

"In my early days, I was climbing a rainbow. I was full of aspirations and learning from others who had done it before me.
I have been ridin' that rainbow for a long time.
Now it's time to pass the experience on to those coming up the side."

Warwick Johnson

Tamahere: 25 June 2002.



Dedicated to the trailer builders—past, present and future,
And the muffin makers.

CHAPTER I



The Empire Builders...



OUTSIDE, THE CHILL wind cuts across the Manawatu plain from the Tasman, as it did often on its way to giving “city types” in Palmerston North a good lashing.

The men who gathered inside the public bar of the Empire Hotel in Feilding each Friday

Then there were the Domett boys.

The boys from Domett Truck and Trailers Ltd, some of them, could be counted on to carry through until publican Bill Gleeson closed the bar. After all, they worked hard all week. They worked hard in one of Feilding’s largest industries and one of its most gruelling. They sweated it out, out there in the middle of the Manawatu, as welders, engineers, designers and salesmen. They would become generally acknowledged throughout the rest of New Zealand as among the best in what was in the 1960s still a fledgling business.

In time, these men would go on to build and become a legend of sorts. But right now, they were just interested in building trailers...truck-trailers.

Their story, and that of others who collectively built a truly unique industry, would have to be left to someone else to tell... at another time.

night didn’t care much about the wind. Didn’t care much about city types either. What they cared about was winding down at the end of the working week. The bar was warm, the beer was cold, and the company was good—and, more important, mostly familiar.

Most were local farmers for whom the working week never ended, but they liked the Friday night ritual. Occasionally a local celebrity in the form of a Manawatu rugby rep would drop in to be stood a few free beers. A couple of local retailers made their regular but usually fleeting pilgrimage to The Empire before heading home for tea.



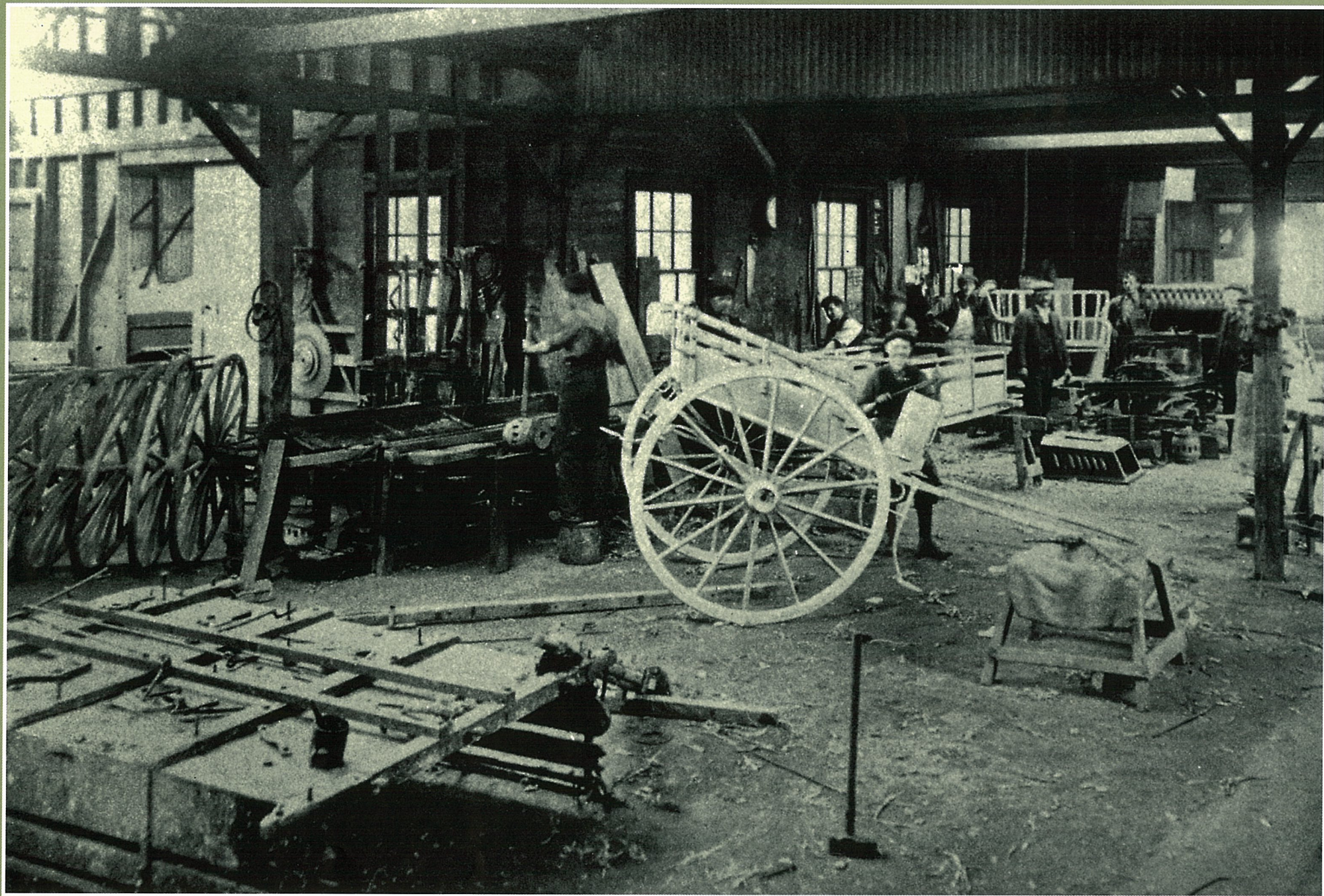
(Above) Dave Domett - Feilding trailer builder and legend.

