

UPPER ECHELON

Like us, Jeff Charlton started 10 years ago. George Bennett hears how it's b

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It was just 10 years ago that Jeff Charlton gave up his interesting but, chronically underpaid job as a medical technician and set up as an owner-driver, just as the first issue of *TRUCK* hit the road. Since then, the story of Echelon Transport – he chose the name to sound less like a one-man band – has been a classic one of struggle to build up against all the odds.

Over a decade, Jeff has managed to build his fleet up to its present strength of 15 trucks, but there have been some near disasters on the way.

Jeff Charlton spent four years working at St George's Hospital, Hyde Park Corner, as a technician in a team doing pioneering work in nuclear medicine. In the evenings he studied to become a doctor, but one day the sight of his take-home cheque for £77 for a month's work made him change tracks completely. He sold his car, bought an old truck, and Echelon Transport was born.

Jeff already had an hgv licence, which he'd obtained by 'grandfather's' rights through the Territorial Army, so then he was faced with all the normal problems of getting an operator's licence. The truck itself was a headache, too.

The first Echelon motor was a Bedford KM with a 26ft platform body, but right after Jeff bought it, the engine blew up, and after repairing it, he was left with no money to run on, apart from a Blue Star diesel card that he'd already fixed up. Jeff says he spent the first few weeks zig-zagging from one Blue Star garage to another. No wonder, as he put it, owner-drivers are 'hungry'.

He admits that he knew nothing about the business when he started, and he carried general freight wherever he could find it. He generally found loads through clearing houses, but his inexperience meant that they took him for a ride financially, and he usually ended up working far harder than he should.

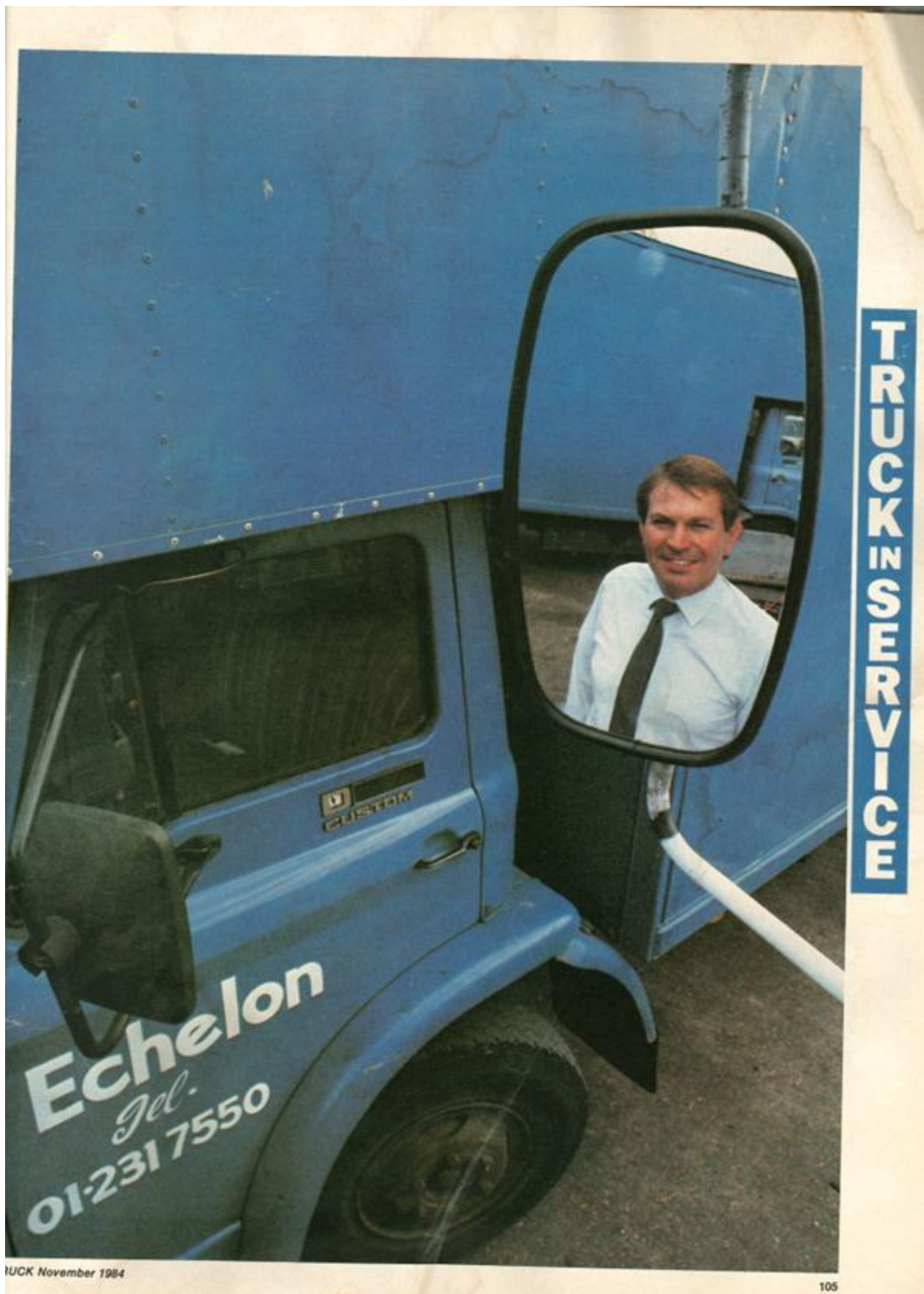
Very soon he realised, as most owner-drivers do who want to get anywhere, that he would have to get his own work directly from customers. He went through the discouraging routine of knocking on doors, and managed to persuade Heinz to load him directly. It says a lot for his determination and powers of persuasion, because he was the very first owner-driver to break into Heinz.

