

COVERING ALL THE BASES

TRANSCOVER ISN'T A NAME MANY UK VEHICLE OPERATORS NECESSARILY ASSOCIATE WITH THE MANUFACTURE OF SIDE-TO-SIDE SHEETING SYSTEMS FOR TIPPERS, BUT THAT'S ALL ABOUT TO CHANGE, AS THIS LONGSTANDING PROVIDER OF FRONT-TO-REAR SYSTEMS BRINGS FRESH FOCUS TO BEAR ON THE SIDE-TO-SIDE SHEETING MARKET. **ROBIN MECZES** REPORTS.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **CRAIG ECCLESTON**

You could accuse Transcover of hiding its light under a bushel as far as its sheeting system manufacturing operation goes. Though the company has been making its own sheeting systems since 2008, it's well used to being perceived as merely a tarpaulin supplier or at best as an importer of US-manufactured sheeting systems. And even those that know it has long since moved away from its original approach of importing in favour of making its own front-to-rear sheeting systems may be surprised to hear that it also manufactures highly engineered side-to-side

systems, too. Based in Aylesford in Kent, Transcover was created by tipper operator Steve Hines just over 25 years ago. "Steve ran a fleet of 20 tippers as SW Hines and on a visit to Florida, he saw a cover system on a tipper that really caught his attention," explains Transcover sales manager Colin Bartram, who joined the operation himself 20 years ago from petrol forecourts supplier RS Sales. "He ended up importing it and putting the very first one on one of his own trucks, and then he went about selling the product."





The system that had caught Hines' eye was an automated front-to-rear sheeting system and the reason it caught his eye was that sheeting systems, and particularly automated sheeting systems, had not been seen operating in the UK at the time. "I don't think there were any automatic sheeting systems around for tippers back then," says Bartram. "People weren't even covering a lot of loads, and if they did cover them, it was just done manually with a tarpaulin."

Though effectively starting out as an agent for the US manufacturer, Hines was obliged to tweak the US systems to cater for the UK's different sizes of tipping bodies. And he also started to develop the system in other ways, for example adding relay boxes and beefier springs. "In the US, they have some fairly weak sheeting systems because the bodies are short and high and it's generally a much sunnier climate there" says Bartram. "So it was really a case of bringing the key parts over and then using them as a base, getting a local company to make the relay boxes, buying in local tarpaulins, and so on."



Interest in the new systems grew – so much so that within its first five years, Transcover formed an alliance with tipper body manufacturer Thompsons, setting up Thompsons Transcover Services in Swanley, Kent, and carrying out sheeting system installations in the yard of Mark Luck Haulage. That only lasted a few years until Thompsons took over Charlton Bodies, however, which was already importing its own sheeting systems from another US source. But its time in the partnership with Thompsons was pivotal for Transcover, says Bartram. "We parted company within a few years, but had Thompsons not given us a hand-up in the first place, we probably wouldn't be where we are today."

It was during its time with Thompsons that Transcover was approached by RMC and asked to develop an automated side-to-side sheeting system for its vehicles, he continues. "Up until then, it had all been front-to-rear systems and at the time, side-to-sides were all manual – we were the first company to make an automated version," he says.





"They wanted a cover that was fully waterproof and effectively automated their existing tarpaulins, so that drivers could operate the sheeting system from the safety of their cabs in quarries. But they didn't want to replace the tarpaulins that they'd spent hundreds of pounds apiece on, so we had to automate what they had, and we came up with a system of metal cables and wheels to go over the arches to do that."

Though that early system was successful and was destined to be developed much further, growing competition in the side-to-side tipper sheeting market at the time combined with the temptation of low-hanging fruit in other markets led Transcover to focus its efforts on developing new solutions for the waste and agricultural sectors for a number of years.

"While we were in Swanley with Thompsons with our own installers and engineering people, we started building relationships in the waste equipment sector, and to bring waste systems in from the US for skiploaders, hookloaders and muckaway trailers. We saw areas where we could do a much better job than the products that were being imported," explains Bartram. "So first, we started to grow the waste business. And then, we began developing some of our front-to-rear products for the agricultural business."

