

# THE BONNET *enthusiasts*

OVER THE YEARS, LENGTH AND OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS HAVE CONSIGNED BONNETED TRUCKS TO THE PAST IN MOST AREAS APART FROM NORTH AMERICA. HOWEVER, THERE ARE STILL SOME ENTHUSIASTS WHO ARE PREPARED TO PAY FOR WHAT THEY REALLY WANT. **BOB BEECH** EXPLAINS HOW SPECIALIST CONVERTERS ARE ADAPTING EXISTING FORWARD CONTROL VEHICLES TO MEET THEIR CUSTOMER'S REQUIREMENTS.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **MARK BALLANTYNE**

At one time bonneted tractor units were a regular feature of heavy haulage operations. British manufacturers such as Scammell built normal control designs covering the entire weight range, from a 25-tons Highwayman to a 240-tons Contractor. They created a huge impression upon all who saw them, but gradually the more compact forward control designs won out for all but the most specialist of heavyweight applications. Bonneted trucks still dominate the North American market and are popular for road-train

and heavy haulage operations in Australia, but in most other markets they are consigned to history as far as new trucks sales are concerned. Overall length regulations and other operational requirements have worked in favour of the forward control layout. Scania was the last European manufacturer to offer the normal control layout, but a collapse in demand in the South American markets meant that it was no longer viable to produce them and production of the T cab ended in 2005.



But there is still an interest in trucks with a bonnet, the numbers sold might be very small, but there are enough individuals and enthusiasts to make it worthwhile for some specialist converters to adapt existing forward control vehicles to meet customer requirements. It's not a cheap process, but people are prepared to pay for what they really want. As a result, specialist conversion companies will build either a new bonneted Scania or convert an existing forward-control model to meet an operator's exact need. This process obviously takes time and plenty of money. The purchaser also has to pay for the donor truck as well – as a result many of these vehicles are among the most expensive general haulage vehicles in Europe.

This conversion process is not just limited to Scania; it's been possible to buy a range of Iveco-based bonneted trucks since 2007. Based upon the Stralis range of tractors and rigids, a small number have made it to the UK, but they are quite rare.

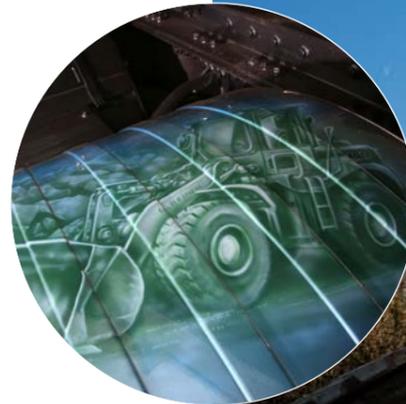
Essex-based G&B Finch, a long established operator specialising in material supply, recycling, ready mix concrete, earthmoving and other allied sectors, has recently put a heavy bonneted 6x4 tractor into its all-Iveco fleet. Readers wishing to learn more about its diverse operation and extensive experience of operating Iveco rigid tippers and mixers, along with conventional tractor units, can get the full story in our sister title Bulk & Tipper.

The conversions are carried out by a Dutch company CFG (Charles Feijts Groep), which is an Iveco dealer, specialist engineer and chassis converter. It came up with the concept of a bonneted Iveco heavy truck range and has produced

what has been christened the Strator range, under licence from Iveco. It's offered for sale in a number of European markets, but the inspiration for the concept came from the other side of the world, with Iveco's Australian operation.

Iveco has been active in Australia for a number of years and took control of the International Truck operation back in 1992. International in that part of the world was independent of the American operation and had developed a range of trucks, both forward-control and bonneted, to meet the diverse needs of Australian market. A key part of the operation is the long-established assembly plant at Dandenong, Victoria. In time the truck range began to incorporate more Iveco components, but care was taken not to ostracise longstanding customers and a choice of both European and American-based drivelines were offered. One of the first new models to emerge, was a range of bonneted trucks that incorporated most of the familiar International features mated together with the Iveco cab.

The new range was christened the PowerStar. The European cab offered plenty of interior space, decent comfort, but could be specified with either Iveco Cursor engines, ZF automated gearboxes, or Cummins engines and Eaton manual transmissions. It was competitively priced, well-built and developed a reasonable following. There was never any intention to market the PowerStar in Europe, but one did make it to Ireland. A 2009 6x4 550 built for road-train operation, it was imported by a big Iveco dealer and went on to spend time in the UK fleet of Scott's Heavy Haulage, from Alfreton and is now back in Ireland, as part of the classic collection of Iveco dealer Long Haul Commercials, Tullamore, Co Offaly.



Meanwhile, after a customer enquiry for a PowerStar, CFG in Holland could see that there was the potential demand for a bonneted Iveco conversion based loosely on the PowerStar, but conforming to European regulations. Producing a Strator involves taking a standard forward-control Stralis, removing the cab and most of the other fittings from the front of the chassis. New cab mountings are fabricated and mounted further back on the chassis. It requires a longer wheelbase than normal and a change of front springs, especially with a tractor unit, roughly 1.8m more chassis to allow for the bonnet. The front panel of the cab is modified to create an effective fire wall, otherwise the structure is pretty much unaltered. New mountings are made for the radiator/intercooler at the front of the chassis. The steering box is repositioned at an angle and the column extended. All other cables, pipes and linkages are modified accordingly, but the main CANbus loom does not require modification. Ideally the conversion works best with the automated transmission as there is no mechanical gear linkage, but we understand that CFG has built some with manual transmission.

