

PONSONBY SUPER BLUE

COMBINING TRADITIONAL VALUES, TRIED-AND-TESTED WORKING PRACTICES ALONG WITH MODERN TECHNOLOGY AND THE LATEST EQUIPMENT, MIGHT BE SEEN AS VERY DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE IN THE CURRENT SPECIALIST TRANSPORT WORLD. HOWEVER, **BOB BEECH** FINDS OUT FROM MIKE PONSONBY HOW IT CAN BE DONE IF APPROACHED IN THE CORRECT MANNER.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **BRYAN WINSTANLEY**

Staffordshire based Mike Ponsonby, a third-generation operator of M. A. Ponsonby Ltd, has been able to embrace many of the values of his grandfather's generation, while working in the era of the smart phone, internet and microchip. As ever, the devil is in the detail, doing the job properly has long been an effective mantra for a successful transport business. For Ponsonby this means maintaining high standards in every aspect of the business, keeping the vehicles and equipment in the best possible condition, and paying close attention to load security and safety in general. Applying these principles to the daily operation creates a very positive image for both the company and the people

involved, giving the concern a readily identifiable brand, that shows what you stand for in the most visible way.

Establishing and maintaining an effective working relationship with all staff, in other words building a team spirit, is another way to make the business stand out. Taking care to recruit the right people in the first place, then getting the best out of people is far from a new concept. But achieving it is far from easy. Attitude and a willingness to learn are key attributes, as is taking real pride in what you do. The very best employees, particularly drivers, often do the best possible job for their own pride and satisfaction, rather than trying to impress the boss.





Meeting and exceeding customer expectations is essential to build long-term partnerships rather than just providing a service. Doing what you say you will is a straightforward concept. But it's far too easy to fall into the trap of over promising and then underperforming - this often becomes a hallmark of many big organisations. Simple safeguards like giving drivers and other staff clear instructions, sensible scheduling and realistic planning, all help to ensure that the operation meets the most basic obligation - turning up on time.

Mike Ponsonby has been able to achieve a great deal since starting his own operation back in 2003. But he had a thorough grounding in road transport because of the strong influence of other family members, along with other key figures who have been very effective guides and mentors in both earlier years and the current day. The current fleet is standing at 15 tractor units, two rigids and a very varied trailer fleet, which includes step-frames, low beds, numerous extending trailers and the latest investment in the form of a new four-axle Faymonville MegaMAX spine bed low loader with two-axle jeep dolly.

This high-specification trailer has pendle axle suspension, an extending bed with removable mattress-type infill sections, excavator trough and numerous other features. As with the rest of the fleet, its finished in the eye-catching Ponsonby blue, which is a respectful nod to the family's previous involvement in road transport. All of this modern equipment is a far cry from the single well-used Renault Magnum 4x2 that Ponsonby drove himself when he launched the operation.

"I have been involved in transport all of my life," explains Ponsonby. "My grandfather started the old family business D.J. Ponsonby Ltd, way back in 1962, with just a Standard Ensign van. He built up slowly, doing both removals and general haulage. My two uncles worked with him and they helped to build a substantial operation. My dad drove trucks for many years, but for other operators rather than the family, he worked for Ryder for many years and also spent time driving low loaders, using the old four-in-line trailers with knock-out axles, when it was seriously hard work. He went on to study law, with particular emphasis on Health and Safety.

He has worked in this area for many years and is a great source of advice and guidance for our modern-day operation. This proved to be invaluable a few years ago. To be perfectly honest, I was trying to do a bit too much myself and let things slip, this led to an appearance in front of the Traffic Commissioners. I held my hand up and the TC appreciated my honesty and said that I needed help on the administration side of things, so we took on Craig Berriff as a compliance manager. His efforts, along with Dad's assistance got things back on track, also my middle son Jack deals with a lot of the routing and movement notification of abnormal loads. They all work very well together, it was not an experience I wish to repeat and a big learning curve, you can be too hands-on and have to learn to delegate in this business."

As a youngster Ponsonby spent almost his every spare moment, either with his father, or in the company's yard. "My grandad was a real character - he made a big impression upon me - his answer to every problem was get up earlier and work harder! I was surrounded by trucks right from the

start, it was inevitable that I would end up driving. I loved listening to the older generation, learning how to do the job properly. I was taught that looking after the truck, finding your way around almost anywhere, getting to destinations on time, dealing with different cargoes and securing and protecting the load are all key skills a proper driver must possess."

