

The Magazine for Professionals

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£2.80

MAY 2006

Fleet, Agricultural and Commercial Transport in Scotland



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# All grow at Neil Williams Haulage Group



Waste and recycling proves to be a landfill of gold for Edinburgh company



By anyone's standards, increasing a company's turnover from £1.8 million a year to over £15 million is a hugely impressive achievement. To have achieved it in 6 years, during a journey from Road Sweeper to Managing Director, makes it even more impressive. To have done it by spotting a potential in the market that was previously untapped and made money mostly out of intelligence and lateral thought, well that's just showing off.

But everything about the Neil Williams Group is impressive, right down to the modern, glass and wood office in Mayfield, outside Edinburgh, where we travelled to meet Mark Williams, the MD who, along with his brothers Craig and Richard, have been the masterminds behind the rise of this company from local hauliers to major players in Waste and Recycling.

"The company was owned by my father and my uncle - Neil Williams Haulage - in 1999," Mark tells us. "I was a road sweeper driver back then. My dad went on holiday and he asked me to come in and look after the office. The office at that time was my dad and my brother - that was it. I came in for two weeks to run the transport while he was on holiday. Then he came back from holiday and I said 'No I don't want to go back on the sweeper, I'll just stay here.'

"So, slowly, we built it up from there. My dad, eventually, after six months of being in an office with me, went out on a lorry, driving a tipper. From there, we've built it up to what it is today.

"Back in March 2005, we purchased the business from Neil Williams Haulage, the partnership company owned by my father and my uncle. They've retired now, although my dad still drives for us.

"During that period we started the recycling side, the road sweeping division and the waste management division. The growth has come in the waste management and recycling side."

And therein lies the crux of the lateral thinking that made the company explode. Not content with hauling rubble away from sites and to landfills, Mark saw the potential in taking that rubble, recycling it, and selling the components, in many cases, to the same companies he took it away for in the first place. So,

just to add insult to injury, this hugely successful company is also hugely environmentally friendly!

"The way I like to look at it is: if you look at people who are successful in haulage, they all have storage as well. If you look at the fleet guys, the Malcolms etc, they're hauling it, putting it in storage, they're making money out of storage and then they're hauling it on again. We don't store things for people. But, effectively, we were taking "muck", if you like, from the site to the tip and it was gone.

"It works on the same principal: if we can take it from the site, to a "storage" area, turn it into a product, make money out of it, then haul it away - it's effectively the same as what the storage companies are doing. You're getting double haulage on the same materials, so therefore you've increased your volume twofold, because everything coming into the site must go back out in some form. So as long as the technology is there to make enough money to cover the plant cost and make a wee profit out of the middle bit, you're also getting the bonus of all the haulage work, going back again.

"We've got it to the point now that the technology has come on so far with the recycling equipment that this is achievable. And you've got the volume, and that's what makes the yard make money. The middle bit makes good money on its own, over and above the fact that you get the double haulage, because we've got such a volume of material and that's what the recycling works on. It's all costs per tonne, so the more tonnes you can get in throughput, obviously the more profit."

That recycling operation doesn't just take place at the one Mayfield site though, as Mark goes on to explain.

"We have three recycling sites: one here [Mayfield], one in Leith and one in Newmains. This one here is primarily for inert waste material. All construction and civil engineering waste comes into the site. Everything which is 6mm plus, which is basically anything with any aggregate, gets extracted, crushed, washed and made into an end user product. We have a small skip waste area, they do a quick sort and take out the metals and any inert material and the lighter waste goes down to the Leith site, where it gets shredded and then the plastics and such are recycled.



"We must haul and tip out half a million tonnes a year, and we recycle probably about 200000 tonnes of that. Purely because some of it is non-recyclable and the quantities, to be honest."

Despite this huge environmental bonus side to the business, NWH still suffers from a bad image in their local neighbourhood, and Williams seems a little frustrated when I suggest that people should see the business as pioneering in environmental terms, rather than as the polluters most haulage companies are seen as.

"A lot of people see this site, for example, as a bad neighbour activity, polluting the environment with dust and noise etc. But nobody seems to appreciate that we're stopping a quarter of a million tonnes a year going into landfill and diversifying that into a useable product. Not only that, but there's not a quarter of a million tonnes being extracted from quarries, which is a non-renewable source, so there is a big environmental knock on, but it's not perceived that way. We spend a lot of time trying to educate people that we're not just a haulage company, we educate them in everything we do.

"Newmains is an old landfill site. It's an old concrete plant. For thirty years, any concrete that went off or didn't make the spec, they tipped it in a hole next to the site. After 30 years, there's a million tonnes of material in there. So we're now extracting that material, crushing it, screening it, washing it and selling it



as an aggregate and therefore creating a void space to backfill with non-recyclable material."