(Right) The Empire in Feilding.

(Opposite) Dometts started as carriers building their own decks and trailers.



CHAPTER 2



The Pre-War Pioneers

THE BUILDER OF THE FIRST TRUCK-TRAILER in New Zealand created more than a trailer. He—and let's assume it was a he—created an industry that in its competitiveness toughness, family histories and sheer exuberance, would in New Zealand be equal only to the heavy transport industry it was to serve so well and for so long.

It would be helpful to know at the beginning of this book who that person was.

We won't.



(Above) Monk and Martin

(Opposite) Steel Bros circa 1878

There are many reasons we will never know. However, secretiveness is not one; chances are whomever built that first trailer would have proudly shown it off. In that respect, this industry has not changed, as the number of photos in this book testify.

No, the walls surrounding and obscuring the earliest history of this industry remain insurmountable for other reasons.

For example, who among us today can realistically define what constituted a truck-trailer back then? A trailer towed by a truck? Sure, most of us will accept that. But was it purpose-built for that function? Probably not. Given the lack of horsepower available from those early Whites and Leylands, and the lack of loads from traders, any such trailer would perhaps have been a domestic trailer built to augment the carrying capacity of a car. Even more likely, it could have been a converted horse-drawn dray.

What we do know is that it would have been a simple affair: single-axle probably, and rigid-axle certainly. Almost definitely a timber frame body atop of wooden flat-deck, with a single drawbar and ball coupling. It would be used for general around town cartage, probably on the flat, probably in Christchurch.¹ Probably.

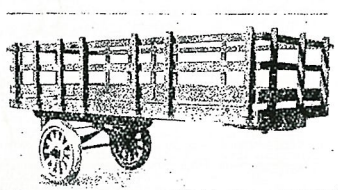
Photo? No.

If we want to begin our history of this great industry with greater

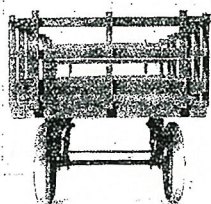


¹ One is tempted to surmise that it was one of the country's biggest coach builders, Steel Bros ("Carriage Builders and General Smiths") of Canterbury, which was established in 1878 by brothers David and Joseph Steel. However, Steel Bros' records indicate that the company did not build their first "official" truck-trailer until 1955 under the stewardship of Joseph's son, George.