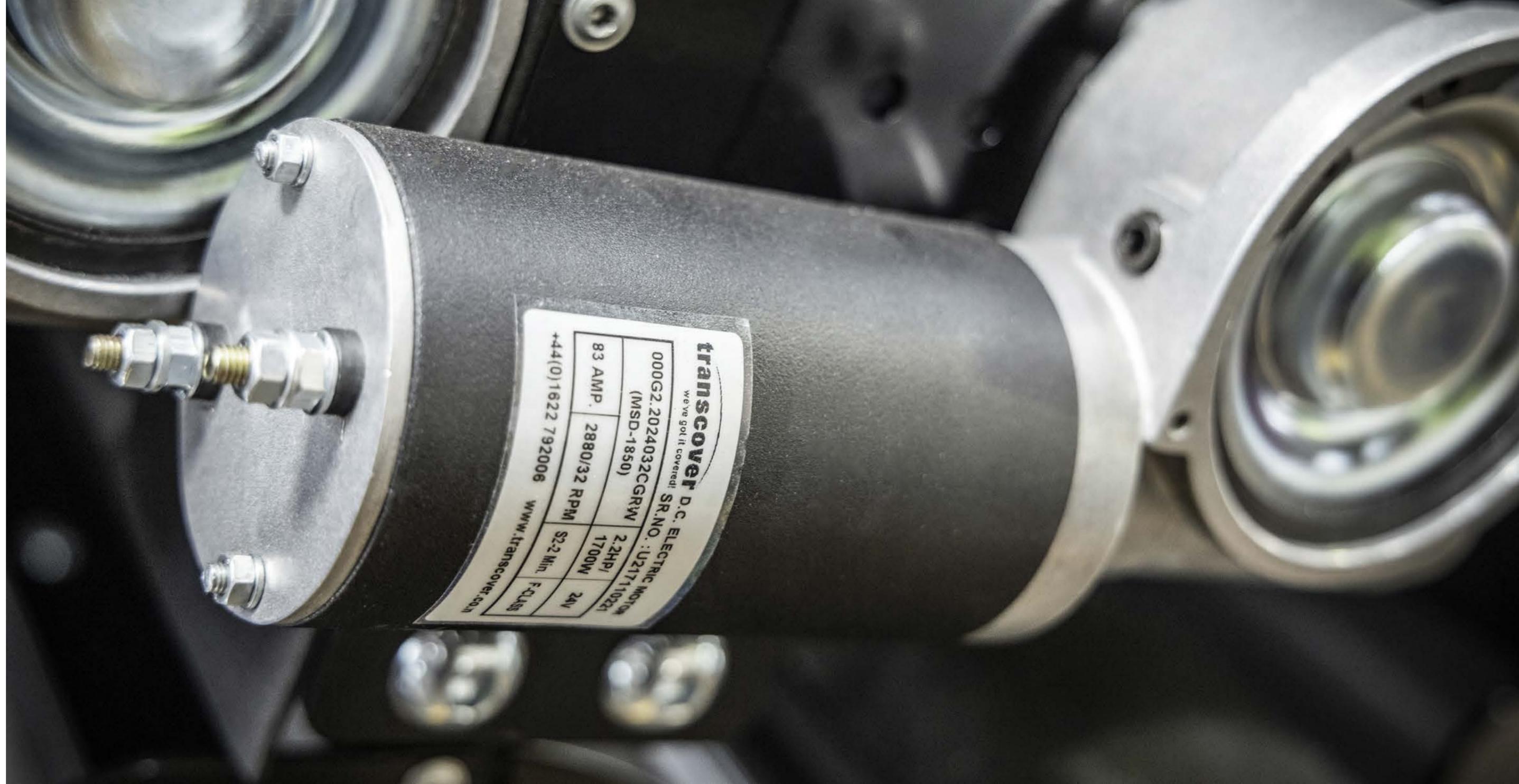
The company also began to expand into export markets, which these days' account for 60 per cent of its revenue, selling to both bodybuilders and end users in markets like Scandinavia, France, Belgium, Australia, the UAE and Singapore.

End users in such export markets, notes Bartram, are typically much more directly involved in specifying and buying sheeting systems than their UK counterparts, who are often happy to take whatever sheeting system their bodybuilder offers them. "We've seen instances with some of our export products where sheeting systems have actually been separated out as a completely distinct tender to the rest of the body," he states. "Many fleets in these markets will look as a business at their costs per vehicle outside the initial purchase, and find that sheeting systems, with the repairs and spare parts involved, can be a significant spend, and so they'll isolate that item away from the bodies. And the next thing you know, the end user is actually looking for the best quality product they can buy to keep those costs down - and that's where we are, because that's the way an engineering company looks at it, rather than an importer." Though exports have of course involved tailoring its products for the different vehicle width and height restrictions in each target market, there are to this day still plenty of vehicle operators abroad to whom the idea of covering a load is relatively new, he adds.

