeen in 2018 for ScottishPower Renewables' East Anglia ONE windfarm project off the coast of Suffolk.



TOP
Abu Dhabi team celebrate the completion of a major project in 2012.



MIDDLE
Leaders from various regions gather together at Altrad's business development seminar in Salou, Spain in 2023.



BOTTOM
MSTime partnership signing ceremony in 2025 to strengthen lifting capabilities across Malaysia.



Singapore team onsite for the construction and commissioning of the Shell Vito platform in 2021.



TOP

In 2019, the Singapore team earned API Specification Q2, the world's highest quality certification for drilling service providers.



BOTTOM LEFT

Rope access NDT in the Northern Territory, Australia, 2021.

BOTTOM RIGHT

India team celebrate the opening of a new workshop in Rabale in 2023.



TOP LEFT

Sparrows Crane Operator Stage 1 training underway in Angola, 2021.

BOTTOM LEFT

Celebrating the opening of the new office in Luanda in 2024.



RIGHT

Mazambi 'Nenet' Nfumu became the first female crane mechanic in Africa when she joined the team in Malongo, Angola in 2019.



LEFT

Sparrows became Kazakhstan's first IRATA-certified operator and trainer in 2022, approved to offer rope access training at its Atyrau facility.



TOP RIGHT

Belt modifications to alleviate issues on a production line conveyor belt, Texas, US, 2021.

BOTTOM RIGHT

Sabtic tank inspection in the US, 2021.



TOP

Stewart Mitchell (left) Sparrows CEO from 2014 to 2023, and Mikkel Lund, CEO at Alpha Offshore announce the acquisition of Danish wind energy specialist Alpha Offshore Service A/S in 2017.



BOTTOM

Trevor Dear shows Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, how to use a crane simulator during a visit to the Tyrebagger training centre in 2017.



LEFT

Wind turbine blade inspection in 2023 as part of Altrad Alpha's first collaboration with Siemens Gamesa Renewable Energy (SGRE) in Japan.



TOP RIGHT

Rope access Non-Destructive Testing (NDT), Mid West Ports in Australia, 2025.



BOTTOM RIGHT

Tower painting project at the Emu Downs wind farm in Western Australia, 2024.

TOP

Caroline Gill, pictured here on the North Everest platform in the UK North Sea, started as an apprentice draughtsperson in 2013 and has grown into a key member of our Aberdeen design team.



TOP

Celebrating Diwali with Super Sparrow in the Abu Dhabi office in 2019.



BOTTOM

The team in the Middle East attend an Iftar meal in Abu Dhabi in 2024.

BOTTOM

Global head of training Angela Birnie announces a strategic partnership to launch Sparrows' training courses worldwide.

TOP

Head of Design and Technology Stuart Smith celebrates 30 years with Sparrows in 2023 with Matt Corbin (left) and Sandy Simpson (right).



BOTTOM

Altrad Sparrows' regional manager for Europe Tim McKelvey, Seamus Ryan (our longest-serving employee in Europe) and Altrad Group CEO Ran Oren at Aberdeen's 50th anniversary celebration ball in 2025.



Altrad Sparrows inaugurates the Middle East's first offshore pedestal crane manufacturing facility in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates in 2024.



The US team in 2024 with the bespoke EC50 pedestal crane, the first crane designed and manufactured under the Altrad Sparrows brand.



TOP

Altrad Sparrows managing director Matt Corbin (right) presenting Sean Fitzpatrick of the Altrad Academy and former New Zealand All Blacks Rugby player with a Lego kit of one of Sparrows' pedestal cranes, to celebrate the expansion of the Tyrebagger training centre in 2025.



BOTTOM

In 2025, Tim McKelvey, alongside Angela Birnie joined colleagues in celebrating 50 years of Sparrows in the North Sea at the opening of the newly expanded training centre, which offers enhanced courses and greater capacity.



In 2025, we were honoured to welcome Mohed Altrad, founder and president of the Altrad Group, to our Aberdeen facilities. Left to right at our Tyrebagger training centre: Dave Buckham, Mahavir Singh (CFO – Altrad), Mohed Altrad, Tim McKelvey, Raquel Leme, Matt Corbin and Djena Altrad (general manager – Altrad).

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