AUTUMN/WINTER 2024

THE ncc BUSINESS

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Green lights for Redline

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Green lights for going the Redline way

How do you follow the right route when setting out on the campervan conversion journey? Redline Campers' Mark Turley (pictured) talks to Nick Harding about the company's success story

"We're really pleased we've got it." Those six words may not look much in print, but there's no hiding the delight from Mark Turley when he speaks them. As a co-director along with Dave Brown of Redline Campers, it represents a massive achievement alongside a dogged determination to do everything by the book.

He's discussing becoming an NCC campervan manufacturer, only two years after setting up a dedicated factory to produce Redlines in-house at parent company Venture Caravans, Motorhomes and Campervans' retail premises at Watford Gap in Northamptonshire – a location it has had since its inception 53 years ago.

It's even more of an accolade when you consider Redline is the campervan manufacturing brand that's exclusive to Venture. Furthermore, this is largely a field that's unregulated, though the NCC is working behind the scenes to rectify this. NCC Accredited status sits alongside other qualifications gained along the way as Venture has developed Redline into a stand-alone manufacturer and brand in its own right.

For perspective, these are not the type of qualifications the majority of campervan conversion specialists seek out but, in receiving NCC Manufacturer Accreditation, Redline Campers joins just 15 other UK companies and only four other specialist Volkswagen converters in the UK that are licensed to carry the NCC badge on their vehicles. As Mark puts it: "This is a massive milestone for our brand and sets us apart from hundreds of campervan converters across the country."

Mark, tell us how it all started

We sensed an opportunity and initially engaged with a VW campervan converter. We bought three vans and had them converted, branding them as Venture. We made several modifications, including having some carpets made and graphics added. This is as we'd done previously with caravans, but it gave us our own little niche product and they sold quickly.

This continued for approximately two years, during which our sales volume increased significantly. We'd learnt a bit by then, so we were contemplating how we could develop our product. At the same time, we were getting a bit disillusioned with some of the other products we were selling. However, out of the blue we had a call from another manufacturer eager to showcase its first campervan, featuring leather seats and oak worktops with a rustic charm.

Six months later we were contacted again, this time with half a dozen converted vehicles. Again, they brought the product over and we realised that the only way this was going to work was if we explained exactly what we wanted and they did the work. Working with a third party can be challenging due to the lack of complete control. This marked the beginning, and in 2017, we began trading as Redline Campers.

At what point did you decide you had to do it the right way, get the right approvals?

At the end of 2019 we had our own dealer network under the Redline brand. However, we wanted to develop and grow further so we devised plans for a new facility, constructed it, and began conducting a limited number of conversions in-house. We achieved moderate success, but we were still learning about it. By 2022, we'd taken the complete campervan conversion process in-house. Everything available from Redline Campers is now designed, developed, and produced on-site.

One of the first things we did was to fit the RIB rear seat/bed. We believe it is one of the best systems out there. We buy a branded fitting kit – basically a steel bar that bolts to the chassis (not all converters use this). It was important to get the fitting correct. I've seen other seats/beds held in by self-tapping screws, which is astounding. Would you put your children on a bed frame that you or I could weld up? Of course you wouldn't!

There are also all the other critical elements – the gas and electrical systems. Modern base vehicles are very complex things. We very quickly realised we needed a wiring loom. We went to the industry standard bearer for that, BCA. They designed and built for us a bespoke loom. It's our own elevating roof. It's one we've always fitted to our vehicles. Uniquely, the canvas comes from Cabanon, the highly regarded French tent and trailer tent manufacturer.

Taking production in-house also meant our manufacturing process could be audited to the internationally recognised standard, ISO 9001, and we could gain Small Series Type Approval from the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA) through the scheme. We are proud to build our range following a quality management system which is ISO 9001 certified and to have Type Approval.

Small Series Type Approval allows us to produce up to 500 units of each conversion model annually. That's compared to Individual Vehicle Type Approval, which is an entirely visual inspection and doesn't include the more rigorous testing required under the Small Series Scheme.

You invested £750,000 in your production facility. Tell us more

It was only just over a year ago that we decided 'bang' – we've got to do it and we've got to do it now. We did the 2023 NEC October show, captured a lot of orders, and then had to build the facility.

We already had the factory but we invested heavily with a complete kit-out – a proper, professional manufacturing plant.

The investment for all the "approvals" has been another six figures plus. We also moved two key members of staff from the caravan retail side – they had the right mindset and qualifications. We now have a team of four and the capacity to build 125-150 campervans a year, with the ability to scale up if we need to.

When did you get NCC Accreditation?