After a few months of doing his own work he still wasn't satisfied. He started working for

Pritchett from their depot in Greenford. Pritchett were the Lancashire-based truck company whose van trailers ran the slogan 'The on-time freight line.' Jeff specialises the smaller loads that Pritchett didn't want to send on an artic. But most of their work box trailers, and they told Jeff that he would have to buy a box van as well.

So he sold the KM, bought a box van started to carry loads for Rank. He did work there, still working through Pritchett, as Rank asked him to work for them directly was a question whether I would betray

Jeff Charlton started out 10 years ago with a single Bedford KM four-wheel and now he runs 15 vehicles. He chose the name Echelon to sound more like a company and less like a one-man band in the early days. Now the fleet consists of Marathons, Volvos, a lone Transcant a few Ford D-series. Jeff grew by offering specialised split distribution service large warehouses. Over the last 10 years has seen big changes in drivers' and manufacturers' attitudes, and efficient



Pritchetts for greed', Jeff says, 'and greed won!' At that time, Ranks were importing a lot of electronic equipment from a number of companies, and as the boom in such things grew, a lot of the Rank sales managers left to set up on their own. Several that did invited Jeff to handle their transport.

By now, Echelon Transport had grown to four trucks: 'But I found that as an owner-driver, plus three trucks, I couldn't possibly compete with the big distributors like

Carrycare, so I specialised in difficult areas like East Anglia, where back-loads were hard to come by. In those days you sometimes had to queue for up to two days at some warehouses before you could unload, but because I was an owner-driver, I could get past the queues with a fiver to the right bloke.' But it wasn't all bad because, Jeff adds: 'In those days I was getting 100percent more per carton than I'm getting today.'

By now, Echelon were working for a

number of different manufacturers, and collecting small consignments which made up into drops for different warehouses so Jeff went for vans with large bodies

Jeff now had an office in New Cross brought in more business, but he still had a workshop of his own, and ended up doing tricky things like changing an axle in the Kent Road. In the end he decided that to get a space for storage and tranship

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That wasn't as easy as it sounds. Land and banks wanted five years' trading figures before they would consider him, and Jeff hadn't been around that long. Finally, however, he found a small place in Peckham. All this time he'd continued his policy of buying second-hand – he didn't want to commit large amounts of money to new trucks or a flashy warehouse: 'because a single hi-jack could have wiped me out.'

Five years ago, Jeff bought his first art was a Daf 2600, an old motor even then, was followed by a 1418 Mercedes. Their made them troublesome, but Jeff didn't want to commit long term finance to anything. On top of that, margins were getting tight as rates stood still in the face of recession.

