The Who’s Who of Rental Loos

Profile: Tardis Environmental

When you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go… and the chances are that you might be going in a Tardis, thanks to the astonishing success of the waste and water services specialist that never says no...

WORDS: Colin Barnett / Photos: Craig Eccleston

We see our share of stories about big businesses that have grown from humble beginnings. But beginnings don’t get much humbler than that of the £20m-plus operation with 135 trucks founded by a plasterer who diversified into renting portable toilets to builders.

The plasterer was Wolverhampton’s Chris Boydon, who became a bit more than one man and his hod. In fact, he eventually led what may well have been the biggest plastering contractor in the Midlands, with much of his work involved in refurbishing Birmingham’s many tower blocks. Clearly, catering for the fundamental needs of the sizeable workforce involved hiring a fair few portable toilets.

As the business expanded into general house building, it picked up a small tool hire company along the way, whose inventory eventually grew to include rental toilets, creating the foundations of today’s business. Chris Boydon came up with the name of Tardis Environmental, inspired by the resemblance to the famous time machine.

In 2001, the building side was abandoned to concentrate on the core function under the general heading of environmental services. Most of its services involve the delivery, storage and disposal of water, clean and dirty. Today, Tardis Environmental UK employs some 200 staff and has a turnover of over £24m.
While Tardis Environmental has grown significantly, it remains a family concern. Chris, aged 73, is CEO, having taken a step back to an advisory role that according to son Rob acknowledges “that he is still the brains of the business”. Now MD, Rob, 44, left school in 1993 and has always worked for the firm, including driving when there were just two trucks. Apart from sales director David Furlong, all of the other directors are family members.

Supporting the Tardis ethos of “we don’t say no”, there is a director on call around the clock, a practice which saw Rob’s 2020 Christmas lunch disturbed while he dealt with the security guard on a London site reporting an overflowing waste tank, and in 2021 he spent Christmas Day sorting a problem in South Wales.

Mobile toilets have evolved, and now range from the basic builders’ plastic thunderbox through those for large public events such as Glastonbury and right up to luxury trailed units suitable for use at the poshest wedding. Rob declined to quote the number of toilets owned, just saying it was in the thousands.

The business came into its own during the initial 2020 lockdown, during which it was one of the biggest suppliers to the Covid support industry with measures such as the Nightingale hospitals requiring a dependable flow of water in both directions in temporary facilities. Tardis Environmental’s drivers stayed on the road as key...
workers and admin staff worked from home. All, according to Rob, “did a great job”.

Tardis Environmental opened its first remote depot in Carterton, near Oxford, in 2008 when the recession was reducing the amount of work available in the Midlands, but soon found that its work always seemed to be in London. Since setting up a London depot at West Thurrock it has seen some of the firm’s highest-profile jobs, including servicing the construction of the Olympic Village.

**WIDE NETWORK**

Sandy and the now closed Crawley were the locations of other early regional bases. Today, 13 depots stretch from Hull to Plymouth, and Rob has identified the North East and East Anglia as areas for further new depots.

Tardis Environmental also has a manufacturing arm based at Walsall, fabricating bespoke waste tanks. The fabrication unit employs seven staff making steel waste tanks up to 60,000 litres, mostly static for overground use, including some for external customers. Its biggest challenge is that the price of steel can fluctuate by up to 30% in a week.

All of Tardis Environmental’s administration is carried out from its Telford head office. Built on a 3-acre site, it incorporates all of the company’s traffic operations, the local rental equipment operation and one of a pair of HGV workshops, the other being at Walsall, while three Sprinters provide a back-up mobile service. The site is owned by the business, as are the other depots and all of its other assets. “The company has never borrowed anything. Everything has grown organically,” states Rob.

Clearly, all this activity involves road transport to the extent that up to 70% of the staff are drivers, and it’s reassuring that they are regarded as the valuable asset they are. When you walk into a business, it’s soon obvious from looking around which ones play lip service to staff welfare and which ones are serious about it. Tardis Environmental is clearly in the latter group. Employee health and safety and environmental issues are areas where that awareness is translated into meaningful action, even when there are real financial implications.

**RIGHT REMUNERATION**

This attitude begins with renumeration, about which Rob says: “Our policy has always been to pay them right,” bearing in mind that they could be in charge of a £200,000 tanker on a vital mission. He admits the job is not for everyone, but says it pays better than general haulage.

To maintain that differential during the recent increasingly competitive driver market, pay rates have been increased. Asked if some aspects of the job can be rather messy, Rob replies: “The job is as clean as you make it.” To this end, uniforms and high-quality PPE are provided.

