

# Rail Plant Association Update

RPA Management Committee Chair Andy Crago reports on the current initiatives of the association.

## 25th anniversary dinner

On Tuesday 25th February, the Rail Plant Association (RPA) held an anniversary dinner for its members to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Association. The dinner was held at the Best Western Plus Birmingham NEC Meriden Manor Hotel, in Meriden, near Coventry, taking place the night before the RPA AGM and leadership meeting the following day. The dinner was well attended by representatives from across the RPA membership and it provided a great opportunity to network and generally catch up with industry friends and colleagues old and new.

At this anniversary point for the association, it seems appropriate to give a potted history of the RPA, its accomplishments and what the future holds.

## When did the RPA begin?

The RPA was established on 8th December 1999 and was an 'off-shoot' of the Construction Plant Association (CPA).

## Who were the founding members?

Andy Webb - A.P. Webb Plant Hire; Trevor Gamble - F L Gamble & Sons; the late Chris Brody - Hiremee; David Simmons - Sinbad Plant and Andrew Bradshaw - W M Bradshaw (Plant Hire).

## Why did it begin?

The RPA was formed to focus specifically on the issues and interests of those CPA members that supply plant and equipment to the various railway infrastructures in the UK. In 1999, a Principal Contractor (PC) tried to introduce a tender document that was going to be very one-sided and onerous to the on-track plant supply community, causing some ructions. David Simmons and his late brother Steve approached Julian Rychelik, the CPA Director at the time, who advised against signing up to the tender document and an open meeting was arranged in Birmingham for those on-track plant suppliers holding CPA membership. During this meeting, it was clear the PC's tender document should be widely resisted and, once the PC was informed, it was withdrawn. The seeds of the RPA were established at this meeting.

It was also widely acknowledged that on-track plant training and competency was inconsistent from company to company and the RPA, in conjunction with the Construction Plant Competence Scheme (CPCS), set about introducing a standardised training and competency scheme for the rail plant sector,



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ultimately to raise safety standards across the industry. Member companies were also subjected to 'death by audit', which was both repetitive and time consuming. The idea of standardising some aspects of on-track plant risk control was a starting point to offer buyers some assurance, therefore reducing supplier audits.

## What is the CPA and how does the RPA relate to it?

The CPA is the parent organisation to the RPA. It covers the wider spectrum of construction plant and represents, promotes, protects its members' interests through the CPA terms and conditions, legal advice, health and safety advice, training advice, policy advice and generally working towards practical solutions in relation to legislation and anything else which may have an impact on the plant-hire community.

## How many members has the RPA had over the years?

The highest was approximately 72 members around 2005/6, however, the financial crash of 2008/9 impacted the membership and resulted in wide industry consolidation with some companies not surviving. Membership has consistently remained around 60 members for the last 15 years. It is widely acknowledged that the costs of entering the railway supply sector and maintaining compliance are significant and not necessarily for the faint-hearted. The list of companies below had previously had RPA membership during the 25 years of the association. Please note, the list is not comprehensive, so apologies if a company has been omitted. It should also be pointed out that some companies are still trading, although not necessarily operating primarily in the rail plant sector.

AB 2000; Alan Lightfoot Plant Services; AMEC Internal Asset Management; Amery Construction; Aspin Foundations; British Contractors Plant (BCP); BCL Rail; Border Rail; BRP Rugby; Bruce Yeomans; Capel Rail Services; Caledonian Industrial; D A Bird; Difuria Contractors; First Engineering; F L Gamble & Sons; Gordon Bow Plant Hire; GrantRail; Greyhound Plant Services;



Andy Crago, Management Committee Chair, RPA.

Hennelly's Utilities; Hiremee; Holyrail; Hughes Rail; Hydex Equipment (UK); John Stacey & Sons; J W Plant Services; Jones Plant Services; Ken Hope Plant Hire; Lomax Access; Mac Machinery Service; Mark Rickarby Plant Hire; Maurice Belton Machinery; Mervyn Lambert Plant; Michael Clancy Contractors; Mowlem Plant; NorEx Rail; One Call Hire; Paul John Plant Hire; Railway Drainage; Rose Plant; Salcey Arbourcare & Forestry; SGB Powered Access; Stobart Rail; TL Drake; Total Rail Solutions; TXM Plant and XYZ Rail.

## What has the RPA done for its members over the years?

With significant input from the RPA members and other industry stakeholders, the Association published the RPA Terms & Conditions 2023 in October 2023. During the process, the Association updated the existing CPA Model Conditions 2021, RPA Supplementary Conditions 2011 and RPA POS Conditions 2022, amalgamating them into a single set of RPA Terms & Conditions for its members' use. All RPA members are urged to adopt and utilise the new RPA Terms and Conditions 2023 across their businesses wherever possible.

The RPA/CPCS Road/Rail Plant Scheme - this was a significant initiative for members before Sentinel, publication of Industry Good Practice Guidance Documents, input into the Mechanical & Electrical Engineering (M&EE) Networking Group Codes of Practice (COPs) and Technical Information Notes (TINs). The RPA is also privileged to have had representation on a number of industry







working groups, which allows it to feed back valuable information to its members. The groups the RPA currently attends are:

- M&EE Networking Group.
- Infrastructure Safety Leadership Group (ISLG).
- Fatigue Management Standard - an ISLG Sub-Working Group.
- Capability Development Group.
- Railway Infrastructure Supplier Qualification Scheme (RISQS) - Supplier Consultation Group.
- Ballast Dust Working Group.

