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Operator's FM 430 4x2 rigid has three bespoke-built demountable bodies and a fourth demountable body combined with a drawbar trailer

MOVING GOALPOSTS

With 35 years' experience, James Removals is no stranger to modernising its fleet. But new legislation is causing its business needs to change – which has led to the purchase of a brand-new FM 430, the first Volvo to ever join its fleet. *Trucking* sat down with owner James De-Machen to find out what convinced him to make the switch...

By Harrison Thomas
PHOTOGRAPHY NIGEL SPREADBURY

Moving house or office is a notoriously stressful process that can be littered with unforeseen complications, costs and difficulties – even if planned meticulously. As a result, many companies have built hugely successful businesses by streamlining as much of the process as possible for buyers and renters.

Backhenth-based James Removals is one such company. The business emerged from humble beginnings, starting with a small facility in Bromley and just a single Transit Luton van to its name. Today, the family-run firm's modern fleet consists of 24 vehicles and operates from a 30,000 sq ft headquarters including a 10,000 sq ft warehouse for storage. It now provides removal services – as many as 10 a day, six days a week – not just in and around London, but also into Ireland and mainland Europe too.

That growth has also seen plenty of change behind the scenes. Owner James De-Machen still sits at the helm, but his background staff has grown tenfold to 40 full-time employees. The company has also recently expanded by renting an additional off-site storage facility in Sevenoaks, Kent – a move De-Machen says is already reaping rewards.

"The stamp duty holiday during the

pandemic was a massive catalyst for that growth," he tells *Trucking*. "We found so many people chose that moment to kickstart their move, and the momentum is yet to stop. Even a year later the phone is still ringing off the hook."

Switching allegiance

Meeting such high demand is no easy task. To place his business in the best possible position, De-Machen is constantly planning years down the line. This philosophy can be seen in part by his decision to switch away from a rival marque to Volvo – a choice he says had been on the cards for several years.

"I've always had my eye on a Volvo, largely due to the strong feedback we hear from operators around us. But as we try to run our trucks as long as possible – the model it replaced ran for 13 years – we've not been in a position to justify a switch before now," said



ABOVE: Company has a 30,000 sq ft HQ including 10,000 sq ft warehouse



OPERATOR PROFILE | JAMES REMOVALS

► De Machen. "Luckily, when the time came, we'd already laid the groundwork with MC Truck & Bus to get the ball rolling quickly."

The company's latest addition – bought outright – is an FM 430 4x2 rigid, complete with three bespoke built demountable bodies and a fourth demountable body combined with a drawbar trailer. De Machen aims to run his new purchase for at least the next decade, covering up to 35,000 km annually.

To hit those targets, James Removals has had to find a 'Goldilocks' spec: a configuration capable not only of meeting the demands of today, but one that is confidently geared towards tackling both the known and unknown challenges of tomorrow's logistics industry.

"I've always believed you cannot cut corners when you're buying a new truck," he says. "Whether the feature in question is primarily to aid driver comfort or towards improving safety for both the driver and other road users, if you're planning to run a truck for at

least the next decade, there's no justification for leaving long-term potential on the table."

Stars in their eyes

A glance at the FM 430's safety-driven specification firmly reflects De Machen's mantra. For instance, a key priority when choosing his new model was Transport for London's upcoming minimum Direct Vision Standard (DVS) rating requirement restrictions. An important part of the mayor of London's Vision Zero ambitions, the DVS five-star rating system is used to measure how much an HGV driver can see directly through their cab windows.

All HGVs already require a DVS permit to be driven in the Greater London area, but from October 2024 HGVs rated below three stars must be retrofitted with industry-recognised technology to legally operate.

"The three-star cab was an absolute must-have for us," says De Machen. "There was absolutely no point in buying a truck that even as soon as 2024 might not be able to legally leave the

depot, let alone enter the city. Going that extra mile was a no-brainer."