We wanted approval from the base vehicle supplier, part of which would enable us to acquire brand new vehicles for conversion rather than pre-registering vans for subsequent conversion. This approach would ensure the vehicles were registered as motorcaravans from the outset, aligning us with mainstream manufacturers.

However, the process is not as simple as it may seem. For instance, the Volkswagen vans website stipulates that a three-year warranty is required to mirror that of the base vehicle, and NCC Accreditation is also necessary.

We did start the process very early in the year. Our Production Manager, Ben Marks, has spent days, evenings, weeks going through everything. He understands it. We gained our NCC Manufacturer Accreditation in July this year. That might just be the quickest anybody's ever done it. We're very proud of this achievement in particular.

What else have you achieved?

In March 2023 we launched the Redline Campers' owner's group, Redline on the Road. In May 2023, we achieved ISO 9001:2015 certification for the quality management system we follow to build our range. Redline Campers' entire campervan range is now built following this system and that November was when we gained Small Series Type Approval. Our conversions are recognised by the leading motorhome insurance

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providers. We work with a number of insurers who are familiar with our models and each aspect of the conversions, which makes them easier to insure. Even finance provider Black Horse recognises Redline now.

What does this all mean for your customers?

Having the NCC Manufacturers Approval badge alongside our previously gained Small Series Type Approval gives customers peace of mind they are purchasing a fully-tested product, the product meets numerous checks and standards, and is built to a consistent standard.

One of the biggest issues we previously faced is that the campervan conversion industry is unregulated. While many campervan conversions appear to be similar to the untrained eye, this is not always true. One could be a professionally-designed and built campervan, and the other could have been built using poor quality and untested components, with no consistency in build from one vehicle to the next. This could be the difference between buying a vehicle that is safe to drive and use, or buying a vehicle that is potentially dangerous.

We consider all the above to be essential. Currently anyone can take a panel van and convert it into a campervan. Our opinion is this this cannot be right, it's completely unregulated and we see other conversions with safety elements that are questionable at best. Unfortunately, anyone can cut up a panel van, install some components and call it a campervan.

What's next?

The campervan sector cannot continue as it is. Somebody could get hurt or killed, it's a disaster waiting to happen. We want to do things right. We want to work with these people. We know it's up to us to co-operate with them, it's not them co-operating with us. They know what can and should be done with their vehicles, and we'll be led by that.

We are now working towards Ford approval and are aiming to be part of the Ford Pro Convertor Programme (only two other companies, Bailey and Swift, have this in the leisure vehicle sector). We are also working on gaining full VCA approval for our campervans based on the New Ford Transit Custom.

Next step is joining the Volkswagen Motorhome Qualified Converters Scheme, which we couldn't do until we had NCC Accreditation. Only six UK manufacturers are on this and everything is in place now for us to do that.

Post-registration conversion work by NCC

In November, the NCC presented its views and a possible solution to senior government policy officials from DfT and DVLA on the impact of post-registration conversions. Discussions centred on the conversion of commercial goods vehicles into motorhomes or campervans that bypass type approval as a passenger carrying vehicle and the re-registration as a motorhome or campervan.

We have lobbied on this issue and submitted written representations through a recent DVLA Call for Evidence (bit.ly/496xJju) and a DfT Consultation on GB type approval (bit.ly/4eK6c8L) that set out proposals for new guidelines covering rebuilt and radically altered vehicles and the emerging GB type approval.

Officials recognised the complexities of motorhome/campervan conversions, and the importance of ensuring these are compliant and safe, possibly through a separate ultra-small series approval process and crucially that any modifications made to a vehicle, such as the addition of seats to change it to a passenger vehicle, must be notified to the DVLA under current regulations.

The NCC made clear in its response to the call for evidence that a vehicle should be considered 'radically altered' at the point when a vehicle originally designed for the carriage of goods is converted for the purpose of the carriage of passengers with the addition of seats, seat belts and anchorage points.

DfT and DVLA confirmed this issue would be added to the immediate work programme on GB type approval, and urgent consideration be given to the NCC's representations in DVLA's response to the call for evidence. They also gave a commitment to continue constructive discussions.

About the Manufacturer's Accreditation Scheme

For over 50 years, the NCC has operated a manufacturer's accreditation scheme that regularly assesses leisure vehicles, holiday caravans and park homes. Units that have the 'NCC Approved' manufacturer scheme badge, show the manufacturer has been regularly assessed and accredited by the NCC. The scheme is widely recognised throughout the industry and is proof of a manufacturer's commitment to the safety of its products and its customers.

The NCC Approved Manufacturer badge demonstrates the product has been:

- Safety checked including gas and electrical installations, furnishings, cooking equipment, ventilation provision, and much more
- Technically checked and regularly inspected
- Compliant with British and European Standards.