Solve you hauling problems with SEMI TRAILERS



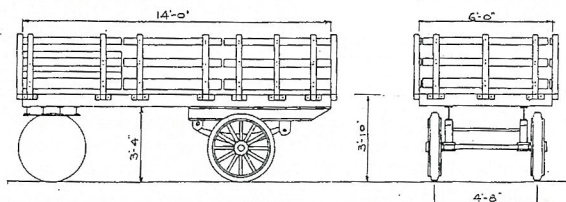
SIDE VIEW



END VIEW

This Semi Trailer is ideal for use by Local Bodies, Contractors, or for the cartage of timber in long lengths. It will deal with a similar load to that carried on the Lorry, thereby doubling the useful capacity of the latter.

Use this Outfit in Conjunction with your Lorries and Double your Loads



Specifications and Full Details
Supplied on Application

INGLIS BROS. & CO.
LIMITED

(P.O. Box 68) Cr. Taranaki St,
and Jervois Quay - Wellington

Inglis magazine advertisement dated October 1925

certainty and photos then we need to change our "first" question slightly, and ask who was the first commercial builder of truck-trailers in New Zealand.

Then, whilst the walls surrounding our early history don't entirely collapse, at least one or two sizeable breaches occur which we can confidently enter in our quest for the (now) "first commercial trailer." And the location, perhaps surprisingly given the city's terrain, may be Wellington.

The Capital claims at least two truck-trailer builders predating World War II: Abingdons and Inglis Brothers.

And now it starts to get interesting. We not only possibly have from these two companies the start of trailer building in New Zealand, we also have the first fierce competition, the claims and counter-claims, dichotomies, and often sheer bloody-mindedness that permeate this industry and are its common load to this day. For example, Abingdons, in a company brochure circa 1937, states that they have been building trailers for five years and, in another document confirming 1933 as the year they built their first unit, they lay claim also to being "the earliest and indeed the only trailer constructor in N.Z."

That's 1933, to reinforce the point.

That, however, would no doubt come as some surprise to Tom Inglis, then working out of the corner of Taranaki Street and Jervois Quay in Wellington. The Inglis brothers promised to "Solve your hauling problems with SEMI TRAILERS" and enjoined transport operators to: "Use this Outfit in Conjunction with your Lorries and Double your Loads".

They promised all that and more in a magazine advertisement dated October...1925!

Independent, though not definite, verification of Inglis Bros' claim to be first comes from the company's Memorandum of

Association, as supplied to us by Archives New Zealand.

This document, which records the incorporation of the company as Inglis Bros and Company Limited, is dated 9 October 1916. It defines the purposes and functions of the business to be, among others: "Importers, manufacturers and vendors of cycles, motor cars and other similar conveyances however propelled, and of perambulators and go-carts...and to commence and carry on the business of electrical and mechanical engineers which may seem by the Company to be conveniently carried on."

The directors of the fledgling private company are Thomas Inglis, merchant (no word of a brother); Sydney Kircaldie, merchant; Neville Willoughby, settler; Edward Dymock, accountant; and Horace Rogers, company manager.

Whilst there is no specific reference in the document to trailer building, and none of the founding directors appear to have an engineering background, we now at least know that Inglis Bros pre-dated Abingdons as a corporate entity by some 17 years.

But of course the most substantive support for Inglis Bros' claim is their trailer advertisement of 1925, and Abingdons' admission that they built their first trailer in 1933 (though still claiming to be the first).

Regrettably, there is little else known of Inglis Bros (the company was dissolved in 1942). However, we know more of Abingdons. And for their personal recollections, we are indebted to three correspondents in particular: brothers Brian and Des Fargher of Turangi and Max Mouat of Hastings.

Bryan and Des, whose father Charles Fargher managed Waipawa Farmers Transport Limited in the central Hawkes Bay and was an early Abingdons customer, remember the company as being operated by an ex-pat Englishman called Eric May (the name

The Demise of Abingdons

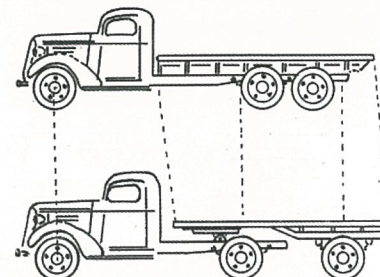
Whilst Abingdons continued to build trailers after the war, that side of the business soon petered out.

