

Pete Dormer loves Hitachi hydraulic excavators so much he reckons he's got orange in his blood.

However it's not just brand new, shiny machines that get the attention of this Canterbury contractor, whose firm Dormer Construction is a high profile drainage and civil construction specialist in the South Island.

His passion also extends to collecting very early machines made by Hitachi. Five years ago, Pete rescued a Hitachi UH12 excavator, which was about to be scrapped by another Canterbury firm. The machine was originally purchased at an international Japanese construction machine expo in 1976, the year after it was made by March Construction.

"The machine was in disrepair and the engine had seized. I saved it from scrap, always with the intention of restoring it," says Pete.

A two-year labour of love and considerable investment in the machine has just come to an end, with the 36-tonne UH12 now returned to its former glory.

"A lot of money, pride and enjoyment have gone into this project. I'm really happy with it," says Pete, as he hops in the cab in a howling Canterbury southerly and fires it up.

He certainly looks at home behind the controls of the excavator which has its original air pressure, oil, engine pressure and amps gauges resplendent with the Hitachi emblem.

"What's unique about this machine is that the controls are air

ORANGE-BLOODED



Pete behind the controls of the Hitachi UH12



The Hitachi UH12 prior to restoration

operated with the foot pedals rather than hydraulic controlled," he says, swinging the big bucket into action.

The engine had to be fully rebuilt, which wasn't an easy task given it was one of the few excavators made by Hitachi with a Hitachi engine.

"The company only made its own engines for a couple of years back in the 1970s so we had great difficulty finding the parts we needed to restore it. A lot of credit must go to Durk from AC Stobie Engine Reconditioners, who put a lot of thought and effort into this very tricky rebuild. We salvaged whatever original parts we could, made a lot of parts ourselves, and compromised on a lot of things we couldn't buy."

Pete believes the UH12 is now the only machine in the world with an operating Hitachi engine.

Its rusted cab has also been fully restored, with new panels and new paintwork making it look as good as new.

"Hitachi has been very interested and supportive of the project and contributed to the paint costs, which was great."

Before it was retired, the excavator did a power of work for March Construction, with one of the firm's operators, Arthur Tocker spending an incredible 22,000 hours behind its controls.

"Arthur took great pride in the machine. It was his baby. He greased it regularly and polished it daily."

Pete estimates the excavator completed at least 30,000 hours during its working life.

He is pleased to see the restoration work finally completed.

"I'm an impatient person so it's good to be through the long process and finally get to enjoy the achievement."

He plans to operate the excavator as a working display model at various events in New Zealand and possibly overseas in the years to come.

"It will be great to see the UH12 being enjoyed by other people with an interest in classic earthmoving machinery."

Pete says his enthusiasm for diggers and working in the dirt goes back to his childhood.

"From the age of five I loved my sandpit. These days the sandpits and toys have just got a lot bigger and more expensive."

He reckons he has owned around 80 Hitachi hydraulic excavators and machines in the 20 years since he started his business Dormer Construction at the age of 17, straight out of school.

"It was something I always wanted to do. I had a holiday job from the age of

12 and saved up a lot of money. I hired a hydraulic excavator for my first five months in business, then built up enough funds to go to Japan and purchase my first Hitachi machine – an EX200-3."

He started off doing site works, excavating and small drainage projects, and has steadily grown the business to where it is today – employing 45 staff and operating a large fleet of brand new Hitachi machines, bought from CablePrice sales rep Andrew McCoy.

"With good cashflow and reliable machinery I have been able to build up my equity and asset base, and work on projects throughout New Zealand."

Pete has dealt with CablePrice since his earliest days in business.

"I've never had a cross word with anyone from CablePrice. They've always been supportive and have a great sales team and product. Hitachi is definitely the leader in their field when it comes to reliability and productivity."

Dormer Construction was named Canterbury Contractor of the Year in 2008 and 2011. The firm continues to specialise in drainage, earthworks, irrigation, civil construction and demolition works.

Its team is currently busy working on a diverse range of projects, including the final stages of demolition works within Canterbury after the earthquakes; being part of the horizontal rebuild of mainly sewer and stormwater infrastructure in Christchurch city; urban development; and rural development including the construction of water storage dams, irrigation projects and general earthmoving.

The restoration of the Hitachi UH12 was a challenging project that took longer than expected. However it hasn't deterred Pete from saving more classic excavators from the machinery graveyard.

"I've got a UH06-1 and a UH3-DT in the yard that I'm also restoring. Like the UH12 they are great old machines. It's extremely satisfying to be able to bring them back to life." ●

The finished product

