

Immigrant INNOVATORS

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This Hino 700 6x4 tipper is one of the bigger units in the Dews Construction fleet. Many of the other trucks are small 4x2s, but a recent shift in contract profiles is likely to result in a move towards bigger trucks



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INE YEARS AGO, WHEN THE DEWS FAMILY SOLD UP a small multi-disciplined civil contracting business in Yorkshire and shifted to New Zealand, their prime motivator was an improved lifestyle.

Dave Dews and his wife Mandy expected to work here, for sure, but the plan was to take comparatively undemanding jobs and enjoy the new environment.

Their children – Laura and her year-younger brother Sam – weren't as bullish about the shift. Just into their teens, they found the prospect of leaving schools and friends to traipse halfway round the world less than appealing. Laura admits that she was especially anti her parents' decision.

Fast-forward to 2015....and the Brit transplants have found themselves coming full circle – now owning and operating a multi-civil company in the Hutt Valley that has grown spectacularly from very modest beginnings seven years ago.

Today, Dews Construction operates a fleet of 20 trucks, backing up an eclectic range of high-tech drainlaying, paving and trenching machinery. If the company has a signature aspect, it's in the principals' preparedness to think laterally....and in the introduction of equipment and practices that are common in the UK, but more novel here.

And after their initial trepidation, the Dews siblings have not only embraced their new home but also perform

key roles in the company – Laura looking after a whole raft of support functions, while Sam is one of the firm's two contracts managers.

The family integration seems set to intensify. Since leaving school at 16, Sam has gained wide experience in the business and picked up an impressive range of qualifications, while Laura is close to completing a degree in business administration and accounting. Both now propose to study for civil engineering degrees... so the management drive of the company promises to remain well on track through the second generation.

Mandy, meanwhile, laughs that while Dave and Sam get to dream of, buy and operate ever-more exotic machinery, and Laura handles the interesting support functions like traffic management plans, health & safety, staff training, tender documents and management meetings "...I'm the one who gets to do all the boring office work."

She had originally trained as a chef, and was working in the food industry when she met and married Dave, who at the time was contracts manager for the local council, having been in local government work since he left school.

In 1999 Dave left the council to start his own business, beginning with a single truck and some basic plant and subcontracting to primary contractors in a variety of infrastructure work.

It was, Mandy recalls, a classic family-based startup:

The Dews 8x4 hook loader unit in transporter guise. Swapping bodies using the Palfinger-based system takes three to four minutes



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“At the beginning we didn’t have a yard. Dave just parked the truck in the driveway of our house, and I did the books from home.”

The venture grew steadily, but had been going only five years when the family made the decision to emigrate. Because the Dews had established a solid support base and a good reputation, the business sold relatively quickly when it was put on the market.

Once settled in NZ, Dave worked with Downers on jobs in the Wellington region for a couple of years, before deciding that his experience from the UK could be put to profitable use here, and Dews Construction was set up.

Mandy shakes her head wonderingly: “We had no plan to start up again in this work. The idea was mainly to come out here and enjoy the lifestyle...but obviously Dave likes the stress.”

Dave himself agrees that the establishment of the company carried heaps of risk: “The timing wasn’t brilliant (“It was totally naff!” comes Mandy’s interjection), because the world was in recession. And there were the big players like the Fulton Hogans and Downers to compete with. It’s a tough game, with no

guarantees.”

However, the fledgling operation took off brilliantly. Within a year it had scored a five-year general maintenance contract from the Upper Hutt City Council and had expanded rapidly.

That contract has since been won for the current term by Fulton Hogan, but Dews Construction still handles kerb and channel construction for the council.

The original operating base, a leased commercial property in the Hutt Valley, was quickly outgrown. Searching the area, the couple found a four-hectare property at Kaitoke in the northern end of the Valley, bordering SH2 as it begins the climb over the Rimutakas. Buildings were limited to a house and a large but basic shed, but importantly the site offered plenty of room, says Mandy: “What attracted us was its potential for a clean-fill site, as well as buildings. So we went for resource consent and had it approved without too much trouble. It’s well screened

The demountable Vermeer hydraulic/vacuum excavator on its way out to a job. The rural setting of the company yard puts it a little distance from jobs in Wellington City, but on the plus side it offers plenty of room for a cleanfill site as well as buildings and parking for gear



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from the road and neighbouring properties, so we didn't face the sort of hassles we might have otherwise."

Dave feels a significant factor in the strong early growth of the company was the couple's experience with the UK's tightly-regulated health and safety environment: "The standards in the UK at the time were far higher than NZ, so it meant we were way ahead of the fight

with respect to the new H&S polices that were being introduced here at the time. The new levels of corporate responsibility that local firms were struggling to adapt to were second nature to us."

