

Handy Andy



Today, Stourbridge-based Andyfreight has a high-profile fleet, but like many successful firms, it grew from modest beginnings

By **Colin Barnett**

IN 1986, A YOUNG Andrew Pountney spent £800 on a well-used Ford Transit dropside, with the intention of delivering tyres for Bridgestone from its UK base at Oldbury, West Midlands, where his father Derek was the warehouse manager. Things went well and a couple of years later, a new Transit was acquired. The customer base expanded, including the long-standing WAM Engineering, a large Italian machinery manufacturer with its UK base in Tewkesbury. He also made his first

venture into warehousing, with a rented shed in Halesowen, then added another pickup. Beginning a long association with the German brand, his Mercedes-Benz 3.5-tonner could carry 230 car tyres. Vehicle sizes gradually increased, through a 7.5-tonne Ford Cargo, then a Volvo 18-tonner, with money-saving plain white chosen as the fleet livery. Loads still included tyres, complemented by concrete products and cooling equipment.

By the mid-nineties, the rigid fleet numbered four or five, and the time had come to purchase the first of many artics, which for a long time would be second-hand Mercedes Actros purchased direct from the manufacturer's used truck facility at Wentworth Park. Since 2012, Andyfreight has been buying new trucks, but its allegiance to Mercedes-Benz has waned and for the past three years, it has bought Scania from Keltruck, just



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At the helm: Andrew Pountney of Andyfreight has been in the business for 31 years

up the M5. Pountney changed his brand allegiance because of dissatisfaction over residual values. He says the main benefit with Scania products is that, though they may not be cheap, they are reliable. He is experimenting with running trucks for longer, hanging on to trucks that would have gone after 42 to 48 months for up to an extra year.

Paying

Trucks are financed through the manufacturers, Scania for tractors and Mercedes for rigids, usually on 10% down and three years, although Pountney isn't convinced it is the right approach. Vehicles are initially maintained by the franchised dealers, and when they are out of contract, they and the trailers are maintained using the local Hartlebury Plant's "brilliant service".

For the past five years, Andyfreight has exclusively bought Lawrence David trailers, which Pountney sums

up as "dearer, but better quality" than the previous supplier. It maintains a generous surplus of trailers over tractors, which allows them to be left on customer sites, bringing greater efficiency from faster turnaround times.



The fleet's key visual cue is the "Just about the only thing not delivered by Andyfreight" slogan. This came about from an Andy Pountney idea sometime around 2003, and today, every trailer has a picture of a baby on the rear doors, almost every one is different. Pountney says: "It's a great gimmick. It's worked well and has earned hundreds of thousands of

pounds worth of publicity."

Today, Andyfreight's rollcall includes more than 50 staff, 34 trucks and 65 trailers. As the size of the business



– and of its vehicles – grew, Andyfreight began a move to palletised loads, and it works 24/7 to provide a nationwide pallet delivery service, mostly to the retail sector. However, while pallet networks are currently in vogue, Andyfreight has made a conscious decision to compete with them, delivering to most areas daily. Pountney says: “We provide a more hands-on family approach to customers who like to know who is delivering their goods.” From the haulier’s perspective, he added, “network members don’t have the same control of their destiny”.

One of its major clients, Newell Rubbermaid, whose writing products division makes Parker, Paper Mate and Sharpie pens, came in handy when the *CM*-issue pen expired during our interview. Another household brand carried is for the manufacturer of Swish curtain tracks. These are some of the locally based customers, but loads are collected throughout England and Wales.

Expansion

In 2005, Andyfreight trebled its space with the move to its present site, which then consisted of two units behind a petrol station, located on the main A458 between the M5 and Stourbridge. This is an area once famous for its glass production, now improved by regeneration. The site is officially just in what used to be the Black Country, now the West Midlands, but is only two buildings away from a Birmingham postcode.

After two years, Andyfreight bought the petrol station, which in days past was a colliery, and eventually flattened it to create the large warehousing site it now enjoys. One



clever move saw the retention of the fuel tanks,

which allows the fleet to refuel at home

with diesel purchased by the tanker load. The three warehouses on the 3-acre site have a combined capacity of 36,000ft², and are full.

Between 2005 and 2010, the firm concentrated its investment in property and then, of course, the recession happened. This proved a precarious period, but Pountney’s astute observation saw it coming and, to an extent, he was able to prepare and ride it through without disaster. The business was streamlined, and he happily walked away from the unprofitable business.

Founder Andrew Pountney, who has always lived in the area, and still lives just around the corner, remains the man at the helm. As MD, Pountney owns 99% of the business, while his mother, Megan Pountney, who is company secretary, owns the other 1%. She still oversees the original invoice numbering system, which started at 1 and is now at 66,000. Nowadays, Pountney is assisted by general, transport, warehouse, planning and admin managers, and has plans to bring in a new operations director, leaving him free to concentrate on sales.





As “a half-time father,” a good management team allows him time to spend with his two daughters, Rose and Lily, whose pictures as babies naturally feature on some of the trailer fleet. Besides the children, his main interest outside of work is his role as chairman of Northern Premier League football team, Stourbridge FC. His involvement doesn’t extend to direct sponsorship, though, with the team’s shirt space sold to a local dental practice. He’s also a keen boxing fan, and pride of place in the head office entrance goes to a picture of Pountney meeting Muhammad Ali.

Drivers come first

When our conversation got around to operational matters, one word kept cropping up – drivers. Pountney does not underestimate the importance of the person behind the wheel, saying: “You can be the best businessman in the world, but without drivers, you’re going nowhere.” Asked to describe his driver recruitment strategy, he says: “I struggle?”

He prefers to employ experienced drivers and finds the best approach is by word of mouth and referrals, but in a seller’s market many drivers think “everyone is paying £10 per hour – why should we work for you?” Some don’t even bother to turn up for interviews.





Expressing real concern, he says: "I feel for the industry. I don't know what it will be like in five to 10 years' time." Pountney is even considering buying businesses to acquire more trucks and their drivers.

Modern problems

Among other challenges, he cites the rising cost of insurance, before getting on to his rigs, which deliver into London every day. Although all are Euro-6 to soften the blow, there are still the parking problems, which means a premium has to be charged. He warns: "London needs to consider what it is trying to achieve. More restrictions will increase the cost of goods. Hauliers have to be prepared to pass on costs. You have to be brave. There's no point being busy fools."

Then there's the rise of online selling, which he says has taken out whole layers of industry, destroying high streets and the delivery network that supplies them.

If any of this suggests a man with a pessimistic view of his chosen profession, that would be a false impression. He has seen turnover double to £6m in 10 years and plans to continue growth at the same rate, and while he doesn't plan to work forever, he would "love the business to continue as my legacy". ■

Jost fifth-wheel couplings

When added the first artics to its fleet, Andrew Pountney became a convert to Jost fifth-wheel couplings. The drivers were familiar with them and found them to be sturdier and more robust than the competition. With frequent trailer swaps made, Pountney says: "Safety is important, and runaway trailers are potentially a real issue." With the support of Jost's regional fleet and sales manager Jannine Burt, Andyfreight has developed a system of safe coupling, within which Pountney says the reliability of the Jost product is a key factor.