The longer we talk, the more impressive the whole setup and concept becomes. To manage to take a politically friendly objective, and not only achieve something intelligent and worthwhile, but make exceedingly good money on the way really just seems greedy. But Williams is still an unassuming man, who sometimes finds himself having to walk customers through the full benefits of using his company.

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"We may be a couple of quid dearer than the competitor, but we're not just taking the material to landfill, we're turning it into products we can sell back to any one of your sites, at a cheaper rate than what you get from the quarry. But without that stream of material, we can't turn that into a product for you to buy cheaper, so you need to help us by giving us the material away to be able to offer you the material back, cheaper. And everybody's more environmentally aware now, so this has got to be better for your company, you can turn around to your supplier and say all the waste goes to recycling and 95% of it gets recycled and brought back into the site. Environmentally, it's where Edinburgh says they're aiming to be."

So for a company that has grown that much, obviously their vehicles and equipment had to grow with them. In 1999 the company had about 23 vehicles; now it boasts 70, plus pieces of plant, shovels, excavators, screens and washers.

In terms of trucks, Scania is definitely the vehicle of choice here.

"Drivers love Scania. It's always seen as 'the vehicle'. It's hard enough to get good drivers, if having good vehicles attracts drivers then it's just a bonus to me, because having the good vehicle saves us money on reliability and maintenance anyway. It's like driving a car - it's fantastic."

Like all hauliers, the biggest ongoing cost for the company is, of course, fuel.

"Fuel's a big thing. We're lucky that a lot of our work is priced month to month, so we can adjust as fuel prices change."

Fuel suppliers are "mixed about" depending on whoever is

giving the best price, but tyres come mostly from New Life Tyres - "we do a lot of work with them," says Mark.

The plant equipment is extensive, including: excavators (JS220, 130, 160 and 330); loading shovels (JCB 456 and 436, CAT 962 and Kmatsu 470); screens (Powerscreen Chieftan 1400 and Warrior 1400) and a huge washplant, also from Powerscreen.

All maintenance on the vehicles and equipment is carried out on-site, with a workshop fitted out by Everquip.

Everquip were one of the first suppliers ever considered by NWH, according to their International Business Development Manager, John Branton: "We were delighted to work in partnership with Neil Williams Haulage on this prestigious project. We supplied and installed a 12 metre prefabricated steel inspection pit, together with an Everquip 20-tonne air-operated pit jack.

"This project highlights the increasing amount of work we are undertaking in Scotland and further consolidates our position as the leading manufacturer of inspection pits in the UK. It is very satisfying that our pits are now recognised as market leaders and used extensively throughout many sectors of the Transport Industry."

Of course, in a modern business, machinery is not the be all and end all. Software is just as important as hardware.

So, already, the company works with Minor Planet tracking software and has all its security cameras wired up to be accessible through the internet. This, of course, means that Craig can call in from his Florida holiday home to ask why the washplant isn't running!

However, the next big step is actually a brand new, bespoke software solution for the company.

"Our biggest problem to stop us growing at the moment is paperwork. So we've budgeted £1/4 million to bespoke build a system which works for us. Phase One should be completed by the end of May, which is just half the system running online. At the transport office, orders will come in to match the quotations - it goes into a run system so you can organise to send the lorries to and from a job. Stage Two is PDAs in the cab, so we can send the job to cab, and the driver, instead of signing a manual ticket, will sign a PDA ticket, which will then have a printer in the cab to print off the job for the man on the site. Then, when he drops it back in the cradle, it sends the PRS across to here instantly, and therefore the next day you're sending out the bill. As opposed to just now, where we're working probably two weeks behind, by the time it goes through. So it's a massive cashflow boost - we do about £400000 a week, so to have that two weeks ahead is huge."



The system is being built by Valley Technology Ltd, based in Edinburgh, who have been providing IT solutions to businesses across the UK for over ten years. With experience in sectors ranging from retail, warehousing and logistics and manufacturing to aircraft management and high-tech R&D, Valley Technology have experience in dealing with all and every kind of business problem and opportunity. Alastair Broom, Managing Director of the company, comments: "Every company is different, with processes built up over many years - these processes give a company its unique selling point. We aim to help automate these processes with software - improving the flow of information within a company with minimum impact to staff.

"The system for NWH is being designed to improve the audit trail between quotations and sales orders through to invoicing. Electronic records of every step will be taken which will speed the flow of information through the business, leading to improved cashflow. Additionally, the system will enhance knowledge management. At present, key operational information is known to only a few members of staff, creating potential problems in times of sickness or holiday.

"Making this information readily available to operational staff through the use of scalable web-based technologies means



staff can focus on performing their job, and management can focus on the strategic direction and growth of the business." And growth is exactly what the Neil Williams Group is likely to continue doing. To illustrate that point, Mark relates a tale of how, in March 2004, the company broke £1 million turnover in one month and everyone was delighted. The results for March 2006 have just come in at £2.1 million. "That's some month," Mark comments, raising his eyebrows.

It certainly is. ■

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