

Truck & Driver

Editor's Choice

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM CUNNINGHAM



FACT FOCUS

- **Model:** Scania R560 Topline
- **Engine:** 16-litre Scania V8 (Euro 5)
- **Gearbox:** 12-speed manual
- **Power:** 560hp @ 1900rpm
- **Torque:** 2700Nm @ 1000-1400rpm
- **Operator:** M A Ponsonby, Rugeley, Staffordshire







BAND of BROTHERS

Sometimes it seems that the industry is overrun with incompetent moaners who look no further than the next Friday. But is there a resurgence of dedicated, hard-working individuals who just want to be good drivers? Tom Cunningham finds the answer in a small but tightly-knit West Midlands fleet





The secret to happiness – Mike Ponsonby's job is also his hobby

There's an upbeat camaraderie at MA Ponsonby International Transport that you'd be hard-pressed to find in the yard of a stock market-floated mega-fleet. The youngster of the driving team, 19-year-old Scott Bywater, sums up the mood when he tells us: 'It's a bit like a crowd of friends working hard together.'

The Rugeley, Staffordshire-based operation isn't the sort of firm where huddled, hi-vis-wearing drivers who have an opinion on everything complain endlessly about rumours generated by colleagues who know not (nor care not) what they're driving or why they're there.

'My lads are all truck people; they're all dyed-in-the-wool truck enthusiasts,' Mike Ponsonby informs us, we have to say, rather proudly. 'I'm very lucky with each and every one of the lads who works here. It's a tightly-knit bunch of blokes who share a common interest in the job they do.'

BIG ENOUGH

In fact, so positive is the mood, Mike reckons it's also noticeable from the outside. 'My lads never have a problem and the customers love 'em!' he says.

Formed after Mike (whose two uncles ran DJ Ponsonby from the early 1980s until its demise in 2002) saw a need to

keep the family name going, MA Ponsonby has grown from a one-truck owner-driver operation to something about as big as you'd want to run on your own. 'The step up from here would be an office with a transport desk and admin staff. That's not really what I'm about so, on numbers alone, we've probably reached the top,' he says.

Fellow haulier AS Taylor gave Mike his first leg up, when the Barton-under-Needwood, Staffordshire international specialist sold the youngster a Renault Magnum.

'Alan Taylor really gave me a flying start,' Mike recalls. 'In fact, that first truck totally changed my opinions of the French brand; I'd never had any dealings with the product beforehand but that thing proved us all wrong. Never had a spanner near it; it just ran and ran,' he reminisces.

From the initial Magnum Mike then added a Scania R144.530 Topline, which, again, probably through a combination of luck and judgement, never missed a beat. 'I've really stuck with Scania ever since. The family has a longstanding family relationship with both Keltruck and Chris Kelly himself, which dates back to the 1980s. The drivers love them – which helps retain the sort of people we desperately need in this industry – and for our type of

work they're also good on fuel.'

While the company has always offered an international service, Mike is understandably cautious about the 'benefits' the wonderful European integration and border abolition policies have done for the British transport operator plying his trade on foreign shores.

'I'm convinced international work will come back to UK hauliers in some form or other,' he says, 'but agree it will never return to the levels enjoyed 20 years ago.'

MISSING OUT?

Everything here is kept immaculate and clean, from the 'work in progress' Scania 143.450 Streamline Topline to the latest R560 Topline driven by 25-year-old James Joyce. With a single-make policy, does he ever worry that he might be missing something?

'No, I wouldn't necessarily say so,' he replies. 'If I ran a really big fleet, then the best possible policy would be a mixed fleet – or two or three makes at the very least. But when you're only running a handful of trucks, it makes more sense to keep close to the dealer. If you don't have buying power as leverage, you need something else, such as a close working relationship.'

In addition to top-notch drivers, Mike is mindful of the help his father

Low-load diversity

A chance encounter at a Glasgow auction led Ponsonby into a niche market the company has become well accustomed to: low-loader work. 'A guy approached me to ask if we could move a cement mixer,' he says simply. 'Of course, this led to another, then another...'

Ponsonby has also operated flat trailers, but renting more specialist kit can be costly and haphazard, so Mike took a punt on a brand-new three-axle King trailer, initially without the work to back it up.

'We had no option but to hawk ourselves around everyone we

could think of, from local engineering companies, plant hire firms, right up to agricultural and construction machinery shipping agents,' he recalls.

To date, Mike has bought four to cope with the diverse number of vehicles the firm now shifts the length and breadth of the country.

'At present we're moving everything from scrap trucks going out for export to brand-new tractors coming in from European plants. If it can be driven or winched onto a low-loader, we'll take it!' he enthuses.





has given him along the way. 'Dad never worked for D J Ponsonby but is someone who has always been involved in the transport industry.

'Working for Ryder, initially as a driver, he worked his way up to the role of sales manager.

'After taking redundancy, he went back to university and trained to be a barrister, which he now uses in his role as transport legal adviser. All in all, he's been quite an inspirational character and a rock-solid shoulder to lean on.'

The same can be said for his long-suffering missus, Vicky, who has supported the Ponsonby cause throughout some pretty tough times.

PICKED UP THE BUG

'She's put up with me working seven days a week for more years than I care to remember. It must be hard on the whole family when you can't just take a day off or go on holiday,' Mike acknowledges.

It's also difficult for the two young-

est boys, Tommy and Jack, although the eldest, 17-year-old Anthony, has already picked up the bug and is travelling the country in M A Ponsonby's smallest load-carrying vehicle, a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter.

Like many in the industry, Mike says that keeping afloat has to be the number-one priority.

'It helps when you're genuinely happy to come to work; you can't really complain when your job is also your hobby,' he concludes. ■



“My lads are all truck people; they’re all dyed-in-the-wool truck enthusiasts”



Scania new boy

The story so far has always been the purchase of quality used trucks, which, bar the very first addition, all wear the Scania badge. But with low-loader work now firmly established and the accountant pointing to the tax-relief benefits of buying new, Mike has taken another leap of faith with VB61 MAP, his first brand-new truck.

Spec'd from the ground up, the V8-powered R560 Topline 6x4 is on a longer than normal 3100mm wheelbase, with a plated weight (CAT2) of 62 tonnes gross.

'We previously had an older 530 doing the same work, which at times got perilously close on maximum weight,' says Mike. 'The 18-tonne increase means we can completely forget about weights of the current loads while increasing the flexibility of looking for potentially heavier traffic.'

