

ON SITE

Taking On The Big Boys?

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Not that Komatsu isn't a "big" brand, you understand. But Marubeni-Komatsu still has a mountain to climb to match the market penetration in the waste and recycling sector enjoyed by the likes of Caterpillar, Volvo and JCB. Which is where a global reputation in construction, mining and general "mountain moving" might come in handy, perhaps? Malcolm Bates goes to see a Komatsu loading mountains of waste near London's Heathrow Airport.

It's all go down at Grundon's Lakeside complex, near London Heathrow – and this Komatsu wheeled loader is on the frontline in the waste transfer facility.

Right, that's more than enough clever links involving "mountains", let's crack on with the actual story. Let's start with Grundon – one of the largest and most accomplished commercial waste contractors in the UK – and arguably, one of the few that can stand-up against the best in Europe in terms of technical accomplishment, a willingness to invest in the future of our industry, in protecting our environment and... well, it's hard to find a single word to cover it, so let's settle for something like, "Grundon has a reputation for doing the job right and doing it to the highest possible standard," shall we?

Leaving aside the fact that Grundon is now a multi-faceted business with an annual turnover of more than £100m, let's focus our interest on the parts of the business that actually get the work done – the vehicles, the plant and the hydraulic equipment. And guess what? Grundon has a hard-won reputation for "doing the job right" in that context as well.

For example, Grundon purchased British-built ERF chassis for waste and recycling operations some years back, when other commercial waste contractors were still buying as cheaply as possible. And in spite of working in what is – and always will be – a grubby business, Grundon vehicles still tend to look smart, whatever the weather. As well they might – they have the family name on the door.

Does "family ownership" mean anything in business anymore? Not as much as it perhaps should. And certainly not as much as it does elsewhere in Europe. But in my experience, it's often the family-owned waste and recycling operations that are driving innovation and high standards in this country, rather than the big international waste sector PLCs. And in that context, "ownership" can have a direct impact on vehicle and plant purchasing policy. If something comes up and is worth a look? Not that I'm suggesting that the decision to replace a frontline wheeled loader of another well-known brand with a new Komatsu WA380-7 was in any



It's hard to believe, but Grundon's WA380-7 still looks like a two-month old machine, yet has over 400 hours on the clock.

way a spur-of-the-moment decision you understand – far from it. But, when the opportunity presented itself, Grundon was open to giving UK distributor Marubeni-Komatsu a try.

One Year On

It was almost 12 months ago that the WA380-7 went into service at the Lakeside waste transfer facility at Colnbrook, near London's Heathrow airport. It was highly specified with full "Waste Handler" package of cab, cylinder and under-belly guards, Turbo pre-cleaner, a wide-core radiator, reversing fan with "chaff screen" and a full fire suppression system.

It was also fitted with auto-greasing and on-board weighing systems together with "Super Highlift" loader arms (with a pin height of 5235mm), on to which a 5m³ toe-tip bucket is fitted.

So how has it been performing? Usually, after six months' hard use in a waste transfer facility, any item of hydraulic plant or equipment is likely to have picked up so many knocks and dings that the OEM – the original equipment manufacturer, or the actual organisation operating it – wouldn't want the likes of me photographing it. After all, "shabby" is not good public relations, and Grundon's PR is exceptionally good



With a full bucket and a steady hand, operator Nigel Eaton sets to loading an articulated refuse bulker. The WA380-7 has full "Waste Handler" package.



“Super Highlift” loader arms and Toe-tip bucket enable the Komatsu to load the highest trailers in complete safety.

and well managed. So, I've probably missed my chance now?

“No actually, it's not that bad,” suggested Carl Wollaston, the product manager for Komatsu wheeled loaders at UK importer Marubeni Komatsu, when I phoned him early in the New Year. “Have a word with the Grundon Group's MRF manager, Steve Fisher – he'll soon tell you,” he added. With a two-day window left in my schedule, a discussion with Steve suggested that, indeed, the Komatsu was still in pretty good shape. E-mails were exchanged. Dates were discussed. Then it snowed. And after almost an inch of the stuff had fallen, the whole of the UK shut down. Time was running short. “Sorry, I've got a day off on Friday, came Steve's response to my suggested

last-ditch date for a visit.” I'm in trouble. “But I'm on site now. Where are you?” he quizzed. The answer was 120 miles away on roads that, the authorities insisted, should only be used if my trip was essential. Well, it was essential.

