



# PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

*The latest Kenworths at JLP are T610s with Cummins X15 power.*

**In a modern world where media notoriety and public prominence can appear to be the pursuit of many companies and individuals, the John L. Pierce fuel haulage company stands like a pillar of profoundly private enterprise.**

Despite a highly visible and impeccably presented fleet of around 150 trucks, and a reputation as one of the most professional fuel haulage operations on Australia's eastern seaboard, John L. Pierce remains the quintessential quiet achiever. An intensely proud family-owned company now in its fourth generation, devout in its determination to let uncompromising standards of safety and efficiency create their own image.

In effect, totally content to walk-the-walk rather than talk-the-talk.

Yet in a rare departure from the norm as Cummins celebrates a century in the engine business, John L. Pierce principals enthusiastically acknowledge the role of Cummins, its people and its products, in more than 50 years of association between the two companies.

"Cummins is our preferred engine brand. Absolutely," said senior John L. Pierce executive Richard Pierce, adding that the company's regard for Cummins South Pacific national accounts manager, Rob Sweeney, was a significant factor in the decision to speak publicly on its long-term association with Cummins.

Cummins-powered Kenworths are a staple of the operation, Richard continued. "There have, of course, been issues at different times but Cummins has looked after us wonderfully over the years.

"Our suppliers are incredibly important to us and Cummins has been a fantastic partner to this business over a very long time."

"There's a lot to be said for loyalty and it has to work both ways. The reasons are varied, but it has been totally beneficial for us to remain with Cummins."

It is an opinion shared fully by fleet maintenance manager Lance Fisher, a 38-year stalwart of the company and widely regarded as one of the most capable and innovative fleet managers in Australian road transport.

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Top: JLP's first Cummins-powered truck – a Peterbilt powered by a Cummins NH250.

Top right: Flashback to 2008: A rare family photo as it appeared in Cummins Commentary, from left, Richard, John, Emerson, Phil and David.

Bottom right: Cummins national accounts manager Rob Sweeney (right) with JLP fleet maintenance manager Lance Fisher.

"Our history with Cummins goes back many, many years," Lance comments, "but when it comes to the reasons for sticking with Cummins, it's the people, the relationship, and a level of service that's second to none.

"The biggest thing for me, though, is the commonality that comes with Cummins. It's what rules the fleet. All the boys know how to get the best out of it, you're dealing with the same spare parts and the after-sales service is fabulous. And you have people like Rob Sweeney making sure that things continue to be done properly."

## X15 the benchmark.

Thoughtful for a moment, Lance makes special mention of the formidable X15 engine which powers the company's latest 19-metre and 25-metre B-double combinations.

"The X15 is the benchmark today, definitely," he remarks. "Performance is good, the drivers are happy, and there's just so much to like about it.

"When it comes to engines, I wouldn't go past the X15. Or Cummins!"

Meantime, it's a smiling Richard Pierce who concedes that he and older brother David at 70 and 78 years of age respectively, are today something of the elder statesmen in the business. For several years now, it's David's sons Phillip and John who have been guiding the day-to-day operation of the company, supported by Richard's son Emerson and more recently, John's son Jake who represents the fourth generation in the family business.

"Our father had a red hot go at creating a business, he gave David and I a red hot go at building it further, and in recent years it has been the boys' turn," Richard explains.

"David and I still have plenty of say, for now anyway, but no one has a title in this business. There is no board of directors. We sit down, we talk about things among ourselves, talk to our people in the company, then we do what needs to be done. More often than not, it's as simple as that."

As for the family's entrenched liking for a low public profile, John Pierce explains, "Truly, we've never seen ourselves as being that special, that newsworthy. We've just stuck to our own grindstone, kept to our own patch."

## Legacy firmly intact.

Still, from John L. Pierce to his sons and grandsons, extensive involvement in industry associations striving for higher quality standards and a better future for road transport has been an intrinsic part of the company's culture.

"That culture came from John L," says John Pierce, citing his grandfather's role as a founding member of the Long Distance Road Transport Association, his father David's commitment to what would become NatRoad, and his own role as a board member and former president of NatRoad.

"All that involvement is not just about improving our own business, but improving the quality and the standards of the industry generally," John emphasises.

John L. Pierce passed away in October 2002 at the age of 87, yet his legacy remains firmly intact. "It's vitally important to be involved," Richard adds, "but as for the running of this business, we just like to keep our heads down and go about trying to provide a decent living for everyone who depends on the success of this company."