The cab is then mounted onto the chassis in its new location, with the bonnet which is modelled on the design fitted to the PowerStar, along with new step panels, bumpers and other bespoke items. There are three cab options, the Active Day and Active Time sleeper version of the narrower Stralis cab



and the full-width Active Space with either the high roof or standard height roof as fitted to Finch's 6x4 tractor. The Strator concept can be applied to a large number of chassis and axle layouts, with both tractor and rigids models available, with 4x2, 6x2 twin steer and tag axle layouts, along with 8x2 and 8x4 versions. We feel that the 4x2 and 6x4 tractors probably look the most balanced layouts, although there is one 8x4 version in the UK. Also based in Essex, it carries a volumetric concrete mixer body. It's based upon a Trakker tipper chassis and has the day cab option. We did get to drive it a couple of years ago, along with a 4x2 Strator tractor unit, the latter was a LHD demonstrator. Both drove very well, with a smooth ride, unsurprisingly the experience was similar to driving a standard forward control Iveco, the conversions had been carried out to a very high standard. It felt as if they were normal factory built vehicles, but you just had to make allowance for the bonnet sticking out beyond the windscreen, although the relatively long-wheelbase of the 8x4 required the driver's full attention when making tight turns.

Lee Finch, G&B Finch's company director and third generation family member, explains the reasons for purchasing the very high specification heavy tractor: "We celebrated our 50th anniversary in 2019 and wanted to do some out of the ordinary, so we decided to have a total of four anniversary

trucks, three eight-wheelers comprising of a tipper, a mixer, a grab truck and a heavy tractor unit. We wanted them to really stand out, with special liveries and other extras. The three Stralis X-Way rigids arrived on time, but the tractor unit took a lot longer to arrive, it was to be expected really, because we were determined to get the specification absolutely right. Plus, it took quite a long time to get it converted to a bonneted layout and then do all of the other specialist work to get it ready for the road – we are delighted with the finished article. It's a great advert for the company and really turns heads, especially with the airbrushed murals of the trucks and equipment we have used over the years.

"It also has a huge element of our history as a family in the livery," continues Finch. "It represents years of very hard work through the generations. The business was started by my grandparents Gerald and Barbara Finch, they were pig farmers, but decided to move away from that business because of health problems. They bought a crawler tractor and plough, starting out as agricultural contractors, this led to more machinery and a move to JCBs working for the local authorities. In time they bought tippers and skip loaders, along with more plant and equipment. My father Steve came into the business and it led to a move into recycling and material supply, along with other associated services."

This formed the basis for the company's modern day operation. It now operates 38 trucks, all Iveco, plus a wide range of plant and equipment based at a number of locations. "We've operated our own low-loaders virtually right from the start, although we had nothing like the new Strator and power-steered Nootboom low beds we have now!"

G&B Finch moved to Iveco almost three decades ago. It ran Fords for many years, starting with the D series, then Cargoes and Iveco as it went for heavier vehicles, that included tractor units to pull its step-frame and low-loader trailers. "The engines and drivelines have always been very robust," says Finch. "We have probably operated at total of between 250 to 300 Ivecos over the years and I can count the engine failures we have experienced on one hand. I am well aware of the image problem associated with the brand and the cab interiors weren't the best quality in the past, but Iveco have worked hard to improve the product no end. We are well aware of all of the other manufacturers and what they offer, we do consider the alternatives, but speaking to other operators and hearing their experiences, we see no reason to change."

"Apart from the reliable service we get from the Iveco products, one of the main reasons we stick with the brand is because of the relationship that we have with Andrew Smith of Northern Commercials. He has done a superb job over the years, also both the dealers and manufacturer have looked after us really well, you get problems with any make, but it's what they do to put things right that really matters."

Iveco has offered 6x4 tractors for many years, a few have entered service in the UK, but they tend to be quite rare. Many will be surprised to hear that the manufacturer and its associated specialist partners, have offered for some time, a wide range of very heavy-duty tractors and rigids capable of operating at weights of up to 250-300 tonnes (See Astra/SIVI section).





“The decision to go for a 6x4 Strator was as a result of this relationship with Andrew,” continues Finch. “We already had an 80-tonne 6x4 Stralis 500 tractor on the road. It has performed really well, we wanted a bit more weight capacity, particularly when operating with our three and four-axle power-steered low-beds. We do quite a bit of work into London and a bit more axle weight capacity on the tractor would give us piece of mind. The gross weight didn’t really need to increase a great deal, but the best way to achieve what we needed, was to look at a tractor capable of 150-tonne operation.”

