



THE GENERATION GAME

NOW APPROACHING 70 YEARS IN BUSINESS, O'NEILL HEAVY HAULAGE IS ONE OF THE LONGEST-RUNNING HEAVY HAULAGE OPERATORS IN IRELAND. BASED IN THE SMALL TOWN OF HOSPITAL, CO. LIMERICK, **DECLAN MCGINN** TALKS TO MANAGING DIRECTOR, JIMMY O'NEILL, ABOUT THE COMPANY'S DEVELOPMENT OVER THE PAST SEVEN DECADES.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **PAUL DORRELL**

Established in 1947 by his father, initially in livestock haulage, it was not until O'Neill himself got involved in the business in the late sixties that the company moved into heavy haulage. "It started off for us as a hobby really", recalls O'Neill. "In the beginning we had one or two guys ask us to move some awkward loads and over time we got more and more inquiries for jobs, so we started to pick up more specialised equipment to cater for them and it developed from there. We are still using the original bank account started in 1947, even outlasting the bank branch which has been closed for nearly five years now". What started off as a hobby is now the frontline service for O'Neill's, with a wide range of customers

in various sectors, from vessel manufacturers to wind turbine contracts and lots in between.

Currently, O'Neill Heavy Haulage is involved in the movement of 65 turbines to sites all over Ireland in a two-year contract with others still at tendering stage. Other work includes the installation of underground concrete cable connector boxes, and vessel deliveries for local tank manufacturers to sites throughout Ireland and the UK. The increase in craft brewery and distillery start-ups have boosted an already thriving business for tank manufacturers and offers constant work to compliment the wind energy contracts.

In conjunction with the delivery of turbines to site, O'Neill's provide services to a concrete manufacturer to deliver and install concrete cable-connector boxes to windfarms all over Ireland. Each connector box is made up of several sections, some weighing up to 10 tonnes, to be positioned below ground level at a radius of 12 metres. These provide weather-proofing for the joining of power-grid cabling. With the average wind farm requiring between 20 and 30 boxes, the teams are kept busy between turbine moves. The access to the installation bays is difficult at best, therefore setting up a crane with full riggers is nearly impossible at times.

The concrete installations require the use of a five-axle MAN which O'Neill purchased specifically for the job. Plated at 150 tonnes it has a truck-mounted crane capable of lifting 25 tonnes at up to 4m. O'Neill had a purpose-built demountable flat body made for the truck which is secured by the fifth wheel and twist locks. The fleet consists of three 6x4 Volvo FH 500s which were purchased in Belgium. "Buying them in Belgium offers far better value" says O'Neill who is always on the lookout for a good deal. Added to this are two 8x4 Scania units: a 143 500bhp on a '96 plate and a '03 plated 164. The 143 recently underwent a full engine rebuild from Scania and is



still going strong. A DAF XF 4x2 makes up the fleet of tractor units. "The Scania V8 engine is bullet-proof so they are always good to have for really heavy loads, but the Volvo is a great truck too. We recently replaced one on a '02 plate which had covered 1.7 million kilometres with one driver on the original clutch. That's some achievement considering the punishment they can receive off road".

The fleet includes over 35 trailers which are a mixture of five- and six-axle step-frames, vessel carriers, low-loaders, double and triple extenders and blade carriers capable of carrying blades up to 52 metres long from various manufacturers such as Nootboom, Faymonville and Goldhofer. To aid moving loads on steep gradients on sites, two ex-Ministry of Defence 6x6 vehicles running 250bhp Rolls Royce engines with transfer gearboxes are used. "The low-down torque that is developed by these trucks has to be seen to be believed", says O'Neill, as he described an instance where one assisted with a 90 tonne pull on a 23° gradient. "It was so good on the climb, I could have nearly left the Scania in neutral", he says. Two dual-purpose escort vehicles are also fully kitted out to give immediate response to breakdowns and reduce down-time.



TEAM WORK

O'Neill's have a dedicated staff of drivers, divided into two teams which work on individual projects. Each has three tractor units, with up to 10 trailers, an escort vehicle and additional on-site equipment such as the towing equipment and/or cranes. Most of the drivers have been working with O'Neill for over 10 years and are well versed in the requirements for the job at hand. "When you get a good man, you have to do what you can to keep him", said O'Neill. I have a good team of lads, that know what to do and can handle any issue that may arise and deal with it efficiently". As a testament to this, O'Neill says he has not had an after-hours phone call from staff in over 10 years. Each team has a manager equipped with tablet to relay all details of loading times and unloading times and any delays in either process back to O'Neill at headquarters. He still does the invoicing to customers himself.

Some notable loads carried over the years, include the relocation of the sugar factory in Co. Carlow to a sister plant in Mallow, Co. Cork, which at over 1,000 tonnes still holds the record for the largest move in Ireland. O'Neill delivered the Spire to O'Connell Street in Dublin's city centre. Comprising



of nine sections, it stands 120 metres tall and was transformed into a giant light-sabre for the premiere of the most recent Star Wars movie. O'Neill was also involved in the delivery of the Munster Rugby sculpture to Shannon Airport. The bronze piece, which is an iconic representation of Paul O'Connell being hoisted in to the air to receive a lineout throw-in, had to be extended 25 metres across the main concourse area into its final position through a large window.

Sadly, O'Neill's brother Larry/Lar or 'Hardy', as he was more commonly known, passed away last year. It was a double loss for O'Neill, as not only did he lose his brother but he lost his chief of maintenance as well. Lar was responsible for the maintenance and repair of all the equipment which is all done in-house. In memory of Lar, the most recent vehicles purchased, the three Volvos, have been named as 'Hardy 1', 'Hardy 2' and 'Hardy 3'. O'Neill recently purchased the old creamery site in the town and has converted it into a modern workshop for all vehicle servicing and maintenance. The responsibility for maintenance has been taken on by O'Neill's son Michael, ensuring a third generation takes up involvement in the family business.



BREXIT SHADOW

So what does the future hold for O'Neill's? "Well", says O'Neill, "the current contract for 65 turbines will take us up to the end of 2017. We should get one or two more to bring us up to 2020. We will still have the connector boxes and the vessels to be delivered for our other customers and whatever one-off jobs that may crop up in between. We have moved one or two wave energy generators which are almost five metres wide and may be a new avenue for us, but realistically they will be in-frequent as most will travel by sea. The biggest issue we have at the moment, is the uncertainty created by the Brexit vote in the UK. It is difficult to predict anything in the future until we know what effect Brexit will have on things such as transport into and out of the UK and Ireland. Will borders re-appear? If they do will it cause delays and added administration? Until we get more definitive movement from the UK government it will cast a shadow over possible investment and any other



economic activity. We just don't know. We just have to work with what we have and see what develops".

O'Neill Haulage has demonstrated over the years that it can handle any task. The rigorous planning that goes into every job, ensures that every eventuality is assessed, scheduled and executed with precision, keeping safety paramount. Method statements, safety statements, equipment conformity certificates and permits are all arranged by contracted suppliers to ensure full compliance with all customer and legal requirements. Delegation and out-sourcing of some of this work is a necessity for O'Neill, as running one of the longest-serving heavy haulage operations in the country is not his only concern. He also owns one of the town's local pubs, an off-licence, a hardware store and fuel depot, so O'Neill's time is precious and to say he is kept busy is an under-statement. A keen golfer too, time needs to be set aside to get a round or two of golf in every once in a while.