After visiting Dews Construction, it's plain that another fundamental element to the company's success is the enthusiastic embrace of advanced equipment... and the introduction of gear and practices that are more commonly found in the UK.

Thus, instead of a dedicated transporter trailer to cart equipment from site to site, a 700 Series Hino 8x4 has been fitted with a Palfinger hook loader system. Depending on the requirements of the time, the truck uses one of three bodies built by Gary Douglas Engineers – a flatdeck to which machinery is lashed for transporting, a bathtub tipper, and a third one carrying a self-contained hydraulic vacuum excavator.

The Vermeer VSK1200HD excavator is one of two identical units owned by Dews – the other fitted permanently to a Series 500 Hino 6x4. The excavators each use a 75hp Kubota diesel as their main power source and have their own onboard recyclable water



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Another piece of equipment that's relatively common overseas, but rare in NZ (the Dews one is, in fact, the only one of its type in the country), is the British-built Phoenix asphalt hot-box system built onto a DAF CF65 4x2



When he came to NZ, Dave Dews had no plans to get back into the civil construction game, but here he is, running a successful, innovative company

supply and 4500-litre slurry tank.

As Dave points out, the Hino 700's transporting duties are typically confined to the morning and the evening, or when they're setting up for a new site. The rest of the time it carries out general tipping duties: "Hook loaders are great for their versatility. It's quite expensive kit, but it means we can deliver equipment to sites when needed, and cut the size of sites down because there doesn't have to be a range of machinery sitting around... and that really helps with traffic management, which is becoming an even more critical factor.

"With a conventional transporter, carting gear around is all it can do," he adds.

The day we're at the Kaitoke depot, we watch driver Jason Douglas drop off the transporter deck with a Bobcat digger aboard and then pick up the Vermeer excavator, the transition accomplished in under five minutes.

Another piece of equipment that's relatively common overseas, but rare in NZ (the Dews one is, in fact, the only one of its type in the country), is the British-built Phoenix asphalt hot-box system built onto a DAF CF65 4x2. The gas-fired unit has two hoppers for different grades of mix, and can keep the material at an optimum temperature and to specification for up to three days.

Hot-boxes like this are used extensively in the UK for road maintenance work in winter. While our climate doesn't present the same challenges, says Dave, the system still regularly proves its worth: "When you're doing lots of little intermittent patching jobs as cleanup for a larger project over a couple of days, it means you can get them out of the way as you go. And if you're working overnight and have to get a batching plant to open up after hours for a load, the cost is astronomical."

As well as adding to the efficiency of Dews



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The Dews family involvement with the company is complete. Laura and her mum Mandy keep the back office functions ticking over, while Sam (below) supervises contracts in the field



Construction's own contracts, the hot-box has helped the company become a go-to shop when other contractors in the region need quick asphalt repairs overnight.

The brand-new DAF was imported as a finished setup, complete with its asphalt body, explains Dave: "Phoenix typically uses DAF for its road-ready installations, so things like PTO linkages and hopper layout are well sorted with this standard British-spec unit. We're the agent for Phoenix in NZ and can organise one on any truck or trailer, but bringing in a built-up unit like the DAF is a simpler proposition

"There was some minor modification needed to the likes of reflectors to meet NZ spec, and the rear axle loading exceeds local limits with a full hopper load, which trims the payload by less than half a tonne, and that's about all."

The ability to handle small jobs pretty much on its own is offered by the 500 Series Hino 8x4 fitted with a crane and clamshell bucket attachment that boasts a 12m reach and 360 degrees of coverage. Trucks like this are really useful for maintenance work, says Dave: "You find whole fleets of them in the UK – there's no need to have an excavator and loader along for the job, for the truck can do its own digging and then pick up the spoil."

An example of another piece of kit regularly found in the UK but much rarer here is the three-way tipper body fitted to a Dews Construction 500 Series Hino 6x4. Tailgate-style sides and a linkage system attached to the single underbody ram allow the unit to tip to either side as well as conventionally to the rear.



A high level of expertise in traffic management (human and vehicular) is one of Dews Construction's strengths

trenches on narrow thoroughfares, says Dave, but is just as useful from a traffic management point of view in helping minimise the space taken up by a project.

Efficient traffic management is a core value of the Dews Construction philosophy, to the level that Dave has set up an independent subsidiary specialising in this field – able to undertake projects for other companies.

Sam Dews expresses the company philosophy succinctly: “Our gear has all been set up for maximum operating efficiency and safety, and with the least impact on the environment and traffic.”

