



# FORCE OF WILL

With a well-spec'd truck fleet, a fast-growing warehousing operation and a strong appreciation for its drivers, Somerset-based Willmotts Transport is expanding in all the right ways. *Trucking* pays a visit to its Waterlip base to meet group MD, Andy Stott – the man very much behind the plan...

By Andy Stewart

ADDITIONAL REPORTING: KERON FENNELLY. PHOTOGRAPHY: MAN TRUCKS

**E**stablished over 100 years ago, Willmotts Transport has long been a general freight operator. Based outside Shepton Mallet, the company has expanded in recent years into warehousing and ambient food distribution. Employing some 250 people of whom 170 are full-time drivers, Willmotts turns over about £25 million a year. Its 150-plus truck fleet is 80 per cent articulated and is mostly made up of MAN and Scania vehicles, with a few other marques filling in the gaps.

The man behind Willmotts' current incarnation is group chairman and managing director, Andy Stott. Andy set up his first company, Stotts Transport, in 2002 as a classic man-with-a-van

operation just down the road from Willmotts' site in Waterlip, where *Trucking* has come to visit. "That business expanded until I was running refrigerated vehicles with a fleet of around 30 or 40 trucks," Andy tells us as we sit down for a chat over a coffee.

At the time, Shepton Mallet and the surrounding area had a large number of food manufacturing businesses, ranging from independent cheese-makers and chicken farmers to big-name dairy producers such as Dairy Crest, Nutricia and St Ivel. Part of Stotts' early work involved picking up chickens for transport up to locations in the Midlands, and taking dairy products from smaller producers up to Nuneaton.

But over time, the big guns like Dairy Crest moved out of the area, which led

many local hauliers to start working for the large supermarkets as other jobs dried up. Sensing a change was coming, in 2007 Andy sold Stotts Transport to the company that owned Peter Green Chilled in Evercreech. He continued to work for Greens for a few years before an opportunity presented itself which was too good to miss.

## A new start

In 2010, David Willmott, owner of local family-run haulier Willmotts Transport, was looking for someone to take over the business (see *Through the Years* boxout on page 48). So Andy collaborated with his business partner, Dave Buxton of DJB Haulage, to buy the firm in 2010, immediately rebranding it Willmotts DJB.



ABOVE: Company celebrated 100 years of trading in 2018



ABOVE: New Generation MANs joined the fleet soon after launch



ABOVE: Willmotts is fully accredited by SGS, BRC and Soil Association



Tidy TGX 26.470 6x2 was first registered in August 2020



> Willmotts DJB switched to hauling and storing ambient goods. At the time, the company was one of the first to apply for and receive BRC (British Retail Consortium) accreditation for storage and distribution, which gave Andy a unique and lucrative proposition when touting for new work.

In the meantime, the DJB side of the business focused on container transport out of Southampton, until it was sold on to James Kemball Ltd in Felixstowe.

"Willmotts was then able to concentrate on warehousing and logistics, and over the last five or six years we've really grown," says Andy. "We now run over 150 vehicles and we've got operating centres in Bristol, Bridgwater, Devizes, Warwick and Sheffield, plus a few others scattered around the area."

Interestingly, Willmotts is also home to a local Scania enterprise. Back in the days when brothers Ralph and Eric Willmott were running the business, the Swedish truck-maker was scouting the area for a suitable site to house a dealership and workshop. It found Willmotts' Waterlip yard the ideal location and set up shop in a corner, just inside the main gate. This became Scania Shepton Mallet – and may explain why the Swedish marque makes up such a large proportion of Willmotts' fleet.

### Fleet make-up

"When we bought Willmotts, we formalised a lease with Scania so it could continue to run its workshop



**ABOVE:** Andy and his team have worked hard to raise standards for their drivers

and repair centre here," says Andy. "It's a great relationship and they look after a percentage of our fleet. Our trucks are about 50 per cent Scania, 30 per cent MAN and the rest are Mercedes, Volvos and other brands. We've got a few Mitsubishi Canters, for example, which have slightly odd specs but are just right for the jobs they do. We also have around 180 trailers, 70 per cent of which are Tiger."

Willmotts' preferred spec for tractor units is 6x2 chassis with powerplants ranging from 450-500 bhp. As 90 per cent of the fleet does three or four nights out a week, spec'ing big, comfortable cabs is important.

"We always try to get the biggest cabs and fit them with microwaves, fridges etc – everything a driver would want," says Andy. "We spec some with alloy wheels and we like to make things a bit more individual for the drivers, such as fit private plates. But we don't over-spec our vehicles – we just like a nice, simple, clean, practical trucks." >



Operator runs its own in-house driver training scheme

### Storage solutions

Warehousing has become a key part of the Willmotts operation. "We've got several sites across the South West, with about 400,000 sq ft of warehousing and future plans to increase," Andy tells us. "We do a lot of work supplying materials to factories, and also taking their finished goods." With a number of deals currently on the table that should see the company grow its warehouse offering even more this year, this is an area of the Willmotts business which Andy is keen to grow quickly.