This means the RPA members' needs are always put first when changes occur in the rail industry. The RPA mission is 'to provide members with the latest industry information and support which enables them to remain compliant whilst supplying the highest quality service to their customers in a safe and timely manner'.

### What is the RPA doing now?

In 2022, the RPA engaged the services of Steve Featherstone of Sachle Consulting. Steve is a well-known industry figure, who has unparalleled industry knowledge and experience from both sides of the fence. He has made an invaluable contribution to the Association in helping it to reestablish its voice at government level and within Network Rail.

In the past two years, the RPA has made great progress in terms of the support that it provides its members. The RPA is now

regularly involved in discussions with Network Rail, the Department for Transport and other trade bodies as it seeks to continually represent the views and concerns of the membership. With over £1 billion of plant and over 5,000 employees, the railway plant community is a sizeable part of the overall railway supply chain. Over the past few years, it feels like the RPA's views are now being listened to, even if they are not always acted upon. Over many years, the RPA has consistently called for the need for better planning and management of the work-bank pipeline. This is to help smooth the peaks and troughs to more consistent and sustainable levels and avoid the feast and famine nature of the sector with the famines becoming increasingly challenging and lasting longer.

The RPA has been proactively developing its lobbying capabilities and looking to maximise the opportunities to try to influence the government's policy makers at the highest level. This is to end the boom and bust cycles of the control periods and support the rail plant sector supply chain, so that it can deliver the essential maintenance programmes and work-bank pipeline for many years to come.

Back in 2022, the RPA re-established the RPA Leadership Meetings (formerly the RPA Leadership Alliance) to give the major industry stakeholders, Network Rail, the PCs and the supply chain the opportunity to discuss the key industry issues in an open forum and work towards collaborative solutions with the

aim to removing duplicated processes and reduce unnecessary costs where possible. The RPA Leadership meetings are normally held three times a year, in February, July and November. If you would like to participate in the meetings please email: [rpa@cpa.uk.net](mailto:rpa@cpa.uk.net).

The RPA Management Committee current workstreams include the review and rewrite of the On-Track Plant Maintainer Competence material (formerly the RPA Fitter Assessment), the drafting of a new On-Track Haulier Competence minimum requirements, Professional OTP Driving Guidance document and setting up an external publications review panel.

### 2025 Management Committee

The Association is nothing without the support of its members and, it is only right to thank the following people who were elected at the RPA AGM and have offered to serve on the RPA Management Committee during 2025:

- Jim Allenden - co-opted.
- Mark Bruce - Story Plant.
- Steven Close - Morgan Sindall.
- Andy Crago - CK Rail.
- Paul Helks - A.P. Webb Plant Hire.
- Liam Ledger - SPL Powerlines.
- Ian Morgan - co-opted.
- Jim Nabarro, Balfour Beatty.
- Richard Romaszko - Explore Plant and Transport Solutions.
- Andrew Shipley - VolkerRail.
- Florin Stanciu - Readypower Rail Services.

### Steve Featherstone

Each railway asset type has an expected asset life. Civils assets, such as bridges, are expected to last over 100 years. OLE assets are expected to last 50 to 70 years. Track, switches and crossings are expected to last between 30 and 40 years. In a mature system, which the railway is, it should be fairly easy to calculate the expected average renewals volumes each year for each asset type. Whilst there will be some variation year on year, over a five-year control period it would be reasonable to expect that the average renewal rate of assets is broadly in line with the expected asset life.

This is certainly not happening for track, switches and crossings in Control Period 7 (CP7). The renewals run rate is in line with an expected asset life of circa 150 years. The renewals run rate is around one quarter of what it should be. The maintenance teams will have to deal with this by applying speed restrictions which will impact on train performance and passenger satisfaction. I hope that the maintenance teams have the competence, confidence and senior support to apply standards correctly, and to prioritise network safety

above everything else.

So what does this mean for the plant supply chain? I have previously discussed, in *Rail Infrastructure*, the significant reduction in enhancement volumes that are expected in CP7 compared to CP6. This appears to now be compounded by a significant reduction in renewals volumes as well. Taken together, this could see total plant requirements in CP7 at 60% to 70% of the volumes in CP6.

The supply chain remains at around 100% of the CP6 capacity, which is untenable in the medium term. The imbalance between supply and demand is being felt by the whole supply chain and it is sometimes being exploited by clients to reduce unit rates.

The Transport Select Committee is currently undertaking a review into the boom and bust nature of railway expenditure. The RPA made a submission on behalf of the railway plant community to help to inform the Transport Select Committee of the impact on our part of the industry. We are currently on standby to be called to give evidence to the Committee. It is, however, unlikely that the Transport Select Committee will change the

trajectory of CP7.

Sadly, the lesson from railway history is that only a serious incident will change the direction that is being set by the government. The last line of defence is now with the maintenance teams and their ability to do the right things to keep the railway safe.



Steve Featherstone, RPA Consultant.