

# Keeping to one brand FOR 30 YEARS

FAMILY RUN ESSEX-BASED G&B FINCH WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1969, STARTING WITH AN ALLIS-CHALMERS CRAWLER, A PLOUGH AND HARD WORK. WITH OVER 50 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE, AND NOW RUN BY ITS THIRD GENERATION, IT HAS GAINED A GREAT REPUTATION WITH ITS BROAD RANGE OF SERVICES. HOWEVER, IT HAS STUCK WITH A SINGLE TRUCK MANUFACTURER. **BOB BEECH** FINDS OUT WHY.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **MARK BALLANTYNE**

Choosing to source your vehicles from just one manufacturer, especially if you operate a substantial fleet, is less common in the modern marketplace. In the past, local companies dealt with their local dealer – strong relationships were forged. These relationships endured through both good and bad times.

Now most operators tend to play suppliers off against each other, keeping them on their toes when it comes to supplying new vehicles and hopefully showing the customer's displeasure when they feel that aftermarket support is not up

to scratch, by buying a rival make. There are pros and cons for both approaches, but Essex based G&B Finch, prefers to stick with one truck manufacturer and has formed a close relationship with both the manufacturer and the local dealer. The company offers a broad range of associated services, including aggregate and material supply, ready-mix concrete, grab tipper hire, specialist equestrian facility construction along with tipping and extensive recycling services – as a result it operates a fleet of tippers, mixers, low-loaders as well as an eight-wheel plant/Hiab lorry with a PM 38-tonne/metre crane.





The entire truck fleet is from Iveco and it has been the sole supplier for over 30 years. G&B Finch, with a total of 38 rigids and tractor units, is well placed to give an objective view of the current product range and preceding generations of Ivecos. It's well aware of exactly what other manufacturers offer, but feels that there is little point in deviating from the policy of sticking with its chosen make.

"We operate from two sites in Essex and tend to concentrate most of our activities within the county, venturing into the Eastern side of London if required," explains company director and third generation family member Lee Finch. "We offer quite a wide range of different services and are constantly looking at ways to increase efficiency and refine the operation. You have to be prepared to embrace change in every business, but equally so, there is little to be gained by changing a proven and successful formula."

The business was started over 50 years ago, by his grandparents Gerald and Barbara Finch. "They were pig farmers originally, but gave it up because of health issues," continues Finch. "They bought an Allis Chalmers crawler tractor and plough, starting out in agricultural contracting. They worked incredibly hard and built up the business. They bought some JCBs and started working for the councils, this led to tippers and skip loaders and the nucleus of the modern day operation. My father Steve came into the business, taking

it in new directions and in time, I followed his lead. We've expanded as opportunities present themselves - the move into recycling was a major turning point - we went from just disposing other people's waste and muck, into creating products that customers would buy from us."

In time, the company moved away from skip hire and bought 8x4 grab-equipped tippers: "They are more flexible, with bigger payloads and require less administration." G&B Finch invested in crushers and screeners to recycle materials, along with a sophisticated soil washing plant so it could offer a wider range of products. "This required a further expansion of the tipper fleet, both rigids and artics. Vehicle utilisation is far higher; they are running loaded for a far higher proportion of the time," says Lee Finch.

G&B Finch now has its own quarry, producing a wide range of products and has a substantial ready-mix concrete operation - the business is now much more diverse and intense. "Customers demand far higher service levels and we have to respond as quickly as possible," says Finch. "Looking back, things were more relaxed in the past, but we didn't have the equipment and machinery we have now. It would be impossible to run this modern operation with the older trucks and equipment we had back then. You have to keep investing to keep moving forward, otherwise you go backwards and in all probability disappear."

Changes in UK legislation in the past 25 years have had a tremendous influence on these sectors, invariably changing the direction and focus of the business for ever. The 1996 Landfill Tax was introduced to encourage recycling of materials and limit the amount of material being dumped in landfill sites. In the long term it was bad for the environment and quite simply there are only so many locations that are suitable as landfill sites. The Aggregate Levy, a few years later, gave added impetus to recycling. Freshly quarried materials went up in price, recycled materials became an attractive option for many projects. More efficient and more sophisticated recycling machinery came on the market, further improving the quality of recycled materials.

The new regulations were viewed with a degree of alarm initially, but more forward thinking individuals could see that it presented an attractive long-term opportunity. Recycled materials have value, processing obviously costs money, but if you have the space, the equipment, the knowledge and the contacts, it's the way ahead. It requires an element of scale to be successful – processing high volumes of material requires a steady flow of rubble, stone, muck and other materials. For many tipper operators, this led to a change in the type of vehicles they bought, previously steel bodies were used for heavy muck shifting and lightweight aluminium bodies were used for quarry work.