But as far as work was concerned, Jeff's policy of offering good and specialised service was paying off. Fed up with the queues in large warehouses, he arranged a delivery schedule with Comet, the giant discount warehouse chain. Now, when other trucks were turned away, or made to wait for hours, Echelon trucks came in on scheduled basis.

That gave a new angle to Jeff's pitch to customers: 'In effect, I'm actually offering

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specialised delivery service into Comet', and there are around 100 warehouses, nationwide, where he delivers. He started picking up all sorts of customers who wanted to be sure that their deliveries got into Comet on time.

And that's no sales pitch from Jeff. When *TRUCK* visited the Echelon operation, we saw a fat file full of letters of appreciation from all sorts of manufacturers, and even one from a national newspaper.

But then, near disaster struck when one of Jeff's artics was hi-jacked. The driver was held up at knife-point, and the truck was driven away. By an amazing coincidence, the police who answered the call passed the Echelon truck later that night, and it was recovered, with half the load missing. This incident almost pushed Jeff into bankruptcy – he was right not to trust to the future, it seems – but he managed to pull the fat from the fire and started afresh, looking for other national distribution work, as well as the Comet service.

That was three years ago. Shortly afterwards, Echelon bought five Ford-D-series box vans for a contract, and things picked up again. When we visited, Jeff had just moved his own operation three months before. Now there's more space, room for temporary storage, and the firm were just putting the roof on a new workshop that day.

With the last of the summer doldrums just coming to an end, Jeff was waiting for work to pick-up in the run-up to Christmas, and there were several trucks standing in the yard. As Jeff showed us round his much enlarged yard, with signs of clearing up and building still going on, he remembered how he felt when he got his first tiny warehouse: 'When I saw that forklift truck, I really thought we'd arrived', he told us. And now he's pretty pleased with the new facilities.

The present fleet consists of four Leyland Marathon Twos, all with E290 Cummins power, a solitary Transconti with the same engine, two Volvo F88s, and half a dozen D-series Fords. With a Transit panic wagon, there are 15 trucks in all.

So what has Jeff learned in his 10 years of ups and downs? 'When I started I didn't know about transport, but we've learned as we went along. You could say that I started with one lorry and worked backwards!

'All I wanted to do was earn more money, and I thought that if I was making £200 a week with one truck, then I'd make £400 with two. Of course, it didn't turn out like that. Another thing is that all the trucks are mine, and I don't have long-term finance on any of them. I like that. My trucks only cost me maintenance, but I'm still struggling. Even today, I still can't afford the nice lorries.

'10 years ago, I could walk into a company and tell them that I could save them money on distribution, but now it's reversed. The large companies have got the edge. If a large firm only makes five percent profit, they can survive, but I couldn't live on five percent of my turnover from a small fleet.'

But there have been other changes over the 10 years: 'Five years ago, the likes of Lancia were snifty, and they talked about fitting lists. Now they're keen to sell.' But Jeff says that even a contract wouldn't persuade him to buy now, unless it was something pretty special: 'I've never seen a long-term contract yet where the bigger party couldn't get out of it if they wanted to', he says. Another thing that's changed is the attitude of drivers. 'When I was at the old place, about five years ago, I used to put big



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advertisements in the paper, looking for drivers. They'd ring up and the first question would be: 'What truck will I be driving', and the second would be about money. Drivers in those days took it for granted that the money would be good. Now, I put in a two-line advert, and get 200 replies.'

The first driver that Jeff took on, nine years ago, was Colin Joyce, and he still works there except now he's the transport manager.

As for the trucks themselves, pride of place in the present line-up goes to the S-reg Transconti. Jeff has had it for two years now, and in that time he's only had to replace a radiator. His verdict on the truck is that it's a 'Wonderful motor'. The Echelon artics are plated at 32 tons, so with the E290 Cummins in five of the trucks, there's plenty of power.

Jeff is in favour of having big engines working below capacity, because he reckons it helps reliability. The Marathons have performed well, though fuel consumption has been on the heavy side, at around 6mpg. But Jeff is not too interested in fuel economy, it's more important that the goods there on time.

As far as spares are concerned, Leyland have been far from satisfactory, at least early

on, and Jeff launched into a sorry tale that all started when he wanted a list of about 30 small parts for an annual MOT: 'It was a typical problem. Leyland seemed to have closed their regional parts centres, and we were left with a main agent at Willesden.

