

If Carlsberg did...

COACH COMPANIES

Hampshire-based Lucketts Group was the first coach company to be awarded Earned Recognition status by DVSA. Richard Simpson visits its Fareham headquarters to see where the magic happens

When the freight transport and warehousing company Lucketts took up coach operations as 'a hobby' in the 1970s, it's doubtful whether anyone involved in the decision could have guessed what would happen next to the Hampshire company.

De-industrialisation, an ageing population and a rise in leisure all served to drive the company into what some truck operators disparagingly refer to as 'self-loading cargo'.

The only trace now of Lucketts' time as a freight operator is a preserved 1920s Albion truck from the company's very early days (pictured opposite). There's a purpose-built headquarters in Fareham incorporating an office, admin and stores functions, together with a four-bay workshop capable of handling the largest coaches and buses, including tri-axles and double-deckers.

And Lucketts has expanded. As director Ian Lockett explains: "You can grow a company in a locality to a certain point, but then to expand, you need to start again in a new area. Big companies have economies of scale, but some inefficiencies arise because they are less flexible. In coach operations, engineering needs to be intertwined



with operations and human resources. This is easy to do with 12 vehicles, but when fleet numbers rise it becomes more difficult. So, it makes sense for us to acquire other companies in adjacent areas where there is potential for growth in the locality, and then expand them with the backing of our resources. For instance, we recently acquired Solent Coaches in Ringwood and Mortons Travel in Basingstoke. Solent had 12 coaches, and we anticipate expanding that to perhaps 20. In terms of profit ratios, you are better with a smaller unit."

Other Lucketts subsidiaries include Coliseum Coaches and Worthing Coaches. Since 2009, it has operated a National Express franchise for a number of routes in southern England. The combined fleets now total around 170 full-size vehicles.

Keeping these coaches compliant

and on the road is group engineering director Mark Jordan's responsibility. He served an apprenticeship with a local bus company, and says apprenticeships are key to ensuring the workshop is staffed with versatile and competent staff. "Our workshop controller and workshop supervisor were both apprentices here," he reports. "We've currently got two apprentices in training and four former Lucketts apprentices working for us. In fact, all our 25 engineering staff, which includes those working at Mortons and in our paint and body shop down in Gosport, are time-served. All our technicians are irtequalified, too."

As Lucketts has expanded, so has its physical and technical capability: "We have had four different workshop buildings here just in Mark's time," Ian Lockett recalls.

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Mark Jordan



Photographic evidence of Locketts' haulage heritage

The Coliseum and Solent fleets are still maintained locally, but the central workshop acts as a 'mother ship.'

"The bigger the company gets, the more we look like the old model central works of a bus company," Jordan says.

But the systems used to manage the workshops have changed. "The spanners are still the same, but we've all got laptops now," he jokes.

A systematic approach to vehicle maintenance and inspection is enabled by IT. All touring coaches are MOT tested in the winter. "Every vehicle is inspected at maximum every 42 days," explains Lockett. "The National Express coaches are inspected more frequently, at 28-day intervals: they do 190,000km a year, which is twice what the private-hire vehicles cover.

"Working for National Express brings things to another level," he argues. "It is extremely proactive over maintenance. Everything that is done to those vehicles must be recorded and documented.

"National Express insists that we work to their standards, and audits us every year. We win Golden Spanner awards from them as we get 100% pass rates on their engineering audits. Their standard is considerably above O licence level.

"If you've got a system like that in

place, it's actually easier to run everything to it. So, it's extended to our entire fleet."

That positive experience of external auditing helped bring about Locketts' position as a founder member of DVSA's Earned Recognition scheme. "We'd been talking to them about it for four years," Lockett recalls. "It's a

self-policing scheme: you can get on it if you show that you can be trusted. Small operators who really wanted to do it would actually find it quite easy. For large operators, the obvious incentive is that it's a powerful tool for demonstrating the right standards when tendering for big contracts."

EARNED RECOGNITION

With an operation the size of Locketts', the key has been in the choice of IT system: Locketts uses Distinctive Systems. Explains Jordan: "We originally used Distinctive Systems Coach Manager for bookings and operations, then they developed a vehicle management system with us."

The system is now embedded in workshop practice, with technicians using web-linked tablets to carry out vehicle inspections. Locketts recently extended that, so drivers now record their daily walk-around checks on smartphones.

"We could have gone to a standalone system like this earlier," Lockett states. "But we didn't want to do it until it could be electronically integrated into our existing VMS, otherwise you can find that faults are getting fixed before they

are entered into the system. The whole point of these systems is to cut out wasteful processes.

"We did a trial eight months ago, which exposed a few issues. Then we did a pre-launch with selected drivers and it was generally very well received by them. For instance, if there's a small crack in a windscreen, they can photograph it and we can advise them on the next action."

Lockett emphasises that DVSA knows it would be unrealistic to expect constant perfection. "In fact, they've said to me: 'If someone presents no issues at all, we'll be on to them straight away!'"

Behind the systems remains the evolving challenge of maintaining a diverse fleet of ever more complex vehicles. In terms of products, Locketts' workshops must deal with Scania, Volvo, MAN, Mercedes, DAF and Cummins engines, and Irizar, Caetano, Van Hool, Neoplan, Plaxton, Mercedes, Wrightbus, Optare, Omni and Yutong bodywork.

"We couldn't survive without good dealer support," Jordan admits. "Although we can do most things in-house, items like wheelchair lifts and air-con need specialist engineering.

"The nature of the work has changed so much. In the days of Bedfords, engine changes were pretty much routine at 60,000 miles. Now, it's rare to see the inside of a major unit. But we have to deal with all sorts of systems like coffee machines and toilets which, if not working properly, will really impact on the passenger experience. So our fitters have a huge range of skills, from changing diesel injectors to sewing seat covers, with plumbing and electrics in between." **TE**

Ian Lockett will participate in a panel discussion about Earned Recognition at the IRTE Conference, 27 September at the Leicester Marriott hotel. For more information, see www.irte-conference.co.uk. Early-bird booking rate ends 10 August.