The company turned to general engineering and eventually the building of petrol pumps (The late Bill Richardson had one of those early Abingdon pumps in his remarkable Invercargill transport museum). Even the company name changed: Abingdons Limited, the original company, was placed in liquidation in September 1942 to be replaced by Abingdons Transport Equipment.

By the 60s, even these activities had dwindled, and Abingdons was largely dormant. However, Abingdons and its then sole owner Eric May still had one valuable asset remaining—the company's import licence for trailer and forestry equipment. That attracted the interest of one of the most powerful figures in the transport industry: Rod Steel of Steel Bros. In 1964, Steel purchased all May's shares and consequently the import licence. The day the deal was done, the name of Abingdons was consigned to history and to the builder's plates on rusting hulks of those early New Zealand built trailers that are perhaps still to be found somewhere in New Zealand.

HOW TO CUT TRANSPORT COSTS

ABINGDON Semi-trailer for Economic Haulage



Some truck users are under the impression that semi-trailers would be cumbersome to handle, but in this they are wrong. The top diagram shows a 157 in. wheelbase truck fitted with a six wheel attachment and 14 foot body, compared with a 131 in. wheelbase truck fitted with a 14 foot Abingdon semi-trailer. The semi-trailer is considerably more flexible and mobile than the fixed six wheeler.

The average 131 in. wheelbase truck turns in a 36 foot circle. The same truck with a 20 foot Abingdon trailer will turn in its 36 foot circle owing to the hinging effect of the turntable! A 157 in. truck with six wheel attachment requires one-third more room in which to describe a circle.

Semi-trailers are superior in every way to six wheel attachments. The outstanding advantages are:— (1) FULL RETENTION OF TRACTION on truck's driving wheels whether running EMPTY or loaded and (2) GREATLY INCREASED TYRE MILEAGE on ALL axles. Abingdon semi-trailers can be fitted quickly to successive trucks and as the SMALLER popular truck chassis are used as towing units, the truck can be READILY RE-SOLD when it is desired to make a replacement.

CHANGE TO ABINGDON TRAILERS FOR ECONOMIC HAULAGE



The 'Carrymore' built for Waipawa Farmers Transport

Abingdons comes from May's hometown in England). The younger Farghers visited Abingdons on several occasions with their father to collect new trailers. Bryan says the company was situated "right in the heart of the city" (confirmed by Max Mouat, who places it as a basement workshop close to Wellington's wharves [the address was 29 Hunter Street]).

Most of the trailers built for Waipawa Transport Limited were single-axle units. One, an early version built in the late 1940s and called the Carrymore, is pictured above. It was used for general freight work, though some Carrymores were later

converted to twin-deck sheep crates.

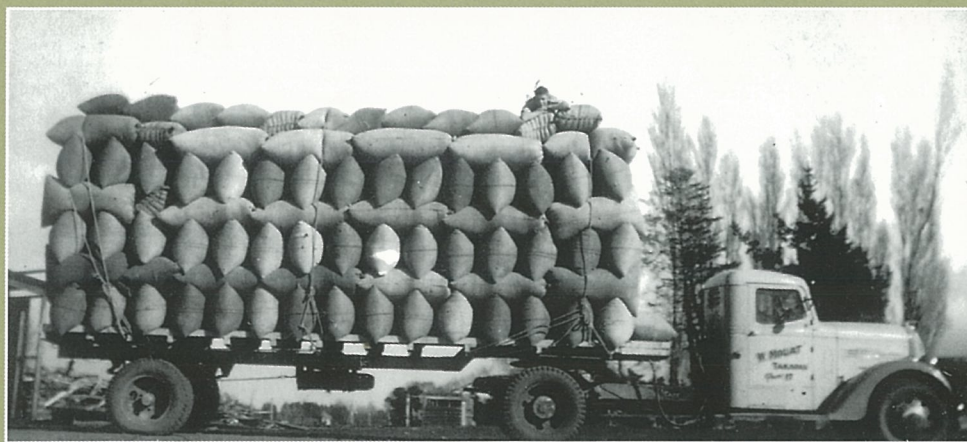
Conversion of Abingdon trailers seems to have been par for the course.