'I phoned in with a list of 30 bits – everything from a light bulb to a fanbelt – but they only had the fanbelt in stock. I asked for the VOR service, but two days later they still hadn't got the parts. So I phoned the head of Leyland trucks, and he didn't believe the story. But he checked and came back to me, promising that

Echelon have just moved into a new yard, and the drivers are helping to build a new workshop while things are quiet. Fitter Joe Taiwo (above) keeps the trucks on the road. Ageing Volvo has given trouble, and driver Roy Harobin has been helping with workshop. Group (far left) shows transport manager Colin Joyce in front, who was the first driver to join Jeff nine years ago. Multi-drops take care on part of drivers. Echelon prefer to use their own men and machines rather than sub-contractors

the parts were now on the way, and apologising for the delay.'

In the end, Jeff found an independent supplier, B C Trucks, in Croydon, and he says: 'They were so good that I was encouraged to go back to Leyland.' He subsequently bought three more Marathon Twos. But Jeff reckons that Leyland back-up doesn't compare well with the Daf agent who took a part off a new truck to give to him when they had no spare.

The two Volvo F88s have proved very troublesome. The better of the two is N-registered, and should be a '290', but somewhere in its career, the engine was replaced by the old '240' unit, which has proved more reliable, and quite economical with up to 8mpg. The P-reg '290', however, has spent most of the six months it has been on the strength in the yard being repaired.

As for the D-series Fords, Jeff is full of praise. They are all D0910s, de-rated from nine-tonners to 3.5tonners, because they carry bulk rather than weight in their Luton bodies. They have been reliable, and Jeff says that he can't see why people need to bother with foreign makes.

For his next buy, Jeff says: 'I'd like to chop in the two Volvos and the two older Marathons for a couple of good Transcontis, but I will go for whatever looks like a good deal then.'

For a surprising amount of the time, the Echelon artics run home empty. For example, they run back empty twice a week from Glasgow, because Jeff says: 'Too much aggravation with backloads'. The trouble is, according to Jeff, that he loses the truck for

too long, either waiting for a load to come up, or in dropping it off. If he could get a backload on and off fast enough, he would be happy to do it, but as it is, it's more important to him to get the trucks back fast for the next load.

And on the subject of scheduling, Jeff told us that all his tachograph cards are sent off to a computer firm for analysis. He isn't taking any chances: 'The idea of the tach was to frighten people, and it worked with me.'

In a small fleet, it's particularly important to have willing drivers, and Jeff would rather take on young drivers who know they can't easily get jobs, and thus are keen, and loyal to the company. 'I've worked for a lot of Japanese firms over the years', he says, 'and they have the idea that anyone's capable of anything.' Now he says his drivers can handle complex loads without problems.

He pointed out that split distribution, and making up complex consignments, is a different operation from haulage, and needs drivers who know what they're doing. That's why he would rather use his own trucks and drivers, than use sub-contractors, as far as he can. That's also why he often has spare trucks standing, but they don't cost him any finance.

Jeff is proud of the fact that he's not had to lay any drivers off. When things are quiet, everyone mucks in together. When we visited the Echelon yard, a couple of drivers were helping to put the roof on the new garage. Roy Horobin, who regularly drives one of the Volvos, was hammering nails into the facing boards of the new roof: 'I can drive anything



from a 40-footer to a two-inch nail', he told us.

When the new workshops are finished, by the time this issue goes to press, fitter Joe Taiwo will be able to move in, which will save having to use the facilities of the haulage firm at the other side of the yard. Jeff reckons: 'If you've got a good fitter and a good secretary, you've cracked it.'

But success also depends on a willing crew of drivers, and the fact that Jeff has been prepared to try all sorts of things over the years. During the last major rail strike, he arranged with a Fleet Street paper to carry newspapers northwards, to save them using their vans.

Jeff hoped to persuade the paper to take him on as a regular alternative to the train, and he laid on stand-by breakdown services all the way north, to make sure the papers got to their destination on time. In the end, however, the papers went back on the rails.

'Everything I've tried has been hard', Jeff told us when we first talked to him. But he has persevered, and looked for the chance to offer a specialised service when the opportunity arose. Keeping the customer satisfied is what it's all about, and at **TRUCK** we look forward to checking up on Echelon Transport in 1994.

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