And with around 330 employees (including 245 drivers), there are certainly plenty of families relying on the enduring strength and success of a company which has evolved from very simple beginnings.

In fact, in the same year Cummins celebrates its 100 years in the engine business, 2019 will also mark 80 years since John Lambert Pierce took his first tentative step into the owner-driver ranks, urged by the young woman who would soon enough become Mrs Lyla Pierce and the mother of their four boys.

“Mum wouldn’t marry Dad until he worked for himself,” Richard reflects with a wide grin. In 1939, the 24 year-old John L. was driving a KS3 International in Sydney’s northern suburbs for the well-known Arthur H. Gillott transport company known as Highway Haulage. However, with Lyla’s obvious encouragement, he ultimately became the truck’s owner.

“In 1941,” Richard continued, “Dad went to enlist in the Army but because he owned a truck, he was deemed an ‘essential service’ so both he and the truck were sent to Townsville to help construct an American Air Force base which is now Townsville Airport.”

Back home in Sydney, the post-war building boom provided the platform for the fledgling John L. Pierce transport company to gradually expand, forging strong relationships with not just customers in the building materials industry, but also the suppliers of various brands of trucks.

By 1956, the company had made its first interstate trip on a run from Sydney to Melbourne. In days to come, interstate would become a core of the company’s operations for several decades before eventually, the decision was taken to shut down the linehaul business and focus entirely on fuel.

## **A new era in power.**

Invariably, many of John L. Pierce’s early trucks were what could be generally termed ‘Pommie lorries’ – ERF, Guy, Foden, Atkinson and, of course, the inimitable Commer Knocker. As for engines, British-built Gardners were the favourite.

However, the purchase in 1966 of one of Australia’s earliest Peterbilts, powered by a Cummins NH250 engine, would be the precursor to an entirely new era in truck performance. One of two that would join the company, the Peterbilt was certainly a big purchase at the time but so, too, was the earlier acquisition of a fully imported Kenworth cab-over.

Yet as Richard explains, Atkinsons with Gardners largely remained the fleet standard for several years afterwards, or at least until the British powertrain struggled to meet changeover schedules on a demanding shuttle run between Sydney and Toowoomba.

It wasn’t an easy run from Sydney, travelling the infamous Putty Road before reaching the changeover point at Bendemeer high on the New England Highway.

“We needed more grunt, so Cummins NH250s in Atkinsons became the norm but back then there were also a few other brands like ERF and Diamond Reo which had the Cummins 250s as well,” Richard explained.



*From around 1970, Cummins became the power preference for JLP. This Kenworth S2 has a Cummins V903. Richard Pierce is on the right.*



*Cummins Big Cam 350 propelled this Kenworth W900.*



*Cummins Big Cam 400 was the strongly beating heart of this K125 Kenworth.*



John L. Pierce was inducted into the National Road Transport Hall of Fame in Alice Springs in 2017.

*It was always going to take something extra special for the family principals of John L. Pierce to take an uncommon step into the spotlight. Something as special as the centenary of Cummins.*

Most notably, though, it was from around 1970 onwards that Cummins became the unequivocal power preference for John L. Pierce. Over the best part of 50 years, there have been numerous truck brands sporting Cummins engines of one type or another – from the original NH250s to the iconic 903 and N14, the L10 and M11, to the revolutionary Signature and now, the exceptional X15.

## 325 Cummins-powered trucks.

On current figures, John L. Pierce has bought around 325 Cummins-powered trucks since that first NH250 in a Peterbilt in 1966.

Yet it is an adamant Richard Pierce who says the 1970 purchase of a Cummins-powered Kenworth S2 model was the combination which laid the platform for a fleet standard which endures to this day, spanning the evolution of a company which has moved consciously, quietly and purposefully between various forms of freight.

As reflective Richard Pierce explains: “This business has had three completely different lives, from tippers to linehaul and now fuel, and none of these changes from one form of freight to another have been accidental... They were all conscious decisions.”

“Tankers certainly were not new to us,” John Pierce comments, “but among other things, it was our involvement in various quality programs that led us to the point where we ultimately didn’t want to be involved in linehaul with fast-moving consumer goods.

“We wanted to be involved in a niche where the standards were higher and where we could actually compete on a more level playing field. For us, that was fuel.”

By April, 2016, with depots in Brisbane, Newcastle and head office at Toongabbie in Sydney’s west, the transition to a one hundred percent fuel operation was complete.

As for the future, a smiling John Pierce says simply, “It’s about building and maintaining strong relationships beneficial to all parties.

“Just like the relationship we have with Cummins.” ■