“The UK is very advanced over most of the world when it comes to covering systems,” he says. “It’s such a developed market that everyone has a sheeting system really, and it’s generally only new trucks left that need one. But in Europe, even today, a lot of operators don’t have any covers on vehicles like skiploaders or hooklifts or tippers, so there’s a huge market to go at there.”

This isn’t to say that Transcover has in any way abandoned the UK market, however. “Our UK business is still hugely important to us,” says Bartram. “And as we speak, the sands are shifting away from businesses that have merely been importing sheeting systems into the UK up to now, not just because of Brexit but also because of COVID-19, with the import issues we began to see before Christmas, and the ports getting busy, and goods being sent to Holland to come in by road, and the global container shortage.”

This is one of the reasons why the company now feels the time is right to turn its attention back to the UK side-to-side sheeting market.



“We’re just relaunching the side-to-side product in the UK,” confirms Bartram. “We believe the aggregate and asphalt sector is more ready for a properly-engineered product these days than it was, and we’ve become more of a global company now, too, which means we’ve been able to ramp our production up to a point where we can be more competitive, and offer customers a well-engineered product that is better than the ones they have at the moment, for no more than other systems on the market.”

Transcover’s SideCover system provides a waterproof covering that is extended and retracted across the load area by hydraulic arms in as little as 20 seconds and, like all of its systems, can be operated from within the cab or from ground level via remote control. It has no straps or catch points and can easily cope with heaped loads. “It’s similar to a system we designed a number of years ago for the agricultural market, but we’ve adapted it for tippers and to sit completely within width so it suits both the UK and European operators,” says Bartram.

"It's all about giving customers a choice: they've been working for a few years now with something that's OK, but do they really want straps that need to be changed, or something that's going to just pull through a heaped load, rather than lift up over the top?"

The SideCover joins a line-up of products for tipper trailers that includes the TipperCover (front-to-rear electric), GrabCover (front-to-rear electric for vehicles with grab cranes) and PullCover (manually operated low-weight front-to-rear) systems. For bulk trailers, meanwhile, the TransCover range includes the SideCover Trailer and DoubleCover (dual-sided) hydraulic systems as well as the manually operated DoubleCover Manual and the TrailerCover front-to-rear electric system.

