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FEATURE

DIGGING TO SUCCESS

A fleet of specialist Hinos continues to expand at Paneltec in the north of Tasmania, going from strength to strength – words by Ed Higginson.

Paneltec was formed in 2000, when Stephen Guy joined his son, John Guy, in transporting LPG cylinders throughout Tasmania. The 'Panel' portion of the name comes from their panel beating background, and the 'Tec' comes from their computer supply business. Not a mix usually synonymous with a trucking business, but as soon as you visit their premises in Kings Meadow, just outside of Launceston in Tasmania, it becomes apparent that this has been a perfect mix for the business to succeed, with an immaculate fleet fitted with some very technical pieces of equipment.

Stephen says, "The fleet is always clean. We need to show a professional attitude at all times in everything we do, especially when working for the utilities companies".

When natural gas came to the island in 2002, the family knew that the demand for LPG supplied in cylinders would quickly reduce. They needed to adapt, and they did so by focusing on setting up the gas infrastructure. By 2003, they had become one of the few to meet the high standards set out by the gas companies and so quickly expanded to meet the ever-growing demand for supplying gas to homes and businesses across Tasmania.

As the gas rollout started to come to an end, they then adapted to the growing communications infrastructure and the NBN, then into water and sewage.

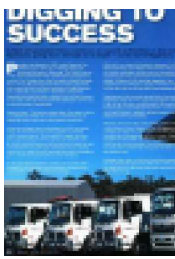
With each new type of infrastructure project, the family behind Paneltec searched for the world's best pieces of kit and latest techniques, building up an impressive range of equipment for every conceivable utilities and infrastructure project. Whether it's for existing upgrades, new subdivisions or emergency repairs, Paneltec is well known on the island for its eye for detail and professionalism.

Stephen and John are also joined within the business with Stephen's other son, Tim, plus his grandsons Daniel and Luke. All up, the team currently sits at 39 personnel, with 18 trucks plus a lot of equipment, from 1.7-ton excavators up to eight-tonners, tippers, vacuum tankers, and non-destructive drilling machines.

Recently, they have also ventured into traffic solutions under the sub brand, Viatec. Harold Burgess joined the company to help set up the traffic controllers and in 2013 Harold's wife Beverley also came on board. Stephen explains that the traffic division has grown and works well with the rest of the business. From having started with four utes, that number has now grown to seven utes that are always busy.

Although they claim not to be a trucking company, they are all passionate about their fleet and make sure they are specced to a high level that looks as good as new, regardless of age.





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Trucks are purchased both new and secondhand, depending on the task they'll be tackling. Some of the fleet, such as those fitted with specialist vacuum tankers or drilling rigs, travel less distance than even a family car, as they only transport the equipment to a work site. Whether the truck is brand-new or 15 years old, both Stephen and John, along with others in the team, set to building the units to their standards, even stripping them down and repainting if required.

The high standard demanded with their trucks can be seen in the line-up of five Hinos for the photo shoot. They ranged in age from 12 years old to just 4 weeks, but it was hard to spot the difference, definitely showing that having a panel beating and spray-painting background has worked to their advantage.

Recent improvements in digging have led to more non-destructive techniques, whereby the infrastructure crews just need to dig a small hole at the side of the road or yard, before a specialist machine can dig a trench up to 100 metres sideways just below the surface without damaging the road. This obviously comes in handy for those busy highways or newly laid carparks.

In terms of trucks, they have tried many brands over the years, especially since Stephen started driving log trucks over 50 years ago. But recently they have started to focus on purchasing solely from Hino as a great fit for what they need. John explains, "We really like the gearing ratios, they are great on fuel and the drivers really like them too".

Out of an ever-increasing fleet of 18, the past 7 have all been Hinos, as the management and drivers prefer them to earlier brands. Customer service and support is also highly valued, with the new dealership of FRM Hino of Launceston opening within a kilometre of base and providing excellent service.

Back in 2013, the first Hino in the fleet was a FD1124 4x2, which was fitted out for gas utilities. Feedback from the drivers was great, especially since the diff ratios worked really well in their applications.

Previous brands had struggled in respect of trying to provide the correct gearing, but Hino was good at setting up the trucks for Paneltec. Next, in 2014, came a new FE1426 that was fitted out as a drill rig, then in the same year a 12-year-old GH1022 that had a specialist Flocon asphalt machine fitted. After a quick refurbishment by the family and new paint job, it was put to work and looked fantastic, feeling just like new (below, far left).

As work increased the expansion continued, without the need to sell any of the old units as they all still had relative low kilometres on them. In 2015, a new FE1426 4x2 was purchased and fitted with a DitchWitch Vacuum tanker from America, and due to its success more were needed. The next unit came in 2016 and was again fitted to a Hino, this time a new FG1628 4x2, then, most recently, in June 2017, a brand new GH1835 wide cab, being one of the first of the new styled Hinos in Tasmania.





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FEATURE

As each truck gets assigned to a single driver, this newest addition was handed over to a very happy Tim Guy, another of Stephen's children. Tim commented, "The Hino is a great truck. The diff ratio is much better than the previous brand, meaning it's a lot smoother at highway speeds plus gives a great saving in fuel, about \$40 less when running to Burnie (roughly a 300 km round trip)".

Tim and his offsider are also big fans of Hino's new entertainment system, which includes the navigation system. It enables the driver to input the truck's dimensions so it can then direct you on the legal route, a great help when they go off the main highway most days.

They were so impressed with the new design and fuel economy that a second GH1835 wide cab was ordered straight away. On the day of the photo shoot, the truck was away having its new tipper body fitted, but was expected (fingers crossed) to arrive soon to join the fleet.

Maintenance on the new trucks will be looked after through the local Hino dealer, being the guys at FRM Launceston. Then like all of the other pieces of machinery and trucks, after the warranty period they will be serviced through a trusted mobile mechanic who works onsite.

In terms of tyres, Paneltec would be the envy of many trucking companies when Stephen commented, "We rarely have to worry about tyres because we don't cover the distances, they just don't wear out!"

The family is looking forward to more Hinos joining the fleet, as the outlook for the business is strong, especially with the upcoming water projects around the island.

HINO 500 SERIES SPECIFICATIONS

Model: GH1835 Wide Cab

Configuration: 4x2 with GVM 18.0 tonnes

Wheelbase: 4.23 metres

Gear Ratio: 4.875

Engine: 350 hp turbo intercooled Euro 5, 9.0-litre, six-cylinder

Max Power: 257 kW at 1800 rpm

Max Torque: 1422 Nm at 1100-1600 rpm

Transmission: Nine-speed manual with airshift and clutch

Suspension: Semi-elliptic leaf springs for heavy-duty application

Additional: VSC, ABS, cruise control, driver and passenger airbag, hill start, alloys, diff lock, entertainment system including satellite navigation.

"So impressed with the new design and fuel economy that a second GH1835 wide cab was ordered straight away"

