

The hire specialist



Although customer interest in the STM RoboFlail has mainly been for steep bank work, David Balmer sees “endless possibilities” for the mower.

In Lancashire, Balmers Hire Ltd specialises in grounds maintenance with an equipment inventory that runs over the 1000 mark. “We hire out all the machinery concerned with groundscare and we supply three councils with all their equipment on long term contracts, we also hire to the domestic market,” explains David Balmer from the company’s base in Burnley. The facility is also the HQ for Balmers Garden Machinery, a John Deere Groundscare dealer and Simon Tullett Machinery Co Ltd (STM) distributor.

The latest machine to join the hire fleet is an STM RoboFlail remote controlled mower. “We had a demonstration of the machine before Christmas, when, in wet conditions, it cut pasture on a steep bank you would not go onto with a ride-on and also mowed thick reed growth at the

bottom of the slope: once we had seen it working we ordered one there and then,” David Balmer says.

“There is plenty of power from the 25hp Kawasaki engine and the tracks, provide flotation and traction, and give it a very low centre of gravity; it will slide before it rolls. It will operate on slopes of up to 50deg, whereas manufacturers’ handbooks limit front triples to around 15deg. The tracks can also be fitted with studs to give it more grip.”

He sees the machine’s climbing skill and its ability to overcome current and impending health and safety regulations being its main attraction to customers, with hire, and its inclusive service and maintenance elements, as a means of stretching tightening budgets. “It ticks all the right health and safety boxes,” he says.

“Organisations such as local authorities and councils are strict in implementing the rules; remote operation means that there are no issues with hand and arm vibration levels and that it already covers anticipated whole body vibration regulations.”

Three 1.22m wide deck types are available for the RoboFlail. To meet the mowing preferences of potential customers, Balmer Hire Ltd’s arrived with two, with a third on the way. “The ESM Verti-2-Flail head is for maintaining rougher areas that only need to be mown every six weeks or so, the rotary deck is for parkland and estates where a finer finish is needed,” Mr Balmer says.

“We also have a Humus head on order from STM for areas such as motorway embankments, where the vegetation has to be well mulched as they are cut only once a year, at the moment with flail mowers.”

The use of an STM demonstrator between ordering his RoboFlail and its delivery has confirmed his thoughts on the viability of the mower. “We’ve now quoted for hire to three councils, who were very impressed with it,” he says.

Council interest

These potential customers are considering the machine for bank work, but Mr Balmer also sees other opportunities for the mower. “Golf clubs, contractors involved in maintaining motorway banking and reservoirs; any user who has the need to mow steep grassed areas on a long cutting cycle that won’t justify a fairly high initial capital outlay,” he says. “Remote operation from a distance of up to 300m could also reduce the cost of central reservation and roundabout maintenance as there would be no need for lane closures; there is nothing to prevent the mower being operated by a wheelchair user, either.

“It’s early days, but I’m sure we’ll think of other applications as we go along, there’s plenty of potential.” ●