James Removals' purchase also comes equipped with the Volvo Active Safety Pack. This includes several modern active safety features such as emergency brake assistance, lane departure-warning system and lane-keeping support.

De Machen has been particularly impressed by the system's ability to offer drivers real-time feedback on their driving habits, monitoring metrics such as eye gaze and hand position, while the FM's adaptive cruise control has also proven a big winner. "The system makes long-distance jobs so much simpler," he says. "The telematics system is also a huge step up over what we've had before. The whole package just feels far more streamlined."

Green operation

The truck's sustainability credentials also reflect a future-focused mentality. James Removals already works tirelessly to minimise its environmental impact throughout its operations,



De-Machen aims to run his new purchase for at least the next decade



The firm also operates into Ireland and mainland Europe



ABOVE: FM features leather interior, twin bunks, microwave, TV and 28-litre fridge

ranging from installing on-site recycling capabilities at its depot to supporting the London Cycle Safety Action Plan. On the road, it's eager to ensure its fleet meets the most up-to-date emissions regulations.

The company reckons its new FM fits the bill neatly, with its D11K engine not

only meeting but exceeding the Euro 6 exhaust emission requirements. Its I-Shift automated gearbox is also already yielding even further sustainability gains via improved fuel economy.

"It is a lovely smooth drive," says De Machen. "The model it is replacing had a very snatchy gearbox, but our new FM grabs its gears very quickly, even when driving uphill, without any noticeable power loss."

"I've always believed you cannot cut corners when you're buying a new truck."
James De-Machen, operator





OPERATOR PROFILE › JAMES REMOVALS



Having four bodies on offer enables the firm to carry out some deliveries within London with an electric chassis

► The decision to opt for three demountable bodies and a demountable Volvo with drawbar trailer was also driven by the need to reduce James Removals' on-road emissions. Having four bodies on offer grants the company the option to carry out some deliveries within London by hooking an electric chassis to its demountable boxes, while also still allowing the company to carry out long-distance deliveries nationally and internationally. However, it also brings safety gains and flexibility to James Removals' day-to-day work.

"Sometimes you get jobs that don't go through, for example, if there's a problem with getting keys from estate agents," says De Machen. "If that's the case, we can just drop that box at our depot and take another empty box out to work the following day, rather than having to unload the whole truck. It's a very common-sense solution."

The road ahead for James Removals is one full of opportunity, though De Machen also notes an array of hurdles his company must overcome. Like every other business, the cost-of-living crisis is an immediate concern, one which De Machen notes has proven particularly challenging given his company is headquartered in the most expensive UK city. "It's not just the fuel crisis that's hurting us; the cost of

“The busy spell stemming from the pandemic was, in some ways, a blessing in disguise for us.”

James De Machen, operator

running our original warehouse in London has doubled," he adds.

The cost of modernising its vehicle fleet to meet London's ever-tightening emissions regulations has added even more pressure. Though De Machen is pleased with the performance of his new FM 430 and the number of smaller electric vehicles James Removals has adopted recently, he is clearly aware those purchases must prove fruitful.

No room for error

"It's been a hugely expensive transition," he says. "The busy spell stemming from the pandemic was, in some ways, a blessing in disguise for us. It has really helped us bolster our forces for the next decade. That's why I always had my finger on the pulse when it came to choosing our next road train model. There was no room for error."

And there may be yet more change to come. "Our roadmap definitely sees us running more electric vehicles in the future," adds De Machen. "We're currently in discussions to test an electric chassis with a five-star DVS

rating, which could prove an ideal next acquisition; and we have an LEVC VN5 electric van on order that's due for delivery soon. If and when we're able to take on an electrified Volvo too, we'd certainly be interested."

While James Removals waits for such future mobility technology to mature, its new FM appears more than ready to carry it through the remainder of this decade and beyond. ■



ABOVE: Owner James De Machen sits at the helm of a 40-strong team