“You made good time,” smiled Steve as I met him in reception at Grundon's Colnbrook offices. What, like it's taken me six months to get here from that first phone call? I thought he was being ironic, but he'd been listening to stories of travel chaos on the radio. Never mind. Finally, I'm here. High-viz on. Check. Hard hat on. Check. Camera checked. Check. “We'll walk over to the waste transfer site,” he explained. “It's not far.” While we walk, we talk. One of the great things about working for a family business is that it can instill

great loyalty in the staff it employs – and Steve Fisher is a prime example.

In response to my question, how long had he worked at Grundon?, his answer was pretty much all his working life. Indeed, during the school holidays, he used to ride in the lorry his dad drove for Grundon. That's funny, I think to myself – I used to ride in my dad's lorry during the school holidays when I was a kid, as well. And I've been involved with the waste and recycling industry pretty much all my working life, too. We stop to look at the view. We're walking past the lake that gives the site its name and I snatch a shot of the distinctive energy from waste plant (opened in 2010) through the trees. It's all very well done.

I'm soon back to earth with a bump. The waste transfer site at Colnbrook is not large. And you couldn't call it pretty. But at least it's well hidden from public gaze. It's also much quieter than I was expecting. “The operator is on a short break at the moment,” Steve explained.

Nigel Eaton is the operator of the Komatsu so, while I wait, I've time to check it over. It's in amazingly good condition, yet has over 400 hours on the clock. It compares to the condition of a typical two-month old machine, in fact. And yet, with over 200 RCV loads a day to clear and numerous refuse bulkers to load, this single Komatsu is the frontline machine on duty everyday at this site. Possibly, I suspect, because two large wheeled loaders might get in each other's way.

But just when I'm thinking that it's a clean machine because Nigel must treat it like a baby, he's back off his break, up into the cab, fires it up and starts to clear the tipping floor in order to allow an articulated refuse bulker to reverse in for loading. Then, checking that I'm ready to start taking pictures, he's into the pile... backing out with a full bucket... loading over the rave of the trailer... returns for another bucket load... err, no – he certainly doesn't treat his machine like a baby. It's full-on.

“The RCVs will be coming in to tip shortly,” Steve explains. There's no time to lose as the weather conditions will have held the crews



Get in there! Here the Komatsu is used to trim the pile and make room for the next RCV on the tipping floor.



As soon as the floor is clear, another Grundon DAF-based Olympus RCV is ready to reverse in.



"I like to keep things tidy", explains operator Nigel Eaton. And that clearly includes his Komatsu!

up and they'll want to get done before the traffic gets any worse.

It turns out that Steve and I both have something else in common – a lot to do and only a short time to do it. Already a line of three-axle mid-steer Dennis Eagle Olympus-bodied DAF RCVs are waiting to tip and my body clock is telling me that if I don't get out of here soon, I'm going to be sitting in traffic on the M25 rather than watching the evening news on TV.

Job done! It's time to say goodbye

to Steve and Nigel, and sorry to the RCV drivers for holding them up.

Conclusion

What's the bottom line here? Always ask the smaller players in the market because you might get a better deal? Family-run businesses can benefit from a sharper focus? And more likely to innovate? Or how about "a contented driver is far more likely to look after the equipment?"

I ask Nigel Eaton what he thinks of his Komatsu. He loves it. He loves his job too. He says he really wanted to give it a good wash down before starting his shift, but apologised that he couldn't because the water pipes were frozen. He didn't want it to look dirty in my photographs, see. That kind of commitment is worth having... in any organisation. ■

www.grundon.com
www.marubeni-komatsu.co.uk



The history: three generations of the Grundon family and the development of waste collection from horse drawn carts to a then still brand new ERF-based front end loader.