A less-than-enthusiastic student at high school, Sam was allowed by his parents to leave a year or so early.... on condition that he gained a trade qualification. This he did, working with the company while getting certified in drainlaying and water reticulation. Since then, he's picked up a slew of other qualifications, including traffic management, industrial health and safety and horizontal drilling.

In the wake of the Christchurch earthquake in 2011, Sam went with a large gang from Dews to help in the emergency restoration of essential water and sewage services in the battered city. Dave explains the

background: “One of our major clients is Wellington Water, for whom we handle maintenance and many capital works. After the earthquake, the Christchurch City Council's infrastructure company City Care put out a distress call to sister organisations countrywide and Wellington Water asked if we could send a group down.

“It was tough work. The guys were on the go incredibly long hours, and living in basic, backpacker accommodation. Sam was just 17 when he went to Christchurch, and the experience helped him mature immensely. Since then he's taken on more and more responsibility and is now one of our two contracts managers, handling all the supervisory and safety aspects of jobs.”

Paul Edwards, the other contracts manager for Dews, brings valuable training expertise to the company, in addition to his abilities on the job. A veteran of the industry, he is one of the highest-credentialed trainers in the country for infrastructure ITO Connexis (formerly Infratrain).

This means the company staff carry a high level of certification in a variety of technical areas, explains Dave: “Having Paul as part of the team has proved really



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Right: A near-new and fully-equipped workshop handles plant and fleet maintenance and all but the biggest repair jobs

Below: The Dews headquarters at Kaitoke features purpose-designed buildings and plenty of space. The company's logo features what looks like a silver fern, but Dave Dews says if you look closely it's based on the way a road cutting is represented on site plans... then shaped as a fern



helpful for assessing and training our guys here.”

Mandy confirms the importance of versatility in the staff: “Because the jobs have elements of all sorts of skills, it’s important that every guy on it can handle every aspect. It’s no use having somebody who can do just asphalt, for example.

“We promote ourselves as multi-civil, so our people need to be able to handle the range of tasks this involves.

“We’ve three guys who’ve been trained in the horizontal drilling, while several others are certified in drainage, pipelaying and building. The qualifications are based on unit standards, so there’s a good deal of crossover.”

Dave adds that the high level of versatility is demanded by the position Dews Construction has gained in the marketplace: “A lot of the contracts we get now are

because we’ve proved we can act as a one-stop shop, and can cover multiple aspects of a job under the one tender price. Clients like local councils appreciate this ability, because it reduces the administrative workload that comes with multiple separate contracts for a project.

“This is one of the main differences between what we do in NZ and the work we used to do in Yorkshire. There, we were generally a specialist subcontractor for a section of the project, whereas here we are increasingly the prime contractor.”

As well as the multi-skilled staff, the company’s range of contracting equipment seems fitted to handle every variety of job. Sure, there are the expected excavators and mini-diggers, but the pipelaying work for Wellington Water is increasingly being carried out by a Vermeer 2440



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This page: This sequence demonstrates the simplicity of the hook loader system as a Vermeer hydraulic/vacuum excavator is delivered to a job site

Opposite page: A second, identical, hydrovac unit is permanently truck-mounted

directional drill that can bore underground for several hundred metres – for water pipes and services ducts. The unit is fitted with a GPS head locator that provides centimetre-precise accuracy, while flexible rod sections enable drill lines to be easily diverted around, over or under existing services in their path.

A variety of cutting heads enable the unit to tackle pretty much any type of under-surface environment.

The drill “saves a bundle on jobs” says Dave. Not only is the cost of reinstatement of a conventional trench all but eliminated, the savings that flow from minimised disruption to traffic are just as significant. Local councils are increasingly specifying this form of non-invasive trenching, he adds.

Backing up the directional drill in new pipeline jobs is the company’s automated pipe-welding unit. The trailer-mounted system is capable of butt-welding polythene pipe sections up to 200mm diameter on site, adding further to cost savings.

Making sure that the range of high-tech equipment is ready for work – and in the right place at the right time – is down to plant manager Hayden O’Connor, who, says Dave, “does a cracker job.”

All this smart kit – which also includes a kerb and

channel machine – represents a big capital outlay, but Dave feels it’s essential if an infrastructure company like Dews is to stay abreast of changing requirements from clients.

Mandy agrees: “We bought the kerb and channel machine when we started, and it paid for itself within three years in us not having to sub-contract that work out. We took a lot of gambles with buying specialised gear at the start, so it has been stressful at times.

“Laura and I do the worrying over things like that, so Dave says there’s no reason for him to worry as well. Sam takes after his father in that respect.”

