

Circular inset (centre):  
Olly Neil, managing director



# Fully focussed on a **SUSTAINABLE** **FUTURE**

OJ NEIL CONTRACTING'S ROOTS MAY REMAIN FIRMLY IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR BUT A HUGE DEAL WITH THAMES WATER HAS SEEN THE BUSINESS EVOLVE AND EXPAND IN RECENT YEARS. **HARRISON THOMAS** CAUGHT UP WITH OWNER **OLLY NEIL** TO HEAR HOW HIS COMPANY IS NOW TURNING WASTE INTO WEALTH.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **CRAIG ECCLESTON**

Being able to adapt and diversify is a vital part of growing a successful business – it's certainly a strategy that has served OJ Neil Contracting well over the past two decades. Established in 2002 by owner and founder Olly Neil – the company began life as an agricultural contractor, specialising in spreading services for local farmers in and around Bury

St Edmunds. "It was just me and a second-hand tractor at the very beginning," recalls Neil, who now employs up to 50 members of staff at the business's busiest times of the year. "My first job was driving an excavator in a landfill site and I saved a bit of money, borrowed some more from the bank and it all started from there."



Since those humble beginnings, the company has evolved into a wide-ranging operation, dipping its toe into the road reclamation and equestrian industries along the way. “I’m always keen to look for new opportunities that maybe don’t already exist or aren’t being well exploited, shall we say, and I think that’s served us well over the years,” adds Neil.

The latest string to the OJ Neil bow, is the business’s biomass division – that is, quite literally, turning waste into wealth. A significant contract with Thames Water was secured in 2016, that sees the firm collect sludge and residue from all the company’s sewage treatment centres north of the River Thames, covering an area from Swindon in the west to the Dartford Crossing in the east. The materials are taken to farming land all over East Anglia where they are used as soil conditioner to help fertilise the ground. Leading on from this initial contract, a further opportunity was identified where, via an organics trading agreement, OJ Neil receives straw from the farms in exchange for the biosolids which is then delivered to two power stations – at EPR, in Ely, and Snetterton – to produce electricity.

“That was quite a pivotal change for us,” says Neil. “It is a 100 per cent sustainable process, which is something we are very passionate about, and has really taken off in the last few years. In total we are now delivering around 400,000 tonnes of biosolids to the land each year, it’s transformed the business really.”

To help with the additional work, OJ Neil has recently added two Volvo FH Unlimited Edition 6x2 tractor units to its fleet. The 500hp trucks will be used on the Thames Water contract, one to pull a Fruehauf 60 Yard bulk trailer to help get the biosolids to the farms, and the other will be doing low-loader work delivering the straw stacks to the power stations.

While the company doesn’t have vast experience in the haulage sector, Neil is a self-confessed machinery and engine fanatic – his father was a pilot in the Royal Air Force – and has taken great pride and care to ensure his company’s trucks are exactly how he wants them. They now have five in total, three Volvos, one Trackway lorry – used to lay down specialist road matting for access onto agricultural land – and an old Renault Magnum that Neil describes as ‘more of a hobby’.







Meet the drivers:  
Leigh Runnacles (top)  
Vitalijus Stasiunas (centre)  
Shaun Gordon (bottom)



Decked out in the company's deep blue livery the two new Volvos certainly look the part. "I was a typical boy, I suppose, trucks have always interested me but until recently we never had the need to use them in the business. However, when the biomass work started coming in, instead of outsourcing all our delivery and haulage, we decided to bring as much back in-house as we could and that's when we started building the fleet. It was better for our branding and made sense for the company to invest in our own equipment.

"All our trucks are tag axles because we realised very early on the mid-lifts just don't work for what we do. Pretty much every tip site we go to is off the tarmac road and we need better ground clearance over the access matting that we lay to get up into the fields. We've had problems in the past with a conventional hire truck where we ended up pulling number plates off the bumpers and all sorts of things like that. So, everything now has been tailored to what we need.

"We are delighted with how these two new ones have turned out. They look pretty special. We have had so many pictures, videos and emails from people who've seen them – it more than pays for itself, spending a bit of money for the additional signwriting and livery work. It's a very good advertising board for us."

The business has also been using Volvo's Dynafleet package with its two new FHs. "Jon Warby at Volvo Truck and Bus South & East told us about Dynafleet, that we access through the Volvo Connect app. It's a platform to try and tweak your drivers' behaviour. We utilise telematics across our excavators and spreaders, so it was only natural we tried to improve what we do with the trucks as well. And thanks to that Volvo Connect dashboard, we managed to get an extra one and a half miles per gallon out of one of the trucks just by looking at what the driver was doing. So, effectively, just with a week of using it and looking at the data, we've managed to save the business £7,000 pounds in diesel a year."