Roping and sheeting loads might seem to be an outdated practice to many in the industry, but Ponsonby says it's a core skill for his company. "We use flat trailers on a daily basis and some of the oversize loads we carry on step-frames and low loaders must be fully protected from the elements. The only way to do so effectively is with sheets and ropes, it has to be done properly, to me there is no better demonstration of a driver's skill and professionalism.

"Although I was involved in the family business from such an early age, I never really worked for them, when I was 18," continues Ponsonby





"I started worked for AS Taylor Transport based near Burton-on-Trent, they are a long-established company that can turn their hand to almost anything. Alan Taylor is a friend of the family and has been a great mentor to me, we still work together. He took me on as a green youngster driving a Mercedes 814 7.5-tonne flat, doing UK and European work. It was a great little truck to start out with - one of the few lightweights with a decent sleeper cab. I moved up onto an artic when I was older. I was given a Scania 142 with a high roof cab conversion. It was a fantastic truck, getting on a bit, but I went everywhere with it - we have included it in a mural of various trucks I drove on the cab of one of the current fleet.

"I was given the chance to start out as an owner driver by Alan. He sold me an M reg Renault Magnum. It cost £5,000 and was a very good truck and served me well for two years. I will always remember the first day working for myself, as I was climbing into the truck, it suddenly struck

me that if anything went wrong, it was down to me to get it sorted! It was a real moment of reality, but fortunately it went well. I concentrated on traction work to begin with, then slowly got my own trailers and customers. I replaced the 4x2 with a 6x2 Renault and then a Scania R144 530 tag axle. We had a regular job shifting concrete piles down to the West Country and loading pallets back. We quickly became known for running flat trailers and being able to handle all types of cargo with them. I bought my first step frame because I was asked to move vehicles and plant to auction sites and then to the docks for export. It was a King GTS44, a really good robust trailer, we still have two in the fleet, they are relatively light and versatile, useful to have in a mixed fleet.

"Right from the start, I tried to make my vehicles stand out, by keeping them as clean as possible and ensuring that every load was properly loaded and secured, I like the tradition of transport and all that goes with it," says Ponsonby.



Mike Ponsonby
SCANIA
SUPER
R580
STGO
CAT 2
S888 MAP

Mike Ponsonby
R580 xi Topline
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.
SCANIA
SUPER
XL16 MAP

Mike Ponsonby
SCANIA
R580 xi Topline
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.
XL17 MAP

Mike Ponsonby
SCANIA
R580 xi Topline
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.
XL18 MAP

Mike Ponsonby
SCANIA
R580 xi Topline
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.
XL19 MAP

Mike Ponsonby
R580 Topline
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.
SCANIA
R580
STGO
CAT 2
V887 MAP

Mike Ponsonby
SCANIA
R580 xi Topline
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.
XL20 MAP

LIEBHERR
LH40
industry
LH40
LIEBHERR
METAL RECYCLING
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.

Mike Ponsonby
SCANIA
R580 xi Topline
M.A. PONSONBY Ltd.
XL21 MAP

“The family name did help to get me established, but I wanted to have my own identity, but retain a link with the past. I started using the current blue livery in 2006. It’s lighter than the old colour, but retains the same style of lettering. Quite a few of the trucks have murals and some light customising, but above all they have to be working vehicles and look professional.”

The modern fleet is 100 per cent Scania. Most days Ponsonby can generally be found in the workshop or out in the yard sporting a pair of Scania overalls, which gives a good indication of where his loyalties lie. The tractor units are almost all V8 powered 6x2 and 6x4’s, rated between 65 and 150-tonnes gross, this gives both capacity and flexibility. The latest 650S XT 6x4 to go into service, has the new lifting tag axle where drive is disengaged when the rearmost axle is raised. This is a relatively new development from Scania and follows the lead set by arch-rival Volvo a few years ago, combining first-rate traction when laden, but allows extra weight to be transferred onto the first drive axle when empty or lightly laden. Conventional 6x2 tag axles often

have superior unladen traction than some 6x4 tractors, the lack of imposed weight on the drive axles causes the truck to just spin and bounce, this option provides the best of both worlds. Buying the first new truck is a big step for any operator, in Ponsonby’s case it was a new R560 6x2 tag axle costing £112,000, which was a huge sum of money at the time, but nowadays it seems quite reasonable considering how prices have risen in recent years.