The fact that G&B Finch could have a factory-built 150-tonne 6x4, then have it converted to bonneted form and still retain factory approval and warranty was the deciding factor. “It was going to be relatively expensive, but we would get exactly what we wanted from the people that supplied all of our other trucks,” says Finch. The donor truck is a Stralis X-Way 6x4 with steel suspension front and rear, hub reduction drive axle, Cursor 13 570hp engine, 16-speed automated gearbox with heavy haulage software, engine brake/retarder.

“We decided to have the standard height sleeper cab with an air deflector, the high roof option would be a bit too high, we do a lot of work on country roads and into London, so we wanted a truck that was easy to drive in challenging environments. We



have used automated transmissions in all of our Ivecos for a long time, they protect the driveline and we get very little clutch or transmission issues. Our existing Stralis 6x4 tractor gave us seven years trouble free operation.”

As the Strator was part of G&B Finch’s anniversary celebration, it went to town with the specification with alloy wheels, side skirts, full catwalk and a lot of other equipment. “We couldn’t be happier with the finished truck, it does everything we want and far more,” says Finch. “Although it’s longer than a conventional Stralis, it’s very manoeuvrable. It’s very stable, even with a lot of weight behind it. The driver is over the moon with it. He says the comfort is first rate, the camera system superb, also the 570 engine and 16-speed transmission are very well matched. We won’t run it at more than about 85-90 tonnes with our current trailers, but it’s capable of far more. I suppose the ultimate would be to have a bigger engine, something of about 750hp, although this is more than enough for our needs.

“Probably, the most remarkable thing is the reaction from the public, especially in London. Normally when you take a truck into the capital everyone is against you, but the Strator generates smiles and approval from virtually everyone – they don’t seem to mind being held up by it at all!” concludes Finch.



# ASTRA AND SIVI

Fiat and Magirus Deutz, two of the original companies that merged together to form Iveco in 1975, built their own ranges of heavy-duty models and had a strong following in their respective home markets of Italy and Germany, plus a strong showing in many export markets. Apart from the needs of heavy hauliers, the Italian market has also had



IVECO HAS WORKED CLOSELY WITH BOTH OF THESE SPECIALISTS TO DEVELOP AND BUILD HEAVY-DUTY VEHICLES FOR HEAVY HAULAGE AND OTHER TOUGH APPLICATIONS FOR MANY YEARS, BOTH ARE NOW COMBINED AND PART OF IVECO, BUT WERE ORIGINALLY INDEPENDENT COMPANIES.

strong demands for heavy tractor units and rigids capable of operating at 100 tonnes gross or more on a daily basis. In certain regions hauliers serving the steel industry and some specialist quarrying operations, are able to operate at very high gross weights on designated routes.

Taking SIVI (Societa Italiano Veicoli Industriali) first, it was formed in 1982 as a specialist converter of Iveco trucks. It strengthened chassis, added axles, fitted torque converters with cooling packs, trailer hydraulics, extra trailer braking and electrics. Additional drive axles to create 6x6, 8x6 and 8x8 configurations were common, with transfer boxes and reduction gearing to further increase torque and pulling power. Many of the earlier versions were powered by the 17.3-litre Iveco V8, that started out at 330hp in non-turbo form and went right up to 520hp or more in later versions.

The SIVI/Ivecos figure highly in many Italian heavy haulage fleets and they were exported to other markets. In time the Cursor engine range took over. Gross weights can be as high as 275 tonnes, or far more when working in tandem, with heavy-duty drawbar couplings of 500-tonne capacity. SIVI became part of Astra and ultimately Iveco in 2004, the name lived on until 2011, but many of these old workhorses are still out there in service and are very highly prized by their owners.

Astra was originally a dump truck manufacturer, taking standard Fiat trucks and upgrading them for heavy-duty quarry work. This led to the development of a range of both rigid and articulated dump trucks, which continues to this day. Its close association with Iveco saw it use the engines

and other components for many years. The company became part of Iveco and in time, developed a range of on-off road heavy rigids for really tough applications at high gross weights.

In effect Astra became the specialist heavy division of Iveco, when SIVI became part of Astra, its heavy haulage technology was incorporated in a combined range, which is marketed all over the world and has a strong following in Africa, the Middle East and other demanding markets. Its four axle rigids, with all-wheel drive if required, are aimed at the oil, gas, quarrying and mining sectors and offers first rate mobility at high gross weights. The modern-day heavy haulage tractors are in three or four-axle form, with various driveline options. The HD9 range is for on-off road use, but conforms to most European traffic regulations. Available as a rigid or tractor, with Iveco Cursor engines, a choice of transmissions, reinforced axles and chassis.

The ultra-heavy duty HHD9 is a real beast of a machine, with a wheel track in excess of 3m dependent upon tyre choice, a double chassis with a combined thickness of 16mm, special reinforced hub-reduction drive axles front and rear. The 40-tonne rear bogie has a special cast frame to absorb both the imposed load and other forces. Gross train weights of 300 tonnes or more are permissible with torque converter transmissions, all-wheel drive and reduction gearing. Other features such as high flotation sand tyres make them popular for desert use and a number of the world's leading heavy transport companies use this model in some of the most testing conditions, which speak volumes for their capabilities.