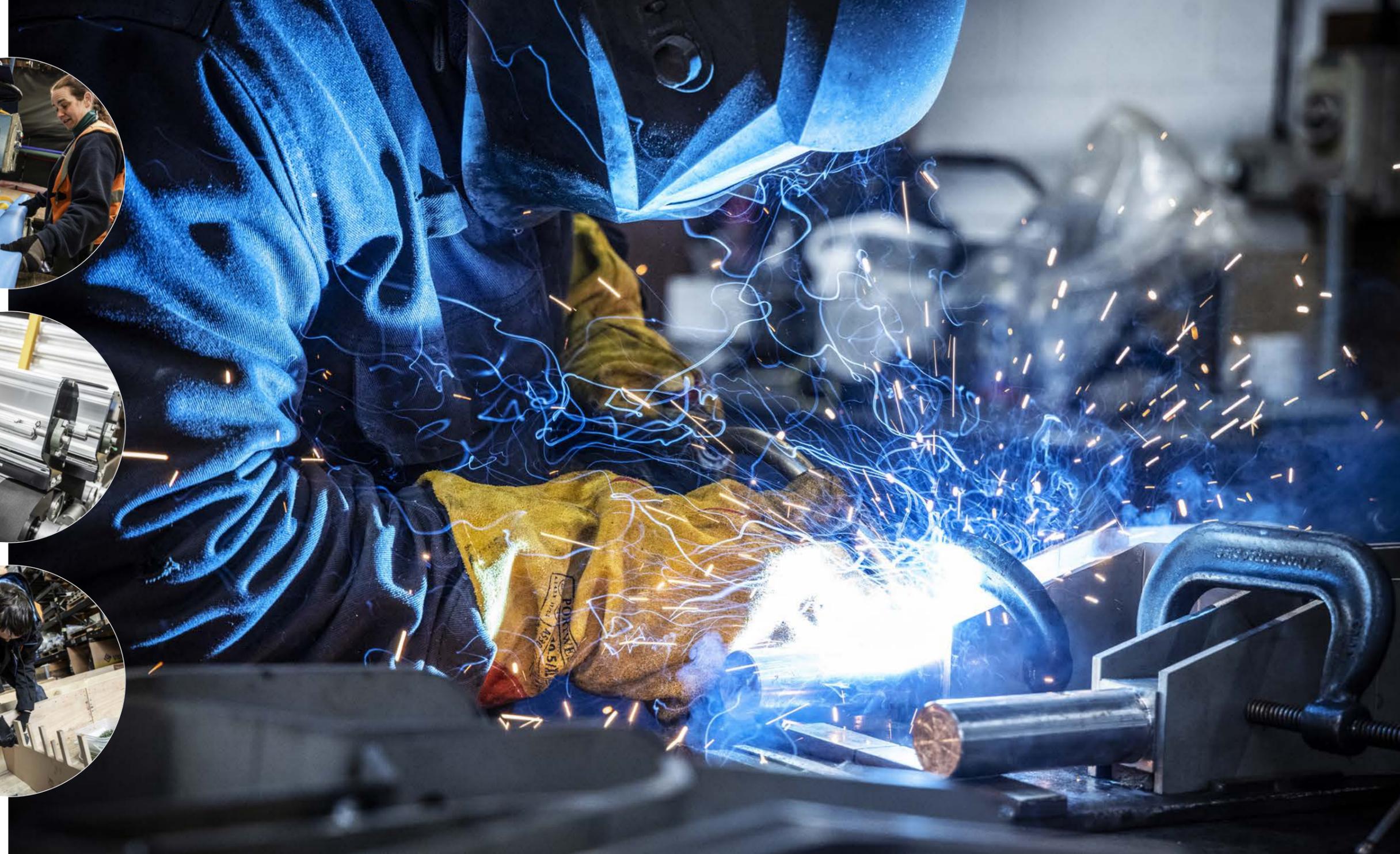
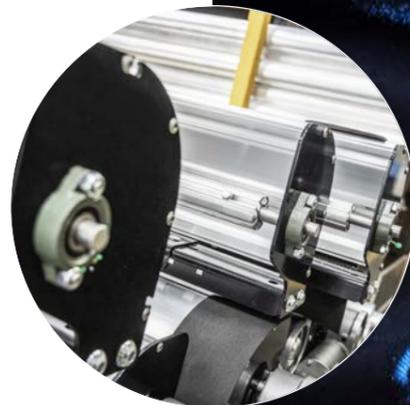
The manufacturer's most popular systems in these sectors are the basic front-to-rear electric-powered TipperCover and TrailerCover, says Bartram, which are available with steel or aluminium arms and can be fitted with pneumatic front raves to help lift clean over any tall loads like scrap.

The firm's DoubleCover system is also popular in the scrap sector, however, as the overlap of the two sides and its lack of any centre mechanism allow it to deal more effectively with projecting loads. "You often see other double-sided

systems with some kind of framework going all the way along the top, but once you've filled the trailer with scrap metal, you flex that whole framework and it all travels back to whatever manifold you've got and slowly destroys it," Bartram comments. "We originally started off with something similar but in the end we got rid of all the framework and just put the two cables in, because it allows the trailer to swell. And that also means that when you're loading the trailer, you can hit it with a loading shovel and at worst, all you've got is a damaged cable.

"It's all about giving customers something that is good quality and understanding their business," he continues. "You design it, you make it, you test it and you work it, and then you strip bits out of it - and in the end you find something that really works well."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Transcover's manually operated systems also remain popular. "I think that's led by the workshops really," muses Bartram. "Lots of fleets used to have their own workshops - but try finding one now that can accommodate a 5m-high 45ft long trailer on a Friday afternoon, because something's suddenly broken. So a lot of fleets are happier with a manual system - there's less to go wrong, and people can get their heads around it more easily if it does."





The firm's skiploader solutions, meanwhile, include static, electric fixed height and pneumatic tower sheeting systems; while its hookloader range incorporates rope-guided tower, fixed-width hydraulic and under-body hydraulic systems. There's also a range of manual sheeting systems for containers, which have been complemented recently with a new solar power system called the SolarSwitch that allows for powered sheeting on freestanding trailers or containers.

