

Jewel in the crown

Stumbling across impressive workshops isn't an everyday experience.

Brian Tinham reports on something rather special in Springburn

There is a hidden gem in Springburn, Glasgow, which harks back to a locomotive heritage that came to prominence in the mid-late 1800s. Fast forward 150 years and, while the rolling stock repair facility at St Rollox continues under Knorr-Bremse, just down the road is multi-modal logistics and bulk goods haulier Russell Group – operating as Russell Group Engineering and Carntyne Transport, the latter famous for whisky distribution.

It's not just that this is a multifaceted organisation. No, what shines out for Russell is the scope of its trailer and tanker repair facilities, its production line, and its investment in skills. In fact, group

fleet engineer Stephen Madden confesses his first venture on to the firm's football pitch-sized workshop left him astounded. And not only at its sheer scale, but also its culture, which he describes as the best of both worlds – 'can-do' plus engineering excellence.

Coming from a man whose previous roles include regional engineering controller for Morrisons and fleet engineer for City of Edinburgh Council, that's praise indeed. So what's special?

Madden points to a turning point back in 2008, when Fruehauf closed in Dareham, and Russell acquired its Van Line semi-trailer plant. Adding this to the firm's already impressive in-house trailer and tanker repair and maintenance

workshop extended its capabilities to include custom box van fabrication.

"The facility has since seen significant design and manufacturing investment, and now handles everything from vehicle refurbishments and upgrades to new body build," he enthuses. "We also fit specialist equipment to tractors. And we've taken on the agency for SDC and BPW, so we're approved to work on a range of chassis. I've seen some bodyshops, but nothing at this level."

Why has this come about? Madden explains that both businesses always required high standards of vehicle service – to meet uptime targets on the one hand and customer expectations on the other. However, with its focus on bulk whisky distribution, Carntyne brings additional complexity best served by a well-resourced in-house workshop.

"When you're talking about tankers, flammable liquids and excise duty, you need workshops with a robust safety culture, the right equipment and highly skilled technicians," he says. "That's not just in terms of maintenance, but also vehicle repair and modification work – which is why all our welders are coded."

Madden points to stainless steel tanker bodies that may be old but are still going strong. "We need the skills, experience, processes and equipment to be able to remove bodies, upgrade

Russell Group's workshops have been central to the design and build of bottom filling tanker conversions and walking floor step frame trailers for whisky kegs



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them to the latest specification, and mount them on new or refurbished chassis.” This is not for the faint hearted, and Madden adds that it’s not just about tankers either. Walking floor trailers – designed and fabricated in-house to minimise manual handling – also demand specialist attention.

He gives the example of a recent project aimed at moving whisky tankers from top-fill to bottom filling, to reduce the risk of falls from height. Design work started in 2009, following a meeting involving the Scotch Whisky Association (SWA) and HSE (Health and Safety Executive). Subsequently, the SWA confirmed Russell’s specification for a ‘hybrid tanker’ and the engineering processes that would enable hauliers to phase-in their transformations.

“We decided to make the process as simple and robust as possible. So when top-fill tankers come into our workshop, after degassing the tanks, we start by cutting off the old rear controls and interlock cabinet. Then we mark, cut and fit the new manway and sample point; fabricate and weld the replacement cabinet on to the tank; cut, fit and weld impress cleaning flanges; and cut and fit the new vent flange and butterfly valve. Then we fit the probe for our new overfill protection system; alter the discharge pipe to suit the new cabinet; fit the valve

switch gear; run in the air lines; fit and wire up overfill protection; and extend the chassis to match the bigger cabinet.”

That may sound like a straightforward sequence, but underpinning it is a significant body of work that ensures not only safe and effective working practices but also the integrity and efficiency of updated tankers. Madden describes everything from technical discussions with insurer RSA around maintaining tanker integrity, to arranging welding procedures, welder qualifications, and confined space entry certification – as well as safe procedures relating to tank entry and hot work.

GOLD STANDARD

He also observes that material welded to each tank has to be traceable. And, on completion, all welds are subject to formal non-destructive testing, with RSA inspectors checking the welds and the tank itself before running a pressure test.

No mean feat. That’s why Russell engineering is the only facility able to perform the entire conversion in-house, including all fabrication, pneumatics, wiring, welding and mechanical work.

It’s a similar story with Carntyne’s walking floor units, nine of which have now been installed in tri-axle box semi-trailers by the Springburn workshop. Madden reiterates that this requirement

arose when its customers started to palletise whisky barrels. “We had to find a way to load the pallets into a box trailer in a safe manner.”

This was a back-to-basics project, starting with designing a step frame suitable to take a pallet walker but also meeting Carntyne’s trailer specifications. As for the build process, you’re looking at everything from front, sides and back fabrication, and chassis fitting, to mounting the walking floor drive, followed by fitting floor bushings, dust guards and walking floor slats, and equipping the vehicle with its sensors.

No surprise, then, that Russell Group undertakes bespoke trailer design and build work for third parties. And, with its recent SDC approval and the Freuhauf Van Line, that includes type approval – originally via IVA (individual vehicle approval) but now NSSTA (national small series type approval).

No surprise also that operators from across the UK are increasingly turning to Springburn for repair and refurbishment work. It’s not just that Madden and his team guarantee engineering-led projects, nor that pricing is evidently very competitive. What’s just as valuable is the knowledge that this workshop has the skills, equipment and capacity to turn round rush jobs, and do them well. Now that is one diamond workshop. **TE**

