

# JACK OF ALL TRAILERS

From three northern UK factories, Montracon supplies a huge range of trailers, from reefers to machinery movers to curtainsiders and boxes. And it is just getting bigger, reports Steve Banner

**T**railer output at Montracon's Doncaster plant should double by the middle of next year thanks to a £4.2m investment in production facilities. So says managing director, Paul Avery (pictured below).

Weekly output is set to rise from up to 40 on a single shift to closer to 80. Changes to the site include the arrival of semi-automated shot-blasting and painting as the Ballyvesey Holdings subsidiary celebrates its 40th anniversary as a trailer builder.

At the same time, Montracon is extending and enhancing its already comprehensive range.

The line-up now includes a chassis-less refrigerated semi-trailer (pictured) that complies with the 4m overall height limit the European Union applies to cross-border work. The newcomer is aimed at UK operators heading across the Channel and at potential customers in mainland Europe and should be able to command a healthy used price, says Avery.

"That's because there will be a second-hand market for it in Europe as well as in the UK," he observes.

Employing monocoque construction, it offers an internal height of 2.65m with a quoted weight of below 8.0 tonnes. The model on display at the Doncaster factory during a busy customer open day was fitted with a Thermo King SLXi fridge unit, BPW axles and 22.5-in wheels shod with 385/65 R22.5 tyres.



New, too, from Montracon is the MT45 machinery semi-trailer intended to shift excavators, quarry loaders and other heavy, bulky equipment.

Designed for operation at up to 45 tonnes gross trailer weight, one of its standout features is a low-profile trailer neck combined with a reduced-incline air-operated neck ramp. The idea is to make it simpler to position extra tackle such as small forklift trucks on the neck so that they can accompany the main load.

This allows a single trailer to be used on jobs that might previously have required two. The philosophy behind MT45, says Avery, is to produce a standardised, common platform in order to keep costs down while offering customers a number of optional modules.

Montracon has been producing machinery trailers for many years but in recent times has been a minor competitor in the sector, building no more than one

a month. At the time of writing, however, output was up to two a week, with plans to boost production to three or four weekly.

## MULTITASKING MOVES

Making one trailer do the job of two is a vital concern for many operators given the ongoing shortage of drivers, and Montracon is building curtainsider, box and fridge semi-trailers in double- as well as single-deck guises.

Last April's Commercial Vehicle Show saw the exhibition debut of a 44-pallet lifting-deck fridge semi-trailer able to carry 18 pallets on both the upper and lower decks plus a further eight over the swan neck.

In another interesting project, Montracon has played a key role in developing a temperature-controlled semi-trailer equipped with a Thermo King fridge driven by a single-axle Kinetic Energy Recovery System (KERS) that has been on trial with logistics group Fowler Welch.



Built in conjunction with International Refrigeration Cooling, the trailer is said to emit 50% less CO<sub>2</sub> than a conventional fridge trailer which equates to a potential 14-tonne-plus CO<sub>2</sub> cut annually. It is quieter, too.

Of the project, Avery concludes: "It works, but the technology used needs to be a bit more robust."

At present Montracon produces a total of 3,500 trailers annually from its three factories at Mallusk in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, Market Weighton in East Yorkshire and Doncaster. Like other trailer builders, it has been hit by the decline in the value of the pound in the wake of the vote in favour of Brexit and the impact it has had on the price of imported components.

"We've had to implement three mini price increases as a consequence," he says. This means that Montracon's products now cost 3% more on average; a modest uplift, he suggests, given that sterling has suffered an 18% tumble against the euro.

The hike might have been higher had it not been for improvements in efficiency and deals being renegotiated with suppliers, he adds.

Montracon's production volumes are much lower than those of some of the continental trailer-building behemoths, and are spread across a wide range which embraces skeletal and flats (including steel coil carriers and brick carriers), as well as the models mentioned above.

"Sometimes I wonder if our range is a bit too wide," Avery muses.

"What we have, though, is flexibility and the ability to tailor the product to the UK operator's needs," he adds; and a British design and manufacturing presence makes communication with operators easier than it might otherwise be. It also gives Montracon a cost advantage against importers that can, to a degree, be offset against higher component prices. **TE**



## CROUCHING TIGER

Another expanding trailer builder is Tiger Trailers, which is planning to start construction of a new, 125,000ft<sup>2</sup> factory in Cheshire at the beginning of next year, in a £14 million initial investment. A phase two expansion will add another 100,000 ft<sup>2</sup> with the right business demand. Once completed, the £22 million factory will have a production capacity of 120 trailers a week and will measure four times the size of Tiger Trailers' current base in Winsford.

John Cartwright, joint managing director, said: "The current factory, although one of the most modern in Europe, was adapted to suit our requirements. The ability to design and build a new factory from the ground up will be hugely advantageous for us."

An extra 270 staff would be employed once the factory reaches full production, taking the company's total to more than 500, and there are plans for a dedicated training centre to double Tiger Trailers' current apprenticeship scheme in partnership with Warrington & Vale Royal College (formerly Mid Cheshire College). The first cohort of the three-year Level 3 engineering manufacturing apprenticeship, which has enrolled more than 30 apprentices, recently completed the course. Each one learns the skills of the industry on the shop floor, working with a mentor for four months on each of the major manufacturing stages; from body building and welding, through to auto electrics and pre-delivery inspection.

This year, the latest recruits are tackling a two-year, Level 2 programme, leaving off the mostly classroom-based third year in response to apprentice feedback. (Tiger will continue to support individuals to Level 3 on a case-by-case basis.)

Fellow joint MD Steven Cartwright says: "We want to build a passionate, skilled workforce here at Tiger, and our apprentices are very much a part of that. We put a lot of effort into the programme and are willing to invest in every single person who joins the course."

Meanwhile, in production, the company continues to innovate; it has recently delivered the first batch of 40 of a new type of double-deck trailer to customer Maxi Haulage, specifically designed for customers delivering to the Republic of Ireland (pictured above). The new 13.6-metre tri-axle, step frame fixed double-deck trailers will be used to transport retail cages between the UK and Ireland. Tiger Trailers was tasked by Maxi Haulage to develop a solution that would offer a completely flat lower deck while also meeting the 4.65-metre Irish height restrictions - which it believes to be the first time such a combination has been successfully achieved.

Andy McGuire, general manager at Maxi Haulage, says: "In the past, the 4.65-metre trailers we've taken to Ireland have had to include wheel boxes within the load space on the lower deck. We wanted this to be completely flat so that we could carry more cages per load. Tiger stepped up to the challenge and the result has been an increase of seven cages, or 10%."

Tiger's design also moved away from independent suspension, the only way such trailers were previously able to run low enough. This made them significantly more likely to sustain damage, which in turn increased running costs. These low-running trailers also made ferry loading and unloading much more difficult, so Tiger and Maxi Haulage consulted the ferry companies during the development stage.

Now, it has installed BPW eco plus drum brake axles fitted with 215/75R 17.5in tyres. The trailer design has a fifth wheel height of 1,250mm.

In addition to the flat deck, Tiger included other bespoke elements in the design, including gates on the neck of the trailers to help secure all available load space and a sloping rear floor to simplify loading and unloading.