

A variety act: Miniclipper's drivers have the benefit of a mixed fleet of 47 trucks



WAREHOUSE TO WHEELS

PROFILE: MINICLIPPER LOGISTICS

Miniclipper has addressed the recent driver shortage with an initiative designed to give existing warehouse staff or external applicants the opportunity to obtain their Class 2 licences, utilising the skills of the company's current drivers to train new recruits

WORDS: TRINITY FRANCIS / PHOTOS: NIGEL SPREADBURY

Commercial Motor Miniclipper is a business of two halves, warehousing and transport. Both are evenly split when it comes to revenue, but expanding warehouse capacity means the fleet has to grow with it. Spread over four sites with a fifth on the way, the company is headquartered in Leighton Buzzard and its transport hub is based in Dunstable.

Transport operations were relocated to a 4.5-acre site in Dunstable in 2021 to be closer to the motorway and give the company better opportunities to reduce carbon emissions. The business focuses on palletised freight, and as part of

the Hazchem network, moves hazardous materials.

Thanks to a growing demand for warehouse space, the Miniclipper team is busy setting up its fifth site in Burton on Trent. The new site adds 95,000sq ft of warehousing, which will predominantly accommodate industrial air-conditioning units. Its other sites currently deal with domestic units, but larger units require specifically designed racking to make them easier to handle.

Commercial director at Miniclipper, Jon Parish, says the new site is part of the plan to grow the business. "We've probably got capacity at the moment for around 1,500 to 2,000 pallets of handling per day. We're trying to increase that up to about 3,500 per day."

NEED TO KNOW

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The site opens this month, and the goal is to transition a portion of the transport side there too. Transport operations director Lee Atterbury says: "Subject to an operator's licence, we're hoping to move some transport there in July."

The main transport hub in Dunstable is also receiving some exciting upgrades. To increase efficiency, the loading bay is being extended to facilitate cross-docking. This is part of a wider plan across the business to absorb increasing operating costs by making logistics run as smoothly as possible. But a crucial part of making this work is having the right team.

No one is immune to driver shortages. Between Brexit and Covid, it's been a struggle to attract and retain drivers over the last few years. Atterbury says: "As an industry, we had to sit up and take notice and say, 'What are we going to do?' So, we decided we would train from within."

Nicknamed 'Warehouse to wheels', the programme is designed to give existing warehouse

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explains. "This time last year around 40% of our drivers were from agencies," he says.

Given the positive feedback so far, the team plans to implement an in-house Manual Handling Equipment (MHE) training course. This is another area that's seen a lack of qualified operators, so Atterbury feels this is a proactive way to upskill new and existing staff.

Due to its work with Hazchem, all drivers are also ADR trained so they can manoeuvre hazardous substances safely through the network.

TRUCKS AND TRAILERS

Miniclipper's drivers have the benefit of a mixed fleet of 47 trucks. Along with 17 tractor units, the rest are 7.5-, 12- and 18-tonne rigids from MAN, DAF, Volvo and Iveco. The fleet is mainly MAN, but due to supply issues, trucks from different manufacturers have been purchased.

A key priority for Atterbury is build quality and availability. Instead of three-year leasing contracts that Miniclipper has traditionally taken on, the firm is moving to an ownership model, purchasing trucks that last. Parish explains: "The residual values on second-hand vehicles are better



Family-run business: Jayne and Peter Masters of Miniclipper Logistics

INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

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INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

staff or external applicants the opportunity to obtain their Class 2 licences. The scheme utilises the skills of current drivers to train new recruits. Atterbury says its drivers have been very receptive to the new initiative. "We're pleased we can train in-house, and we're now starting to invest in more of our drivers going down the route of becoming driver trainers," he states.

TRAINING INITIATIVE

The training has already been a success, with two young drivers joining the ranks this year, bringing the average age of the team down. "Our average age is now 47 because our youngest driver is 21. As we get natural leavers and people retiring, we're bringing through younger drivers into the industry," he explains.

The plan is to train two new drivers annually and offer Class 1 training too, which has already been quite popular. Miniclipper's driving team is now fully recruited with 55 staff, Atterbury



these days and cost controls are easier to manage."

