





THE RIGHT TRACK

PROFILE: DUKE DISTRIBUTION

It's fair to say that the team at the helm of Duke Distribution are multi-talented, having built an award-winning business that excels in a range of fields, from heavy transportation to trackway installation

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Commercial Motor

Most people are happy to retire once. Not Dale Robinson though. He's already retired from two successful careers and has a clear vision of what he wants to achieve before the next time. Today, Dale is chairman of Duke Distribution, based in Worksop, but he is the middle of the three generations involved in getting to where the story is today. But as with all good stories, let's start at the beginning.

If you've ever attended a major outdoor event on a temporary site, be it a sporting event, an agricultural show, or even a music festival, you may not have even noticed that access is only possible by the roadway beneath your feet or wheels. Today, supplying and installing this temporary infrastructure is a significant industry in its own right, but at the beginning of the 1960s it didn't really exist.

One of the key drivers appeared in the 1960s, when J L Eve Construction was engaged to work on creating the new national grid of high-voltage power cables. Clearly, much of the work was located in hard-to-access locations, and just getting on-site

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created major issues. To overcome the problem, the company bought in loads of ex-army trackway systems, setting up Eve Trakway, a name familiar to even casual observers.

At the end of the grid-building contract, the trackway became redundant, so Eve Trakway sought new avenues of operation. These were as diverse as exploring for coal, still acceptable in those days, providing access for mobile cranes and delivering Terrapin modular, or pre-fab, buildings. With many of these requirements being short term, a hire division was set up.

One of the key staff at Eve Trakway was John Robinson, who had become experienced in handling trackway sales and rentals. Among other things, he was instrumental in providing the trackway for the first Pilton Pop Festival, later known as Glastonbury, thus creating a foothold in the entertainment and exhibition sectors.

The market rapidly expanded over subsequent years, firstly within the UK, then via France and Germany, throughout Europe. In 1987, Eve Trakway entered its first joint venture to provide trackways at a major golf tournament in France. By this time, ▶



Life's for living: James and Dale Robinson are definitely not the types to tread water and are always on the lookout for a new opportunity

it had secured around 80% of the UK market, modernising the access industry with military grade roll systems and had invented a modular system able to carry just about anything.

Transporting all this kit needed a road transport fleet, which John Robinson's 16-year-old son Dale had joined in 1982. In 1994, John retired from his then role as operations director, by which time Dale was a site engineer. However, by 1996, Dale had become managing director, but left two years later when the firm went through a tough patch.

The next chapter begins when Dale Robinson, in conjunction with local haulier David Bowring, set up Trax Portable Access (TPA). Within three years, it had become market leader and continued to be successful in the coming years. So successful that in 2005, Dale was approached to sell the business to the major industrial rental company Vp plc, and retired for the first time at the age of 40.

During this time, Dale's son James made a brief appearance in the world of trackway, joining TPA on work experience, before leaving to successfully pursue the two seemingly disparate ambitions to

become a joiner and a helicopter pilot, the latter skill also featuring on his father's CV.

Not being one to stay idle for long, as soon as he was contractually free, Dale joined Lion Track Hire. In a long and convoluted chain of mergers and acquisitions, Lion became part of the Ashtead Group, which began in the eponymous Surrey village in 1947. Trading as Sunbelt Rentals, Ashtead is the second-largest equipment rental company in the world. Along the way, Ashtead bought Eve Trakway and merged it with Lion Trackhire to form LIVE Trakway, although it took a year to get Monopolies Commission approval for the deal.

CUSTOMERS FIRST

During this time, Dale reinforced his belief in customer focus, whatever it takes. The market has grown consistently, so there has always been plenty of work for all, with no need to cut corners to gain jobs at the expense of customer service.

James re-enters the story here. Having previously gained experience and his HGV licence at Lion, he eventually moved into the scheduling



office at LIVE, all the time learning the transport side of the business. With an inventory of 120,000 of the standard 3m x 2.5m trackway panels, which can be used in a modular fashion to carry anything from a car across a golf course to 200-tonne mobile crane across a peat bog, it required a fleet of 120 trucks, again seen as a necessity. However, the trucks are used as mobile warehouses, permanently either loaded and awaiting deployment or empty on site, with just three regional fixed depots needed. With the need for instant support, crews are paid to be on standby during events, making this an unusual sector where parked trucks are still earning money.

This brings us neatly to the third and current chapter in the saga of the Notts family Robinson, with Dale's son James now playing the leading role. By the end of 2019, he had decided he wanted to buy a truck and enter the transport business. James, who is something of an action man, and as well as flying helicopters, races motorcycles on track and on enduros, just got on and made it happen. Partly funded by the sale of his own house, he went ahead and bought the first two trucks, a pair of ex-TPA Scania, G420 6x2s with bespoke track-laying crane bodies, which he identified as needed to fill a gap in the market.

The new company was named Duke Distribution,





not because there is a Mr Duke in the background, but drawing a link with the Dukeries, the historical locality to which Worksop is the traditional gateway, and which contained four dukedoms in a relatively small area. To use the name of Duke, the authorities in Whitehall had to be convinced of the firm's motives before they would grant permission, but once Whitehall realised their intentions were honourable, they became very supportive.

You don't need a great memory to realise that the beginning of 2020 was not a great time to launch a new business. When Covid hit, Duke Distribution was too new and with no trading history to qualify it for furlough grants or any other financial help. However, James was determined to keep going, paying the two drivers' wages out of the remaining start-up capital, taking any work that came along, despite being somewhat limited by the specialist nature of the trucks.

