



Penshurst Fuels: a fuel distributor with community at its heart

PENS Hurst Fuels was founded in 2021 and is a relatively new, independent fuel distribution business based in the picturesque village of Penshurst, Kent. Both owners of the business, **JAMES ROBINSON** and **BEN BOOKER**, are local to the village, and are passionate about their business and being part of the community.

CLAUDIA WEEKS, COMMUNITY CONTENT LEAD FOR FUEL OIL NEWS, SPOKE WITH JAMES, JOINT OWNER AND DIRECTOR OF PENS Hurst Fuels, to find out more about the business.

The development of the business

“Ben and I met on the school run, as our children attend the same village primary school. Ben had recently left a local independent supplier, and I was looking for a new business opportunity,” James began, explaining his background and how he came to the decision to set up a brand-new fuel distribution business.

“At the time, my career involved a lot of international travel, and I wanted to be closer to my family and to contribute to my community. Like many people in our area of Kent, I was a heating oil customer, and I really wasn’t satisfied with the service I was receiving. Ben agreed, and over a few pints and packets of pork scratchings in our local pub, we came up with the idea to start our own supply business!”

A truly local business

“Starting from scratch was daunting, to say the least,” James continued. “But with Ben’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the industry and my drive, we believed we could create something special: a truly local business with values, customers, and the community at its heart.

“That was back in 2022. We started with one lorry and two customers – ourselves! Three years later, we have three active lorries and thousands of regular customers across Kent, Sussex, and the Surrey borders, whom we supply year-round.

“Our customers range from Mrs Smith who lives at Number 2, to the local dairy, school, and even the largest stately homes and National Trust properties.

“We love Penshurst and our surrounding area, and we will always put the community at the heart of what we do. We love that our customers can drop into the office for a chat or a cup of tea.

“Of course, we’d love to keep growing, but we plan to maintain our village feel and the values we were founded on.”

I love coming to work every day

“Looking back, it’s a great source of pride that we’ve been able to start and grow this business during an incredibly challenging market with so many economic variables,” James shared,

explaining how challenging yet rewarding it has been developing the business.

“With any new business, there are long hours and sleepless nights, and a significant amount of risk is involved. We both gave up our jobs and sold our dream to our loved ones. We were determined to make it work.

“Thankfully, we quickly realised that we had a product and a service in demand. It was a huge thrill when we recorded the details of our one-thousandth customer. In less than a year, we had to upscale to a second lorry. As demand increased, we added a third, and we’ll need a fourth before the end of this year. While growth





is important to us, we're in this business to offer a personal touch to our customers, and we're determined not to compromise our values as we expand.

"We are currently a team of six. It doesn't sound like a lot, does it? But it's amazing what we achieve together.

"I love coming to work every day. Even on the toughest days, we find something to laugh about – usually, it's the tortured groans coming from the Pilates classes in the studio next door to our office!"

A local business that gives back to the community

James is clearly passionate about his village, his community and making a difference: "There's a big marketplace, and a huge amount of competition. I was a customer before I was a supplier, and I felt there was something missing. I loved the idea of creating a local business that gave back to the community, and that's something we've focused on from day one.

"We support local charities and causes like the Kent Air Ambulance, the local hospice, and the farmers' association, and we helped create after-school sports clubs for children.

"We're very visible in the community, and our customers tell us this is something important to them. We're proud to have a customer retention rate of more than 95%.

"Our domestic customers may only speak to us a couple of times a year, but when they do, they're always pleased to tell us they've seen what we're doing to support the community. People always want good value for money, but they also want great customer service and the opportunity to support a company with values.

"We ask our customers; 'Would you stay with us if our prices weren't always the cheapest



on the market?' and more often than not, they tell us, 'Yes!'. It's proof that people aren't just interested in the product; they care about how you sell it."

Malcolm Silander, the coach and team manager from local football club, Chiddingstone, was keen to pass on his thanks and appreciation for the business: "Penshurst Fuels have been an amazing support in setting up our local girls' football club, Chiddingstone Girls FC.

"James and Ben bought our first footballs, sponsored our strips and have been there to cheer us on in all weathers, run BBQs and help wherever they can. We now have 50 girls playing every week thanks to their generosity. We can't thank them enough and every parent that uses Penshurst Fuels recommends them unreservedly!"

Working in this industry

James was clear about what he enjoys most about working in the industry: "The ability to truly help people when they find themselves in a sticky situation with runouts, and the fact that we can literally fuel local rural businesses.

"It's always nice to hear that our drivers have been treated to a free beer or two, off-shift, in local pubs because we've gone above and beyond for a customer. I must say that our drivers do often go above and beyond!

"One of our fantastic drivers, Adrian, was chatting with one of our domestic customers.

She asked if he could give her a quick hand moving something from her kitchen to the front garden, and, of course, he obliged. What he didn't realise was that she was moving her entire kitchen and had been waiting for a sturdy individual like him to help her.

"He ended up moving her kitchen worktops and sink and worked up quite a sweat. We all had a good laugh back at the office!"

The best industry advice

"You can only lose a customer once, so do your best not to let that happen!" James replied, when asked to share the best industry advice he'd been given. "These very wise words are from Alan Manning, our colleague who has over 40 years' experience in the business. Ben and I are very grateful to Alan, he has been a guiding light for us both with his years of experience. His wisdom, advice and industry knowledge are very much appreciated by us both.

"Our proudest accomplishment, since founding Penshurst Fuels, has been giving back; we help local charities and support community events. Also, we are so proud of the tremendous pace of our growth, and everything we've achieved over the past three years!"

Energy transition

With the sector transitioning at pace, Claudia asked James what he believes are the major challenges and positives for the industry as it moves forward. James responded: "We find this quite an exciting time. As a new supplier, we're not tied down to any historic working practices, and we enjoy talking to our customers about the transition to sustainable fuels.

"I find it interesting that many customers are unaware of how the transition will work. We absolutely have a duty of care to ensure our customers stay informed. I believe that's the best way to retain customers as our products evolve in the future."

The sky is the limit

When considering the future of the business, James said: "The sky's the limit for us. We want to deliver our consistent, considered, and customer-first level of service to as many people as we can.

"It would be lovely to come back and talk to you again in 5 or 10 years to see how much we've grown and how much the industry has changed for the better. One thing is for certain, we will be constantly looking ahead."

Fuel Oil News is very much looking forward to catching up with James, Ben and Penshurst Fuels in the coming years and wishes them every success.