Max Mouat supplies photos of an even earlier Abingdons Trailer. The single-axle semi shown on page 9 carrying chaff bales was built by Abingdons in 1938 for Takapau Transport, which was owned by Max Mouat's father Bill. The company didn't own the trailer for long—Max recalls Bill having trouble backing it—and it wound up on-sold as a converted six-wheel unit to Hills Transport in Bulls.

Generally, sales of Abingdons trailers—and those of Inglis Bros—were confined to the lower North Island, and like most trailers of the time, were all-purpose. Most were also single-axle. The advent of twin-axle trailers, predominantly from TMC and Domett, would see the end of these lightweight but hardworking trailers of the pre-war years. There are none known to be in existence today—but the memories of them are, and so, too, a few treasured photos of them and their proud and pioneering owners.

Were there other trailer builders in New Zealand prior to World War II? Almost certainly, but it appears that none, apart from Abingdons Ltd and Inglis Bros found the market or the tractor horsepower sufficient to justify trailer building as a full-time occupation.

The world would first have to go to war for that to happen.



Abingtons Trailer built for Takapau Transport in 1938

DEALERS PRICE	
"A B I N G D O N" SEMI-TRAILERS.	
PRICE LIST effective 1/2/38.	ABINGDONS LTD. BOX 1191, WELLINGTON
STANDARD "ABINGDON" Single Axled Models.	
The "ABINGDON" Standard Model Semi-trailers are fitted with Single Axles and are quoted with brakes; wheels, tyres and tubes being extra nett. Jockey Wheels for "shuttle" operation are provided where required, at extra cost.	
The following chassis prices include electrically welded frames with ample cross members securely gusseted at all joints, Manganese elliptic springs, with hardened steel shackles pins. English "CARRIMORE" or S.K.F. Ltd. 10-ton high tensile steel axles. 35 inch diameter cast steel, rocker type turntable fitted with positive locking release lever, for instant dis-connection from truck (invaluable when servicing truck). Turntable is carried on 2" diameter steel rocker shaft and contains 10 lbs. of industrial rubber which completely insulates the truck from the trailer, eliminating chatter. 1 1/2" diameter cast steel brake drums and 3" moulded linings, operated by air "Servo" cylinder, using motor suction and controlled by valve mounted in truck cabin on steering column. Prices include chassis mountings and fittings to truck, grease nipples and painting in bituminous chassis black.	
PRICES:	
16 foot chassis fitted with brakes etc.....	2225.10. 0.
18 foot chassis fitted with brakes etc.....	2254. 0. 0.
20 foot chassis fitted with brakes etc.....	2243. 0. 0.
All chassis are 7 ft. wide unless specially stipulated.	
JOCKEY WHEELS, for trailers 18 foot and over.	
Complete with raising and lowering gear, fitted.....	236.10. 0.
ALL PRICES ARE SUBJECT TO ALTERATION ACCORDING TO FLUCTUATIONS IN THE MARKET.	
THE ABOVE PRICES ARE LESS 20% TRADE DISCOUNT, PLUS SALES TAX.	
TERMS: F.O.B. WELLINGTON - CASH ON DELIVERY.	
-----0-----0-----	
We do not quote bodies as body-building prices are generally lower outside Wellington. All our Chassis are however, drilled ready for fitting of bodies. A flat platform on a 16 foot trailer should not cost more than £17.10. 0. to the trade.	

Cheap at Half the Price

Abingdon's 1938 price list illustrates the leadership stance the company wanted to take for the industry. Apart from the detailed trailer specifications and processes Abingdons provided, which we quote above, the company also used its price list to admonish the market to: "avoid makeshift jobs built from discarded truck parts, which are liable to place excessive strains on the truck, or even cause disastrous accidents." Abingdons go on to state that their semi-trailers are "soundly engineered vehicles, built on highest automotive standards, and will stand many years of hard service."

So did they then provide value for money?

You be the judge.