The rapid growth in the Dews Construction truck fleet came mainly on the back of the Upper Hutt City maintenance contract, and was not something that was planned from the beginning.

The current lineup of 20 trucks over three tonnes is likely to be reduced in the face of the changed work profile, with some of the 4x2 tippers that make up the bulk of the fleet being replaced by bigger, 6x4 and 8x4 units.

Hino is, and is likely to remain, the favoured truck brand. In the first few years Fuso figured prominently, but after problems with gearboxes and batteries a switch



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Mileages are very modest, with one of the biggest 8x4s having covered just 110,000km in six years

was made to Hino. This hit a bit of a snag when Hino production was curtailed post the catastrophic Japanese earthquake and tsunami, says Dave, so the company picked up four Isuzus – two each of Class 1 and Class 2: “These also had problems with their auto boxes, so we’ll stick with Hino into the future.”

The DAF is the odd one out in the otherwise Japanese lineup, but it fits in well, he adds: “We had them in the UK, and had no issues, so this truck is very much a known factor.”

Mileages are very modest, with one of the biggest 8x4s having covered just 110,000km in six years. So, as Dave says: “On that basis, there’s no point in looking at the likes of Scania or Volvo or Mercedes. The capital outlay would be close to twice that of a Hino...and we’re just not covering the distances to justify the difference in terms of lower repair costs and fuel savings.”

Larger maintenance jobs are carried out by Truck Stops... but the company also has a newly-built and well-equipped workshop with a permanent technician, who handles CoF work and the like. It’s a very impressive operation, with a built-in inspection pit and a spares store.

The workshop adjoins a purposebuilt office complex, while other new buildings on-site house machinery and the like.

Dave finds the maintenance regulations for trucks in NZ less onerous than the UK: “There, we had to have a warrant of fitness from our own qualified mechanics every six weeks, plus the annual MoT. If you had a truck pulled over by the Police and they found something like a minor air leak, you might get given an hour to have it fixed, or you’d be up for a full new MoT, even if the truck had just had one a few weeks before.

“Overall, it’s much tougher to do business in the UK, and the weather environment is more stable and benign here. On the other hand, the prices for trucks and equipment – and the availability and cost of parts – is better there.”

We ask Mandy whether being stuck out in the far reaches of the Hutt Valley presents logistical problems, but she says not too many: “A lot of our work for Wellington Water is in the city, so that’s a bit of a challenge, but often most of a gang will go straight to a job in the morning, and one guy will come out here, pick up whatever gear’s needed, and meet the others on the site. We’re currently working on a couple of big jobs on the Kapiti Coast, but there we’ve got access to a secure site where we can park equipment overnight.”

Until recently the fleet vehicles have been fitted with



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A lot of the company's jobs are on narrow suburban streets, where compact excavators and smaller 4x2 tippers come into their own

Navman GPS, but the company's in the process of transitioning to EROAD, says Dave: "We've swapped because of EROAD's automatic RUC payment and the higher level of information integration, making it easier to use."

"Paying for RUCs manually used to be a nightmare, with no credit cards for face-to-face sales, and you had to wait for certificates if buying online, so therefore you had the danger of getting pinged for not displaying. The other benefit with EROAD is its integration with the NZTA database, meaning you can stay abreast of registration and CoF due dates."

For four people who work virtually in each other's pockets, the Dews family members give no hints that the situation carries any tensions. In fact, the conversation between Dave, Mandy and Laura in the office the day we visit is peppered with fond banter. The parents still live on-site at Kaitoke, but the kids have forsaken the social delights of the area for a shared flat in the Hutt.


And work doesn't appear to be an all-consuming passion. Dave confesses to being a full-on motorsport fan, with a love of performance machinery – witness his

Jaguar XK-RS coupe and Honda CBR1000RR Fireblade motorcycle: "The company doesn't pay much of a wage, so I might as well have the car and bike," he quips.

Sam has been a national-level motocross racer for some time, and still competes on a Kawasaki KX-F 450 sponsored by Palmerston North's AFC motorcycles.

Powerful wheeled toys do nothing for them, say the women in the family, whose leisure-time pursuits are more in the fitness realm, Laura with daily gym sessions and Mandy with competitive Cross-Fit.

Given that setting up in business again was not on the longterm plan when the family arrived from the UK, there's a sense that they still wonder how it's all happened so quickly. Dave explains it's probably down to seeing opportunities and taking advantage of them in an innovative manner: "We're only a small family company, but I think we manage to keep the big players honest."

Mandy agrees: "We never thought we'd end up in this sort of work out here. It just happened really – just developed on its own. But it's great fun. What else would you be doing?" 



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