But with some help, particularly from landlord Richard Herbert, owner of the Flying Fridge business, who we will be revisiting at a later date, Scott Johnson who refurbished the trucks and provided invaluable maintenance support, finance provider Simon Knowler of Bristol-based Direct Asset Finance and insurance broker McCarron Coates, Duke Distribution made it through. Along the way, FORS Silver accreditation was gained.

Today, Duke Distribution is located in a compact but immaculate yard, a short walk from the small patch of hardstanding on Worksop's Dukeries Industrial Estate where it was initially set up. The head office buildings are all recently built, and as well as the admin functions, house a truck wash building and driver welfare facilities, all decorated and maintained to a high standard.

A good look: The company's highly professional branding features on everything from trucks to filing cabinets

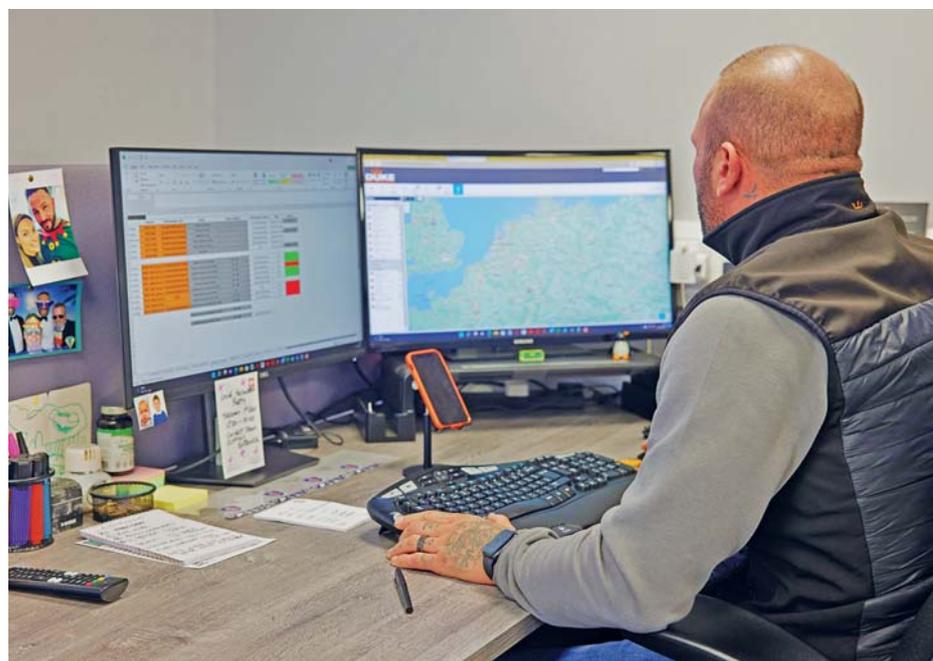
The professional image is reinforced by the use of the CallSwitch system, which provides a virtual reception service. Wherever any of the management team are, they all get to see incoming calls on either a desktop or mobile device, and can deal rapidly with any call that is not immediately answered.

That management team currently consists of chairman Dale Robinson, and his two offspring, James, aged 33, who is managing director, and Hollie, 30, the compliance and transport manager. Then from outside the family are operations manager Lewis Hessey and head of finance Rob Dargue.

WHY SCANIA?

Since Covid, the business has already diversified, particularly into construction materials, and expanded significantly, now numbering 20 trucks, either present or close to being delivered. During the current supply situation, trucks have been acquired from wherever they've been available, but unsurprisingly, given Scania dealer Keltruck Worksop is a five-minute walk away, the fleet is almost entirely comprised of the Swedish brand. The only exception is an ex-Field Track Mercedes-Benz Arocs, acquired when expansion was needed quickly, but everything is maintained by Keltruck.

The fleet consists of a real smorgasbord of Scanias, with G, R and S cabs, and engines from 410hp to 660hp, the flagship being a 660 S, but the most common rating being 590hp. True to its roots, there are six trackway trucks, three 6x2s, two 4x2s and a single 6x4, all with trailers. On the distribution





side, there are currently nine tractors in service and another five on order. They are matched to a mix of trailers including a low-loader, flats and curtainsiders and a pair of Moffets. The trackway vehicles are there simply to provide a specialist service to the existing trackway rental suppliers, James keen to point out that Duke itself isn't a trackway company.

James has inherited his father's ambition and says his aspiration is to reach 300 trucks before his own retirement. During our visit, groundworks were already underway to extend the yard around the back of the existing site, which with tidy parking, is just about big enough to house the current fleet. When finished, the parking capacity will have doubled to 40, and moves are afoot to increase the O-licence accordingly.

Technology is further used to provide a highly professional service to its customers, by the use of

the BigChange JobWatch system. This provides end-to-end management of every job. It starts at the beginning of the day, when it will insist on a properly completed daily check process before a user can be allocated any work. From then on, all parties are able to monitor the state of an individual job, from collection to instant photographic proof of delivery, while the driver is provided with accurate navigation to collection and delivery points.

The company has already gained a good reputation in its relatively short existence, indicated by the waiting list for driving jobs. Externally, it has been recognised as a finalist in the National Startup Awards, and winner of the North Notts Employer of the Year.

Dale still has a few years to go until his 60th birthday and is showing no signs of slowing down, so the father and son duo is set to continue for a while yet. James is still in with a chance of achieving his objective, and we wouldn't bet against it happening. □

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