This more or less coincided with the introduction of the lightweight steel body by Thompsons and other manufacturers.

Special steels with a very high strength to weight ratio, along with modern fabrication techniques, made it possible to build a steel body that offered a very competitive payload, along with high levels of durability. In time, truck manufacturers responded to this shift in the market, improving the ground clearance and off-road ability of their mainstream models, others reduced the unladen weight of their heavy-duty chassis.

Operators looking for greater flexibility bought these new four-axle rigids with lightweight steel bodies in large numbers – they invariably went for bigger engines and more durable drivelines. Vehicles are now changed more frequently. In the past they were run into the ground on heavy muck shifting, now it's more about the overall operating efficiency and having an asset to sell on at the end of the term of ownership. G&B Finch has witnessed the evolution of the four-axle tipper chassis over this period.

“We have stuck with Iveco a number of reasons,” continues Lee Finch. “Firstly we have a fantastic relationship with our local dealer, my Dad has dealt with Andrew Smith of Northern Commercials for a very long time, he has always done his best for us over the years. This has endured through dealer changes and reorganisations of the network. The service and support we get from the dealer and manufacturer is very good. Previously we ran Ford trucks for many years, starting with D Series, moving on to Cargo's and then Iveco going up the weight range. The various generations of trucks have served us very well, I am well aware of the image problem,





some people are highly critical, but have little first-hand experience. We have probably run a total of 250-300 Iveco's over the years, all on heavy work. The engines and drivelines are pretty much bullet proof, the rest of the chassis and running gear robust and the cabs are now far better built and equipped. Although we have had a couple of failures with Euro 6 SCR engines recently, but the problems were sorted quickly and fairly and we are well aware that other manufacturers have experienced similar problems."

Lee Finch says Iveco has steadily improved the designs over the years, and that is was one of the very first manufacturers to offer automated transmissions in both artics and eight-wheeler - years before most of the competition. "We had a 13-litre 440 Eurotrakker 8x4 in about 2000, it had the first generation 16-speed semi-automated gearbox. It was a big tough machine, purchased in Ireland because we needed a truck quickly. It did very well, with no transmission problems whatsoever, back then we were changing clutches almost every week with a fleet of manual gearboxes - the boxes themselves were failing regularly unless the drivers really took care."

From that point onwards the company could see that automated gearboxes were the way ahead. "The early versions needed a bit more driver input, but the electronic software has improved no end," says Finch. "The latest versions are very good, they will do anything and everything a manual gearbox will do, but with far less wear and tear.

Now clutch and gearbox failures are a thing of the past. I think we have had about three clutches actually fail in the last two decades with automated transmissions, we could easily replace that many in a week when we ran a fleet of manual transmissions. To begin with there was a bit of driver resistance and it took a while to persuade some of the older guys, but once they had got to grips with the automated gearboxes and found out that they were far less tired at the end of a long week, they were converts."

Unlike with the tractor unit range, Iveco only offered a limited number of engine options in the UK tipper line-up for a number of years, initially it was just the original Cursor 8 or the bigger 13-litre version. The smaller engine was a willing power unit, but a bit limited power and torque wise, while the 13-litre added extra weight, they lacked a mainstream option. Now it offers the 9-litre, which replaced the 8-litre, the mid-range Cursor 11 and the 13 for really heavy applications. This better reflects the needs of the tipper market and the 11-litre has proven to be a popular choice with power outputs of 420, 460 and 480hp. The revised 9-litre now offers up to 400hp and 1,700Nm. It's a good choice if operators are looking to minimise unladen weight, but the 420 11-litre is that bit more comfortable at 32 tonnes with 2,000Nm developed between 870-1,475rpm.

G&B Finch is a big user of the Cursor 9 engine, but has made the move to the 11-litre for its latest batch of eight wheelers. It has also specified rear air suspension on a number of these trucks. This is an unusual choice for high-mobility 8x4 chassis

specified for on-off road use, but they haven't given any problems in service and offer a number of operational benefits. Technically, the air suspended rear bogie is far more road friendly than a two-spring steel suspension set-up and there is a good case for a potential increase in rear bogie and overall gross weight for an air-suspended 8x4, but that will depend entirely upon the authorities.