That eye for detail plays perfectly into OJ Neil's whole business model. "Whatever we do we want to make sure it's right," says Neil. "We don't want to be known as a company that just buys bog standard rubbish. If it's the excavators that we've got, if it's the trailers or the spreaders – we want them to be top of the range.

"If we find a market that we can get a good return on, I'm happy to invest the money. So, all the equipment looks good, my drivers are happy with them and it gives them a sense of pride in what they do. Retaining staff is a big, big issue these days. And I think part of the way that we can help them as a company is to offer them the best package – the best wages, the best trucks, the best machines, that they want to drive."

Taking care of his staff has been an integral factor for Neil as the business expanded and evolved over the years. The

equipment may be all singing, all dancing top of the range machinery these days, but he is in no doubt it is the people that have been key to the company's success over the past two decades. "It was bloody hard work in the early days. It grew quite quickly. I'd be visiting 20-30 farms during the summer and soon added more customers," he recalls.

However, the farming work was very seasonal and it wasn't until Neil managed to turn what could have been a business-ending disaster, into something of a masterstroke that things really took off. "I was quite fortunate in a roundabout way. In our second year, I think it was, I wrote that first tractor off in an accident. It almost finished us off initially, as it was a bad time of the year for us financially, but I invested the insurance money into a second-hand excavator and started doing groundwork in nearby Newmarket."







With the rich racing heritage in the area, the work was soon flooding in. The company has an ideal client base – including Sheikh Mohammed’s world-leading Godolphin stable – right on the doorstep and the groundwork side of the business is still going strong to this day, with the company helping to build some of the most innovative training facilities in the east of England.

“It all tied in perfectly to be honest,” admits Neil. “We had the farming and spreading work that took

us through to September and then from October through to late spring we would be doing the groundworks for the racing clients, who tended to take the horses back to the Middle East for the better climate during the winter. So, it dovetailed nicely and allowed me to start employing more staff, which has been so important to growing the business.”

The company now employs 22 permanent members of staff on the payroll, which rises to between 45-50 during the peak of its work on the Thames Water

contract – that is overseen by transport manager Tom Clarkson. “For the biosolids side of things with Thames Water, we have to follow the combine, so to speak. We get as much in during that harvest season as possible, so our geographical area is quite wide,” says Neil. “To give you an idea, out of 400,000 tonnes a year of biosolids on the contract, probably 330,000 tonnes is spread over a 12-week window hence the need to bring a lot more additional resources in staff wise. It’s a pretty hectic time of year for us, that’s for sure. Tom runs that for

me, and pretty much looks after the entire haulage fleet – he’s been a major part of our growth over the last few years.”

Working in a variety of sectors and not relying on one single revenue stream, has also allowed Neil to ‘de-risk’ the business. Something that has come in hugely valuable over the past 18 months. While the coronavirus has had a devastating financial impact on so many companies up and down the country, OJ Neil has been able to come through relatively unscathed.





“We were really, really lucky,” admits Neil. “We furloughed two members of staff for maybe three months when it first hit back last year. We had a big £2million groundwork job that got cancelled. I think we were just nine or 10 hours into it for one of the Arab racing clients and they pulled the plug, because they couldn’t guarantee they were going to be able to bring their horses back for the summer.

“So, yes, the groundwork side was affected but the utility and the agriculture side of things has really been busier than ever, to be perfectly honest. I think what it has shown us is that farming and utility work, certainly in the wastewater industry, need to go on whatever is happening in the world. As long as there are humans about there’s a need to treat water and there’s a need to grow crops.”

A lesson that Neil is determined to take forward as he plans the next few years for the business. “Having identified these new sectors – utilities and renewable energy – they are the two main markets we want to push into. It’s been a hugely positive experience and we

definitely want to do more with utility companies, to do more with companies looking to create electricity via crop residue,” he says. “It’s a really valuable and sustainable model that we can easily fulfil, and I think having been stress tested, so to speak, with COVID, we’d be fools not to stick to the plan.

“We’ve got no desire at all to become a general haulier. I think as our core contracts drive growth and the need for haulage grows with it, we will keep investing in trucks but only to suit our own internal requirements. We’ve recently been approached by a company to haul 100,000 cubic metres of liquid each year, so we could end up with liquid tankers, but again, that is part of our cycle of taking organic waste to land and then from that we can get straw to burn in the power stations. I think that is where we need to be heading towards – just to expand and improve on what we’re doing now in the biomass sector.”

A sustainable future for a successful, hard-working business. What’s not to like about that?

**Main image** (left to right): Olly Neil, managing director, Alison Burrows, office manager and Tom Clarkson, transport manager

