A **BIG** pick me up

Not necessarily needed every day, recovery vehicles are still the only solution for some jobs, finds Steve Banner

On the face of it, heavy recovery trucks have an easy life. They spend much of their working lives stationary, waiting to be called out on jobs; anything from retrieving an eight-wheeler that has rolled down a motorway embankment to towing away a coach that has broken down on the M6 in the middle of the rush hour.

"Our trucks do no more than 25,000 to 30,000 miles each annually, and not all of them go out every day," says Steve Smith, managing director of Barking, Essex-based Boleyn Recovery and Fleet Services, and president of the Association of Vehicle Recovery Operators. He estimates that the average daily utilisation rate of Boleyn's 22-strong heavy recovery fleet is around 45%, and peaks at roughly 65%.

"You can have situations where trucks will be sitting there for most of the day doing nothing, then two or three jobs will come in late afternoon," he says.

At a typical cost of around £250,000, potentially rising to as much as £550,000 in some cases, heavy recovery rigs are expensive pieces of capital equipment to keep on standby; valuable, and sophisticated. "They can take around a year to build," says Smith.

To save time and money, the recovery tackle on a truck earmarked for sale is sometimes not replaced, but swapped over to the replacement chassis instead, he says.

SPECIFICATION

Recovery vehicles are specified in line with the sort of work customers expect to tackle and their client base. An 18-tonne 4x2 with a underlift arm may be perfectly adequate for a business that has a contract to retrieve broken-down buses from city centres. A 25-tonne-capacity rotator – rotating lifting boom – mounted on an 8x4 chassis may be more useful if the customer has to recover vehicles in the Pennines in the winter.

A good example of a sophisticated recovery rig is the Volvo FH-540 8x4 supplied to Alpha Recovery of Cramlington, Northumberland in early 2019 (pictured, p29). It is equipped with a Composite Sliding Rotator 50/65 recovery body built by NRC Industries of Canada, and installed by York-based Dave Bland Engineering. The body boasts a rotating boom that can lift a maximum of 50 tonnes when retracted to its first stage (close to the vehicle). At its third stage it can still hoist 12 tonnes. Maximum boom outreach is 9.2m.

Towing heavy vehicles away tends not to be a problem for such vehicles. A Volvo FH-540 rig in service with Manchester's First Point Commercials and equipped with a pair of 24-tonne winches is plated for operation at up to 80 tonnes under STGO Cat 2 rules.

Overloading individual axles when towing is seldom a problem for heavy recovery rigs, says Boniface sales manager John Coldwell. Where it can become an issue is if a laden eight-wheeler tipper is being recovered after an accident during which most of the load has shifted forwards, which may mean it has to be unloaded before the

truck is removed. The company has recently supplied a DAF XF 530 FAS 6x2 rigid with its MK 6 Interstater for Crouch Recovery (pictured, left).

BUS AND COACH RECOVERY

Recovering buses and coaches is a particular challenge because their low fronts make it difficult to get a lifting arm underneath. Says Smith: "One approach we use is to deploy an underlift arm with forks that hook up to the vehicle's front wheels, and roll them and the vehicle on to pads that are also attached to the arm. You can do this in 15 to 30 minutes if you are experienced, and be away." However, care still has to be taken because raising this type of vehicle prior to towing can result in damage to an overhanging rear.

A coach can always be winched on to a specialist coach and bus recovery trailer with a load bed that can be dropped flush to the road – Manchester Breakdown Services is among the recovery companies that operate trailers of this type – but at £100,000 apiece, they do not come cheap. Using them to recover double-decker coaches can be problematic, because the combined height of trailer and coach may be too great to fit under low railway bridges.

In addition, the Institute of Vehicle Recovery warns that extra care has to be taken when recovering low-entry buses fitted with air suspension. Opening the passenger doors can cause the onboard control system to lower the suspension because it thinks the bus has arrived at a stop: that's a danger for any technician reaching underneath at the time.

Not surprisingly, given the price tag they bear and their usage patterns, the market for heavy recovery vehicles is not enormous. "I would say there are approximately 350 in service across the UK, but I would stress that this is an estimate," Smith says. The arrival of London's ultra low emission zone means that operators carrying out recovery work in the centre of the capital using Euro V or earlier trucks are being hit by a £100 daily charge. Transport for London has not exempted them from its Euro VI requirement. So recovery firms have the choice of absorbing the levy, passing it on to the customer, or ridding themselves of their older vehicles – which they may have planned to keep for ten to 15 years, says Smith – and acquiring Euro VI models at considerable cost.

For example, the Boleyn fleet is in and out of central London regularly. The firm has been investing heavily in Euro VI vehicles – "16 of our trucks are ULEZ compliant," says Smith – with two acquired last year and three in 2018. Smith says he has no choice but to pass on the daily charge to the customer if a Euro V vehicle has to be deployed. He has also been obliged to increase Boleyn's rates by around 8% to reflect the firm's Euro VI investments.

"We haven't lost any work, so I can only assume that other operators have increased their prices, too," he comments. Rates have gone up by no more than 2% in recent years, despite escalating costs, he points out, so an 8% hike is not unreasonable. TE

REPLACE OR RETROFIT?

Why not upgrade a Euro V recovery rig to Euro VI by retrofitting a suitable emission control system? The difficulty is that heavy recovery trucks are low-volume products with little space available for such a package, given the way their bodies are designed, says Eminox retrofit sales director Carlos Vicente.

"They have a lot of equipment lockers, which would get in the way," he points out. A truck's equipment will include the slings which may have to be attached to a boom's hooks to lift an overturned vehicle.

"That said, we're developing a solution which we should be able to talk about in early 2020, and we're aiming to have it at the Commercial Vehicle Show," he continues. It is likely to bear a £20,000 to £25,000 price-tag; not cheap, he agrees, but the bill should be seen in the context of the price of a replacement vehicle.

Zero-emission pure-electric heavy recovery vehicles could be a possibility one day, but not at present, says Coldwell at Boniface. "Recovery equipment is hydraulically operated and run off an engine PTO," he points out. "So how would you power it?" Even if the batteries had the capacity to operate a rotator, towing away a fully laden 44-tonner would soon deplete them; and there is little space for installing an ancillary battery pack.