

Body beautiful



Bevan Group: MD
Anthony Bevan

Winner of the Bodybuilder of the Year category at the Commercial Motor Awards was Black Country-based Bevan Group

By **Colin Barnett**

WHAT IS NOW a major force in the commercial vehicle bodybuilding world began in Brierley Hill in 1976, with a business started by Ronald Bevan.

In the four decades since then, it has grown to be a £36m business with five production locations and a workforce of more than 300, building in excess of 60 bodies each week.

The group has grown to its current size largely by acquisition, and every purchase has taken Bevan into a new market sector.

The acquisitions include respected names such as Welford Thomas and PG Reeves, which specialised in the brewery transport sector. Apart from one specialist division, the Supertrucks business in Merseyside, making dedicated glass-carrying bodies, the Bevan Group has remained within the Black Country.

The group has been in the hands of the Bevan family throughout, although when founder Ronald became ill, his son Anthony took the helm and is MD today, and fortunately his father made a full recovery.

A recent new management structure has greatly reduced the number of Bevan's direct reports, and one of the key roles is held by sales director Roy Shelton, who

heads a team of six sales staff working on both bodies and graphics. Bevan says that distancing himself a bit further from the daily running is giving him the opportunity to engage in more strategic planning, up to a year ahead.

While the group's first factory was in Oldbury, our visit was to the Wednesbury location, which, as well as housing the head office functions, includes the dropside assembly unit and the operational centre for the Aftercare fleet (see box). Each of the five factories concentrates on one product.

Dry freight

The company's portfolio is anything related to dry freight. Bevan's policy is to sell direct to end-users, and it targets specialist products rather than volume. Bevan is happy to live with manufacturers' own in-house ready-to-go operations, as they can satisfy the market for higher-volume, lower-margin products. Bevan, meanwhile, can concentrate on products with a higher cost but with a longer service life. For example, the bodies fitted to Amey's 3.5-tonners have a design life of eight years, like all Bevan products, and come with a three-year warranty.

While much of Bevan's manufacturing is done in-house, it realises that it is cheaper and more efficient to buy in items such as pressings and extrusions from the





many traditional metal bashers that still proliferate in the West Midlands.

Predictions some time ago that 30% of the bodybuilding industry would disappear, either by being acquired or just shutting down, seem to be coming true.

As suspected, it is the smaller bodybuilders, more used to designing on the back of a cigarette packet, who have struggled to adapt to the administrative burden of Whole Vehicle Type Approval (WVTA) on a small scale.

Changing marketplace

Bevan highlighted one company with 50 years of history that couldn't identify the cost or weight of its core products. WVTA has actually created opportunities for Bevan, as the group offers a third-party type approval service, employing five staff, which includes clients from the bus world and from Ireland. Bevan describes WVTA as being just what the marketplace needed, although it is not particularly well funded.

One of Bevan's key customers is the giant Saint-Gobain Group, the UK's sixth-largest own-account operator. Perhaps the most visible part of this relationship is the fleet of trucks delivering Jewson building products. Although the Jewson fleet has a two-manufacturer policy for the base trucks, tendered



The Jewson bodies are assembled from ready-compiled sets of components, designed to be as repairable as possible, with jig-drilled mounting holes. All are fitted with Bevan's safety rail system, as are around 80% of total dropside products. Danger areas and crane parking locations on the truck bed are identified by yellow-coloured phenolic resin ply panels. On the dropsides, the sub-frames are assembled and then removed again so that all nooks and crannies get painted.

Chassis life

The chassis life of trucks is increasing, with 10 years not uncommon, and the group is continually looking at new products and materials. However, there is a two-year development lead time to do it properly. One possibility is using composites for the safety drop system to reduce repair costs. Bevan admits that his products aren't the lightest, but any extra weight is intended for extended life: "You can knock 20kg off a body, but you probably won't get a repeat order. We try to build relationships to get future business."

As well as the manufacturing of bodies, the group offers a full range of peripheral services. It has a 6-acre repair centre with 20 bays, with the capacity to double its throughput, and a parts operation that sends out 70 to 90 parcels a day, soon to be complemented by a new website, partsfortrucks.co.uk. Then there's the graphics team of four, which offers a full design, print and application service, capable of panels up to 3,000mm high and as long as you want. Between 30% and 50% of its application work is conducted externally. ■

for annually and currently with DAF and MAN, Bevan supplies the bodies for all of them, from 3.5 to 32 tonnes, on an ongoing basis. Other long-standing blue-chip clients range from Tarmac and Amey in construction to Fraikin, DPD and DX. Asked the topical question about the Carillion collapse, Bevan confirmed that it had severed relations a few years ago, and actually saw the collapse as an opportunity as rivals to pick up some of its work. The group's structure is flexible enough to adapt to sudden changes in demand in any sector.



Aftercare

- **Aftercare, initially called BodyCheck**, is now one of the fastest-growing elements of the business, although expansion is slower than planned due to problems recruiting suitable mobile technicians. Previously known as Autocare by Bevan, the group's connection is now being downplayed to reflect the wider service offering.
- Although it initially concentrated just on body repairs, the service is now expanding to all ancillary equipment. As well as supporting its own products, it also handles both damage and warranty work on third-party components such as cranes and tail-lifts in one call. The only thing not touched is the base vehicle.
- Aftercare employs around 70 staff, with 50 vans on the road backed up by a round-the-clock control centre. Around 20% of work is unscheduled, with peak times being first thing in the morning and between 5pm and 6pm. It now also works for the RAC on its expanding CV operation.
- While we're looking around, one new recruit was busy putting the final touches to his brand new van, one of the first batch of MAN TGEs to join the Aftercare fleet. Each van comes fully equipped with £10,000 to £15,000 worth of kit – everything needed for on-site repairs, including an external power source for tail-lift testing. Each technician has access to a 40ft container near their home with a full inventory of fast-moving parts.