He admits to some frustration that youngsters
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are unaware they could be earning fantastic rates of pay driving one of his trucks. He likes to invest in bringing young drivers through from vans and 7.5-tonners. Experienced truck drivers, he points out, can be harder to train than novices. Not that recruitment is a problem though, with 30 applicants for the last vacancy.

Rob doesn’t have a very high regard for the current CPC as a measure of suitability, however. He views it as just attendance-based, creating too much red tape and deterring new and returning drivers from the industry. When drivers join team Tardis, they tend to stay, some having clocked up 20 years of service.

Drivers can participate in a photographic competition to show their vehicles at work, while driving performance based on telematics data is periodically rewarded with prizes of up to £100 for the three top-ranked drivers. The bottom-ranked driver wins a day out with the company driver assessor. All new recruits get a full day assessment followed by an induction process of at least a week. “It’s expensive, but the kit needs the right operator,” says Rob. To maintain the required standard, the area managers carry out regular spot-checks on drivers and vehicles. The result is a team of whom Rob, referring to the pandemic, says: “We are proud of all that our drivers achieved.”

The firm’s first foray into road transport was in 2001 when it purchased its first tanker, a Ford Cargo, which Rob describes as “not quite right.” It was soon joined by a more right Leyland Freighter, and both were soon kept busy with on-demand liquid waste collection.

**FLEET BREAKDOWN**

Today, the trucks on the 135-strong fleet are almost entirely DAF, ranging from 7.5 tonnes to 44 tonnes, and 20 trailers, all bar one low-loader being tankers. There are a handful of 15-tonne and 18-tonne MANs, but they haven’t really challenged the DAF policy.

The trucks are serviced by a mix of DAF R&M and independent maintenance providers. Specifications have been steadily moving entirely to automatics. “Some drivers don’t recognise a gear lever anymore,” says Rob, adding: “We don’t buy the most powerful trucks, just what does the job.”

The amount of PTO work on most jobs means that ultimate fuel economy is not a big issue.
The lighter end of the fleet consists of Mercedes-Benz Sprinters, plus a new model Land Rover Defender used for the toughest off-road waste tank service tasks.

Another area where Tardis Environmental is backing good intentions with action is fuelling its truck fleet. “We can’t buy electric vehicles to do this job, but we can operate on HVO,” says Rob. He estimates that running on HVO (hydrotreated vegetable oil) increases annual fuel costs by £90,000-£100,000, or 6%, but considers it a good price to pay for a 90% CO2 reduction across the fleet.

One benefit of Tardis Environmental’s extensive depot network is that its trucks have no problem returning to base, and the fuel is readily available with a 10-day delivery lead-time. By the end of 2022, the whole fleet will be Euro-6. Where electric is appropriate, though, it is used, and all of the area managers get issued with Teslas.

The trucks aren’t short on tech where it’s beneficial, either. One of the most useful innovations is an in-cab alarm that alerts drivers if they’re about to drive off with a hose connected.

This has almost entirely eliminated this messy and time-consuming mishap, which was previously cropping up around five times a year.

The road transport side of the business is managed using a Transcend telematics system tailored to Tardis Environmental’s needs. The toilet and plant rental side is controlled by a specialist system from MCS Global.

All vehicles are tracked and have 360-degree cameras. One unusual feature is a geofence system to warn drivers that they’re entering a safety zone where PPE must be worn. Drivers are allocated their work by the traffic office via individual PDAs, but the system won’t provide any work until the daily walk-round checks have been completed.

**DOUBLE IDENTITY**

The fleet features two different liveries. Waste water vehicles are branded as Tardis, with their long-standing yellow, green and red colour scheme, chosen by Chris back in the early days. Those delivering fresh water, supplied and tested up to drinking quality, operate in a separate division under the H2O brand and feature a distinctive water-inspired livery. During the pandemic, it operated under the catchline ‘Things can only get wetter’.

The fleet is still expanding, with the whiteboard in Rob’s office showing 23 items on order for delivery through to September, from Sprinters ordered five at a time, to four Magyar 30,000-litre tanker trailers, Tardis Environmental’s first venture with the French brand. Other suppliers include RTN Clayton Vallely, VJ Engineering and Whale, but all need to meet Tardis Environmental’s philosophy of ‘Simple designs with no frills that do the job’.

Not all operators are convinced by the FORS scheme, but Tardis Environmental is among those that are, and since our visit, it has been awarded FORS Gold status. “We think it’s a great management tool,” states Rob.

With its social and environmental conscience and its cautiously self-financing business model, Tardis Environmental looks set to be caring for our water-based needs for the foreseeable future. As Rob puts it: “As long as there are people, there will be waste.”