Majority of Willmotts' trailers are built by Tiger





Lion's pride

The firm was an early adopter of MAN's New Generation TGX tractors, which entered the fleet in September 2020. They've proven a hit with drivers, which has led to a further brace of lions being ordered for the beginning of next year. "We've another dozen 510 bhp TGX 6x2s coming," Andy tells us - but the new additions don't stop there, as a similar number of new Scania are also due to arrive on the fleet by year's end.

"We've just taken 10 new Scania S500s, plus six Mercedes-Benz Actros Ls because we had an opportunity to grab them," Andy tells us. "The Mercs have replaced our previous 64/65-plate Actros 2546, so it'll be interesting to see how well they do."

"We tend to keep our tractor units on the fleet for five years, though we're trying to reduce that - which is obviously difficult because it's hard to get hold of new vehicles. Like most operators, we're holding onto older kit for longer at the moment."

The majority of Willmotts' fleet is DVS-compliant. "We've spent a fortune

on DVS, installing camera systems and so on. The main bulk of our work in London is general haulage, supermarket deliveries, IDC deliveries etc, but we also do some aggregates deliveries."

Drivers first

Willmotts tends to stick to a one driver, one truck policy. "Our method is to buy a nice truck, give our drivers a smart uniform, and we'll look after them and pay them as best we can - including extra bonuses and incentives. And all we ask is for that respect back. We don't push people, but we do enforce compliance because we're heavily regulated."

"I strongly believe drivers are not paid enough money for what they do. I'm aware of some hauliers who pay their drivers low hourly rates; ridiculous money for the level of responsibility a driver has. They do a skilled job."

Has the company been affected much by the driver shortage? Willmotts' commercial director, Dan Gray, takes up the story: "It had a massive impact last year when the shortage was at its worst.



Through the Years

Willmotts Transport was originally set up in Wells in 1918 by George Willmott, soon after the end of WWI. Mainly transporting cheese, paper and beverages, the company went through three family generations before Andy Stott took over the reins. An ex-RAF Leyland was the first vehicle on the fleet, before the firm made a switch to AEC vehicles in 1936. George's two sons, Ralph and Eric, took charge when George retired. Ralph handled accounts while Eric looked after engineering, and over the years the favoured marque changed to DAF. In 1982, the brothers moved the business from Wells to its current home in Waterlip, just outside Shepton Mallet. When Eric retired at 65, Ralph continued the business with Ralph's son, David. And when his own retirement drew near, David sold the company to Andy Stott in 2010.



More TGX are scheduled to join the Willmotts fleet in early 2023

We did have vehicles parked up, but we've tried to change internally to make life better for our drivers. I think you have to put a lot of effort into staff retention and ensure you're giving drivers the best conditions possible."

Ongoing training is also a core company value. Willmotts runs its own internal driver training scheme to help get more people behind the wheel. "We've put a dozen or so drivers through our training scheme," says Dan. "Drivers are now able to do C+E direct from a standard car licence, but we don't put them straight into an arctic. Instead, they'll follow a path from 7.5-tonner to 18-tonner, 26-tonner and then arctic. It makes sense."

But it's not just drivers who are encouraged to progress their careers. "We've put a lot of energy into upskilling

our office staff as well, such as helping them to get their National and International CPC licences," adds Andy.

Crossing the Channel

Indeed, Willmotts continues to be active in international transport; though the tangle of Brexit red tape has seen the company shift its focus here. "We're continuing to send some high-security loads across the Channel in high-sided box trailers, which are pulled by double-manned vehicles," Dan tells us. "We go to the Netherlands and Germany fairly regularly."

"But there has been a reduction in our European deliveries and we've probably shied away from some new, smaller opportunities purely because of the mess in terms of requirements. If one of our vehicles sits at a ferry terminal for a

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Andy Stott

couple of days, or spends a day waiting in Calais for a T1 document, we've immediately lost any margin we had in the job. It's nonsensical if we have that level of risk."

A significant proportion of Willmotts' work is for pallet networks. According to Dan, European consignments have grown over the networks in recent times. "We've seen a sharp increase in smaller consignments going over as part of consolidated orders rather than full loads once a month, as there are clearer requirements for customers to follow and it's managed by the pallet network itself."

As we round up our chat, it's clear Andy Stott and his team at Willmotts are passionate about work they do and the people they employ. Despite the current difficult market conditions, it's

impressive to see a company push so hard to raise standards for its staff.

"I think 2021 was the hardest year in transport in terms of the ups and downs in the market, what with Brexit, Covid lockdowns, plus the turbulent nature of freight volume as well," agrees Dan. "Then we went straight into the driver shortage. But it was the same story for everybody."

"We've expanded as a business just through natural progression and our appetite to grow. It's been quite organic, and it's happened for the right reasons."

Over 100 years on from its humble beginnings, Willmotts has never been in better shape. And from what we've seen, we wouldn't be at all surprised if it continues along this path for the next 100 years to come. [T]