“They are very expensive to buy, but they are worth it in the long run,” says Ponsonby. “The V8 residual values are the best on the market, they always make good money providing you look after them, which we do. The big engines are well on top of the job regardless of what they have behind them. Fuel is obviously an important factor, but getting the job done matters the most. We specify them to a very high level, which keeps the drivers happy, a very important consideration, our guys must do a lot more than just drive the truck. Loading machines in all weathers, dealing with all sorts of oversize loads, blocking, chaining, roping and sheeting, there’s a lot more to it than just opening the doors and reversing on a bay.





"I like the trucks to look their best, so we spend quite a lot of money on paint and extra artwork, but I don't go over the top," continues Ponsonby. "We want to show that we are competent and professional. I encourage the drivers to look after the kit and keep it clean, but getting the job done has to be the biggest priority. We have a T cab 730 6x2, it was bought for a long serving driver. It's a great head turner, but you couldn't have a fleet of them, it's not really practical. We also have an R580 6x4 Golden Griffin, it's seven years old and still in fantastic condition. It's done over one million kms, all it's had is a replacement turbocharger. My eldest son Anthony drives it and really takes pride in the truck - we will keep this forever."

M. A. Ponsonby Ltd buys both new and used tractor units, and finds the older R series is a great truck for its work. Ponsonby says it's simpler than a new generation, easier to look after and a bit more robust for visiting construction sites and other off-road locations. "I buy the new trucks from West Pennine Trucks, because they look after me,

although we have all our parts from Keltruck because they are closer. I suppose I should consider an alternative make at some point, but it would have to be properly specified by someone who really understands our requirements and almost certainly Swedish, but we will have to wait and see.

"We have a couple of rigids, one started life as a 6x2 V8 tractor, after a few years we sent it to Chassis Engineering in Stoke, they converted into a tag axle rigid with a plant body and winch, this compliments our four-axle rigid which has a front-mounted crane. Both give us added flexibility, they often work alongside the bigger artics, shifting lighter equipment, using the crane to load and position cabins, plant and fabrications."

The company's trailer fleet is diverse. It's concentrated on Faymonville in recent years and has both self-tracking and fully power-steered four-axle MultiMax step frame versions. "The latest double extender is very useful," says Ponsonby.

“We move a lot of barges and other craft, having full power steering really makes a difference in docks and small marinas. I will try their hydraulic width-extending bed next; it gives even greater flexibility and is now a well-proven concept. We have a lot of fixed and extending flats, all equipped with posts and sockets, along with full sets of chains, straps, ropes and sheets. We also have a triple extending Nootboom flat, obviously power steered, it’s great for long piles and other big fabrications.

“We have a couple of low-beds, the Doll Panther two-axle wafer bed is a very useful trailer, nice and short when closed up, ideal for Europe, with a really low ride height. The only downside is the aftermarket support is not too good here, we have waited a long time to get parts. The new Faymonville low bed is a further step up the weight range for us. I like the product and the support from Rydam is superb, it replaces a three-axle Nootboom, we move a load of big material handler machines, both wheeled and tracked. Height and weight are becoming an issue, so we went for a spine bed to carry the bigger machines on their

belly, also pendle axles give greater steering angle and suspension travel, very important getting into scrap yards and the like. Also, the wide rear trough makes it possible to get the long booms as low as possible – we specified a removable jeep dolly to give flexibility and the best manoeuvrability. It takes a while to get used to reversing it, but we are getting there. Actually Tommy, my youngest son, handles it really well. He picked it up straight away, although he is a few years away from taking his test, he has been coming to work with me since an early age and lives for trucks and the business in general – just like me at the same age I suppose.”

The operation has an assured future, steady investment in the best possible equipment, a wide customer portfolio, a new yard with purpose-built workshops and offices, also the fourth generation of family are actively involved and are totally committed to the business. Not a bad achievement for a young owner driver starting out with just one tractor unit 18 years ago, determined to do the job to the highest possible standards.



Main Image:
Mike Ponsonby, MD

Inset (centre):
Tommy Ponsonby