The plan is to take new trucks on five-year contracts with R&M deals. Atterbury says: "However, depending on the condition of the vehicle, we can extend that to seven. It's done on a vehicle-by-vehicle basis at the five-year period."

The newest additions to the fleet will be 11 DAF XF tractor units, one 12-tonne rigid from DAF and two MANs. It has also ordered 11 new trailers to join the 41-strong fleet. Given the business is palletised freight, all trailers are curtain-sided and include urban, double-deckers and straight-frames, with and without lifts.

When it comes to trailers there is an even mix of Lawrence David, Montracon and SDC models. One particular Hazchem job operates via a low bridge, so it has ordered two specialised double-deckers to run this route. Miniclipper's trailers are also moving to an ownership model and "the plan will be by the end of the year, all of our trailer fleet will be owned", Atterbury says.

Smart truck and trailer choices contribute to Miniclipper's green ambitions. After upgrading to second-generation MAN TGX tractor units

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Lee Atterbury, transport operations director, Miniclipper Logistics

in 2020, fuel efficiency improved by 15% in the first year. To improve trunking efficiency, it also has four extra-length LST rear-steer, double-deck trailers from Lawrence David that can carry 10 more pallets per load. This equates to one full trailer load per night, saving around 60,000 miles each year.

SUSTAINABILITY

Achieving carbon neutrality has become more than just a nice goal to aim for, and is turning into a new way to win business. However, Miniclipper's environmental goals are driven by personal ambitions within the team to leave a better world for future generations. Acknowledging that green credentials can be an effective selling point comes second to this.

As such, all owned warehouses now have solar-panelled roofs, and lighting has been changed to LEDs with sensors, so they automatically turn off if no one is there. On the logistics side, route efficiency is being improved with the help of Paragon software to reduce diesel consumption. Atterbury explains in addition, "drop density is

also something that reduces our carbon footprint because we're travelling fewer miles?"

Embracing new tech has been a helpful way to reduce paper usage as well. The fleet now uses Asset Go software for its compliance management and driver checks, which has cut paper on the logistics side by 50% in the past year. Any cardboard and plastic packaging used is now collected for baling and sent for recycling.

BIODIESEL AHEAD

Small changes like these have already made a big impact on carbon emissions, but the team is planning to go further and transition to biodiesel by the end of this year. Parish sees this as a more affordable solution than electrifying the fleet. "The cost of biodiesel is getting more comparable with normal diesel and it roughly increases operating costs by a penny a mile – it's a no-brainer," he declares.

Atterbury concurs: "I think it's the cleanest

INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

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COMPANY HISTORY

Miniclipper is a family-run business founded in 1971 by 'one man and a van' – Mick Masters. After responding to an ad in the *Leighton Buzzard Observer* looking for a courier, Masters identified a gap in the market that Miniclipper has been filling ever since.

While the business started with logistics, it quickly moved into warehousing, expanding over the years to grow with customer demand. In March, Miniclipper celebrated its 52nd anniversary with a fleet of over 40 trucks, 500,000sq ft of warehouse space and nearly 200 employees.

The third generation of Masters has now joined the business, working in both warehousing and logistics. Commercial director Jon Parish explains: "The family ethos is very important to us. We're a family business and that's how we see it going forward. We have a number of people whose families also work for the business."

This sense of teamwork has contributed to its successful logistics partnerships. Miniclipper was a founding member of Pall-Ex and Hazchem, the only approved network for delivering packaged chemicals in the UK. It has also been part of Palletline for over a decade and joined UPN in 2021.

fuel we can perhaps get at the minute. Currently, electric vehicles are around three times the cost of Euro-6 trucks, so it's a big investment." Miniclipper bunkers fuel at its transport hub so it can track usage and smooth out fluctuations in fuel prices.

Fuel efficiency is monitored through Microlise Fleet Telematics, which shows driver behaviour and fuel consumption. To encourage drivers to think about the environment, it has introduced a reward system for those who meet their mpg targets.

With the high cost of electric trucks and these being better suited to final-mile operations, in the short-term Miniclipper will move to biodiesel provided this doesn't interfere with R&M contracts.

Parish anticipates that "we'll probably end up moving from diesel to hydrogen in one step rather than going via electric on the way?"

Meanwhile, even though electric trucks aren't in the future plans, the team has transitioned its company car fleet to fully electric. □