All of Transcover's sheeting systems are manufactured at its site in Aylesford and supplied as kits to be bolted onto a vehicle in just a few hours, whether by one of its 125 support agents around the UK (who also handle sales, servicing and spares) or by the end user's own fitter. While some items are bought in to Transcover's specification from third parties, like electric motors, springs and relays, it manufactures everything else in house, right down to its tarpaulins. "If we do a grab loader we'll use an off-the-shelf switch for that, but really, everything is manufactured here or made to our specification," says Bartram. "And we specify everything with the



user in mind. The springs and spring boxes we do, for example, come with a lifetime warranty – they are simply the best product you can possibly get.

"We need to make sure the product we are making is what our clients really want," he explains. "We're not in the business of trying to push an average product just so that bodybuilders can make a couple of hundred pounds extra per vehicle, because in our experience, that approach will inevitably be short-lived."

Maintenance of its sheeting systems is simple, he suggests: "It's literally just a case of greasing the bearings, and there are only two or three of those per kit." Prices, meanwhile, range from £850 up to £3,150 (ex-VAT) for the tipper range, with waste systems starting at £1,000 and rising to around £8,500 for the more complex remote-controlled solutions.

"If you're covering a tipper body, it's a finite size; but if you're pulling containers or skips onto your vehicle, you have to cover variations which means





*Main image (left to right):
Colin Bartram, sales manager
Paul Hines, managing director*



it has to be articulated,” explains Bartram of the higher cost of waste systems. “The minute it’s articulated it needs hydraulics, and the minute you have hydraulics, it needs to be something more robust that is really well built.”

Transcover has certainly come a long way in a quarter of a century. The firm has supplied over 30,000 of its own sheeting systems so far across its UK and export markets, and continues to manufacture around 2,000 of its own systems each year. On top of that, it also supplies unbranded systems under licence to a number of “familiar third-party names”, says Bartram – something it has done for years but has probably contributed to the brand’s low recognition rates in some sectors, he admits.

Though it currently manufactures all of its systems in Kent, it’s in the throes of setting up a second site in Kortrijk, Belgium, which will initially employ 10-12 staff to handle some assembly and store spare parts for EU markets including France, Belgium and Ireland, helping Transcover to avoid some of the red tape associated with the new post-Brexit trading environment. Bartram says the Kortrijk site should be up and running later this year.



The company, which now has a turnover of some £4m a year and employs about 40 staff, currently supplies around 64 per cent of its sheeting systems in all to the waste handling sector for vehicles like skiploaders, hookloaders and muckaway vehicles, while 29 per cent go onto tippers and seven per cent are for agricultural vehicles. At the moment, front-to-rear systems account for almost all of its tipper output, admits Bartram – but that is obviously going to change with the firm’s renewed push into side-to-side systems.

The biggest challenge the firm faces as it takes this challenge on, he believes, will be market perception. “It’s disappointing that people in this business don’t necessarily know the extent of what we do, or just think we’re a company they buy the occasional tarpaulin from,” he comments. “Even those in the business who do know us probably haven’t got too far away from the fact that we were once an importer, rather than a manufacturer. But we supply a good quality product at a good price – in fact the products we offer now are the best that are available and at the best prices. So the key message from us is that we are a significant and unique entity in the sheeting business in the UK – and a business that the UK should be embracing.”

Early ADOPTER

One early adopter that certainly is embracing Transcover's fresh push into the automated side-to-side sheeting system market in the UK is Dennison Trailers' specialist division Crick Trailer Sales, based in Rugby, which has just had its first SideCover system put onto a triaxle sliding bogie tipper it has supplied to Hanson's subcontractor Thwaite Plant Hire.

Crick Trailer Sales technical sales manager Scott Pagano says he specified the Transcover system both for its quality and for Transcover's willingness to train Dennison's engineers to fit the sheeting systems themselves, avoiding the need to send finished vehicles away for them.

"Transcover is educating our engineers up at the factory to get them fitting the sheeting systems so we can fit our own, where our current supplier insists on fitting their sheets themselves,

which is a logistics nightmare for us," says Pagano. "The Transcover system is fitted and working with the customer. It closes well, and it holds closed well, and it has a good strong arm system on it to roll the sheet over."

The cost of the Transcover solution is hardly any different to the previous sheeting solution and Transcover's support service has been excellent, both in terms of sales and mechanical support, he adds. Pagano says the company expects to be fitting all of its own side-to-side sheeting systems to trailers within the next six months as a result of the switch to Transcover, and that doing so will significantly speed up the supply of trailers to customers.

"It will be a smoother, more controlled process," he confirms. "It's probably going to cut around two weeks off the timing."

