



Left: The Volvo rig features a tilting, armoured and caged cab, an additional counterweight in addition to belly and track guards.

Clearly pleased with his Volvo machines, expansion of the fleet has been gradual, as the business has developed. The current workload means the AJ Blake fleet now comprises six tracked excavators and a loading shovel, with an additional excavator and shovel soon to join the fleet as part of Adam Blake's expansion plans.

"The Volvos have proved a much more expensive machine to buy up front, though the build quality and durability is so much better – but just how this extra level of investment will stack up when it comes to changing models in the fleet, I really don't know," he says. "I'm hoping that the old adage 'you get what you pay for' holds some weight come resale time."

His first Volvo, a 30-tonne EC290B LC is still hard at work and has clocked up around 6000 hours. Blake has no set replacement policy but says he'd like to run kit for five years, but will evaluate each machine individually at four years of age.

Choice

"If it looks like reliability becomes questionable and we're in for some unwanted hidden costs, then the kit will have to go – it's that simple," he adds. "We're under pressure to deliver for our customers, so I don't want to have to hire in while my kit is repaired, nor do I want to be penalised in other ways if I start to get breakdowns. I like to think I'm buying an element of reliability through the dealer and with a service contract."

Being located within Southampton's Western Docks has its advantages. "The docks operate around the clock and that gives us the opportunity to do the same, if we need to," he adds. "A lot of our business is sourced within the docks, but we will travel if needed."

Mr Blake estimates that through constant redevelopment and refurbishment works taking place, the docks provide around 60-70,000 tonnes of material for recycling each year.

"From this, we can produce 6F1, 6F2 and Type 1 materials for re-use," he says.

There's plenty going on within the container terminal and in addition to supplying machinery needs in-site for contractor Dean & Dyball, AJ Blake is working on a paving repair scheme within the terminal, which sees 2m x 2m, 150mm concrete slabs being removed, crushed and then in-filled.

Blake has also developed a good working relationship with Bagshot-based Wooldridge Demolition and works closely on projects with the firm's Nick Anderson. Working in partnership, the pair have recently secured an 11.8ha recycling facility at Eversley along the M3 corridor, almost midway between each other's bases.

"We have permission for concrete recycling, but would like to develop this into timber shredding and plastic recycling operations," he says.

"And the next step is to locate a base around Winchester to bridge the gap between Southampton and Eversley."

All of which might suggest that the EC360B won't be Adam Blake's last high-reach demolition machine.

penchant for ownership rather than hiring, Adam Blake has remained focused on buying, but has progressed from sourcing used kit to enjoying the security of new machines with warranty and service contracts.

As a result, his fleet has evolved into an all-Scandinavian affair with the exception of trucks, crushing and screening equipment.

"We used to buy second-hand plant, but I was never a good one for regular servicing and maintenance – if it wasn't broke, we just kept going," he says. "But now I buy new kit when it makes sound financial sense – and when it's needed – but on full R&M contracts with Volvo.

"At least this way, I get fixed operating costs while the kit is being looked after," he says.

Up until 2003, Adam Blake says his machinery

fleet was all Hitachi, but points out that there were a few unresolved warranty issues on 13-tonners when Fiat and Hitachi went their separate ways. This put unwanted strain on his relationship with the UK distributor, which made waves with his machinery purchasing decisions.

"I voted with my feet and put my investment in machinery elsewhere," he adds. "The situation was untenable and it's now unlikely I'll ever have another Hitachi."

"My local Volvo dealer, Plant & Engineering Services, was keen to win my business, so I bought a 30-tonne EC290B LC in 2003 and so far have never looked back," he says. "The operators who tried it reckoned it was a far superior machine and the back-up we've experienced has met my expectations."