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TRAINED UP



Trentbarton former bodywork apprentice Oscar Jenkins distinguished himself last year by being named not only the company’s engineering apprentice of 2021 but also the winner of the Skills Challenge’s bodywork apprentice category

Oscar Jenkins, now a skilled bodywork technician, grew up steeped in engineering. “My dad and my mum’s dad work at Rolls-Royce in Derby. I spent my childhood in granddad’s shed building random things from him, and dad would come home from work and tell me what he was working on. I also have an interest in heritage trains; from the age of 13, I volunteered at a heritage railway restoring diesel engines.”

His interest in bodywork came from this work on the railway, he says: “I learned about restoration, and bodywork ties into restoration: it’s about making it look right again.”

When he was interested in finding an apprenticeship, he was attracted to Trentbarton, whose services run outside his house, because of its small scale and ties to the community. Jenkins was soon apprenticed at its Langley Mill, Derbyshire head office depot.

Of his early time there, he recalls: “Initially it was lots of menial stuff; lots of watching and listening, helping, fetching and carrying, and slowly working my way in to helping with jobs. I worked on a lot of labour-intensive prep-jobs, and helping other technicians by lifting. Then I started to



get work with more variety.

In 2018, there was more crash work and more defects, and modifications, such as installing USB cabling.”

In his relations with the skilled staff, his unusual background initially set him apart, Jenkins says. “Because of my experience from the railways, I asked them more advanced questions than they expected. But once they got their head around that idea, I gelled in the team. It was quite a small group - four skilled coachbuilders, one apprentice and painters; quite a compact group. If you upset a couple of people, you’ve lost a large portion of your colleagues.”

But Jenkins was popular enough to be asked to take part in the Skills Challenge during his first year as an apprentice (he declined). The next

year he did compete, but struggled.

When he returned to the Skills Challenge in 2021 (pictured at left, far left), things were different. He says: “This year, I was proud of what I’d done under the pressure of competition. I wasn’t expecting to win

with the work I’d put out. After the first time, I did not think I’d done well. That made me up my game at work. When I had a little free time waiting for a bus, I’d practise welding. When I had nothing on, I’d take an old panel and repair it,

just as practice. I wanted to be better. I think the Skills Challenge helped me upskill. I went back to use it again to keep developing my skills. The Skills Challenge does push our abilities as technicians, and it’s a good benchmark of where we are as professionals.”

But Jenkins is not resting on his laurels. He concludes: “I feel that the learning only really starts now that I have my qualification. In the last few months, I’ve faced more challenging work as a skilled man than I had as an apprentice. Luckily I know the guys will continue to support me; they don’t think, ‘he’s skilled; he can do it all on his own.’” 