"We have progressed from the original Eurotrakker, to the Trakker and now the current Stralis X-Way rigid chassis," says Lee Finch. "They have been able to progressively reduce the weight without compromising strength and durability. Our latest X-Way 8x4 tippers carry 19.6 tonnes with ABBA Predator bodies, which is very good for the high level of specification we have. We moved to ABBA after experiencing long lead times with Thompsons, they both produce an equally good product, but ABBA offer shorter lead times and have not let us down in any respect.

"The 9-litre engines do a good job and we have no complaints, but we decided to go for the 11-litre 420," continues Finch. "It's more on top of the job, which is important because the tippers tend to be loaded for a very high proportion of the time. They return between 7.5-8mpg, which is better than the 9-litre 360 and is pretty good considering that the trucks are mostly on either rural roads or having to deal with heavy congestion on a regular basis.

We have retrofitted a partial LPG conversion system to some of the Iveco rigid, it blends up to 20 per cent gas into the intake manifold, reducing both emissions and lowering diesel consumption. This helps to reduce cost, but doesn't require any major engine modifications or cause reliability issues.

"We would be interested to try a fully gas-powered 8x4 tipper, Iveco offer both CNG and LNG engines on tractors and some other rigid, it would be interesting to see a tipper chassis specified with these power units. In theory it would work well on our type of operation, because the trucks return to base every night. We are open to all aspects of change. We now use a paperless PDA-based system for all deliveries. With hundreds of movements every day, it was becoming almost impossible to keep track of everything, now we have a record of every load as soon as it goes onto the truck and when it is delivered.

"Rear air suspension seems to work well, there are no issues with ground clearance or traction," says Finch. "It seems to be kinder on the rear tyres and the drivers like the smoother ride, especially when empty. It also has the added benefit of reducing noise, which is an important environmental issue – we have to work with both our neighbours and the public in general – empty steel suspended tippers can make quite a bit of noise on rougher roads, also air suspension is better for the roads themselves."





Artics play an important role in the operation, both pulling tipping trailers shifting material in bulk and with low-loader and step-frame trailers moving Finch's extensive construction equipment fleet and other operators' equipment. While the tractor units pulling tipping trailers are relatively conventional, the latest heavy 6x4 tractor unit to go into service is unique, but still from the Iveco range.

The bonneted Strator is powered by the 570hp version of the Cursor 13 engine and plated for operation at up to 150 tonnes gross. The long-nosed tractor is actually converted from a standard Stralis tractor by CFG, an Iveco dealer and specialist converter based in The Netherlands. If readers want to know more about this special vehicle and the background story, we have a feature devoted to it in the current issue of our sister publication *HeavyTorque*. It's one of four vehicles carrying a special livery to celebrate Finch's 50th anniversary.

"2019 marked 50 years since we started operations," says Lee Finch. "We decided to order a tipper, a mixer, a grab and the bonneted tractor to celebrate. They all have a special livery that really stands out and the tractor unit has airbrushed murals of vehicles and plant that we have operated over five decades. Inevitably the Strator tractor took far longer to arrive and didn't go into service until later in 2020, but it was worth the wait and really turns heads."

G&B Finch also runs four artic tippers which are used to deliver material from its recycling and quarry sites and returning with sand and other materials for the concrete plant and general

stock. "We use Stralis 6x2 tractors with the lightweight pusher axles and the 11-litre 460 engine," continues Finch. "We specify the lightweight pusher axles, they pull aluminium half pipe tipping trailers from Kelberg and Fruehauf. We aim to get as close to 30 tonnes payload as possible, so we can shift big volumes of material in the most cost-effective way. Both makes of trailer do a good job, but we have gone back to Kelberg for the latest one – they are a bit more robust. We've had tailboard problems with Fruehauf. While we purchase all of our rigid, trailers and other equipment, we lease our tractor units because we find that the used market is often saturated with 6x2 tractors, which lowers the residual values. We go for the standard-height AT sleeper cab, it's a bit lighter and narrower, which is ideal in country lanes. These outfits work hard and the Stralis is well up to the job. We will replace them with the new S-Way models in due course, hopefully the narrow cab versions will be available in the UK soon – we intend to change two this year and the others next year. The new model looks really good and we look forward to seeing them in our fleet."

While G&B Finch sticks with what it knows, it's equally keen to try new ways of working and has taken up a tyre management contract with Michelin. It now supplies and looks after all of the tyres in the fleet, including the loading shovels and other rubber tyred kit. "Their tyres are more expensive, but last far longer. They do regular checks, monitoring everything, including training our own staff. It's reduced our overall tyre costs considerably and the level of failures are far lower. In the long-term, their tyres are definitely more cost effective and we experience higher levels of fleet utilisation," concludes Finch.