

Introduction

Before you read any further, I will apologise in advance if the words "*grandmother*" and "*eggs*" come to mind whilst reading this booklet. It is designed to be exactly what it says on the tin - an Idiot's Guide. So if it seems a little *too* basic in places, then you are obviously not an idiot! It also covers a lot of things that you don't actually *need* to know, which you may find interesting.

I also apologise if anything has been missed - it has been written almost entirely from my own personal experience, which is by no means exhaustive. There may be things that other people do differently. In either case, please feel free to let us know, so we can improve future editions. Bear in mind that this booklet is primarily aimed at the employed driver, rather than the owner operator.

This guide will tell you the basics. If you are new to container work then it should save you from trying to pry information out of other people, and maybe give you a small insight into why things are the way they are. If you are considering it, then it may help you to decide whether it could be the job for you. Even if you only learn one thing from the whole booklet, then my job is done.

Enjoy (!)

Who Pulls Containers?

I suppose by this I mean: "**Who will I be working for?**"

Like any sort of haulage work, there are as many different types of firm as there are shades of green. But to give you general overview, the vast majority can be broken down into 4 main categories: -

1. Large specialist firms.

These people are the "big boys" of the container world. They either do nothing else, or have large sub-divisions that do nothing else. A lot of other firms are subcontracted to these guys in one way or another.

The big firms get the vast majority, if not all, of their work direct from the shipping lines. This means that they are making the biggest profit margins, so are generally the best payers.

They do a mixture of *contract work* and *spot work* (see below) - you and your truck may well be shifted around from one to the other, or between contracts, depending on which is busiest. On spot work you may even find yourself working for a different haulier from time to time - if they are short of a vehicle for a job, then they will simply "hire" one in from elsewhere.

The exception to this is when you are allocated a "dedicated" truck. These units are on one contract permanently, and are painted up in that shipping line's livery, e.g. Hyundai Merchant Marine, or APL (a privilege for which the haulier is paid a small fee). As far as I know, none of the shippers own their own vehicles; so if you see one of these liveried trucks, then it just means that they are "dedicated".

There is also at least one instance of several firms pooling a certain number of trucks together and forming what can best be described as a "sub-firm", in order to take a contract away from a mutual

competitor. In these cases, the truck is either run by the sub-firm itself, or work is passed back through the individual traffic offices. In fact, it can change nearly as often as you change your pants, as they keep trying to extract every last penny out of the operation! From the driver's point of view, it makes very little difference which way they're doing it this month - the jobs are the same, it's just a different voice at the end of the phone!

Pros/Cons.

The upsides to working for one of the "big boys" are as you'd expect, really:

- They tend to pay the most.
- They get the "best" work - whatever that may mean. . .
- They have relatively new trucks, usually with a decent-sized engine (so easier driving) and these days are going for more and more high-roof cabs/space cabs/etc. , to try and attract and keep drivers.
- Their size means that they tend to be more flexible about holidays/doctors appointments, etc.
- They *may* even offer pension schemes and sick pay - although don't quote me on that! If you're female, then you will have a lot less trouble sorting out maternity leave, should you need to. Employment rights are generally played by the book, as are other applicable laws.

The downsides are equally predictable, although none of the below can be said about *every* firm - they all have their good points and bad points. These are just a few things that are possible, so it is useful to be aware of them when you consider who to drive for:

- Because of their size, these firms can be very impersonal to work for - in extreme cases the driver is merely considered to be an extension of the truck.
- If the work goes quiet they may have a round of redundancies, then recruit again once it picks up (although this is becoming less common as the current shortage of drivers makes its mark). In which case, it's generally last in, first out.
- They can be a little "cliquey" - i. e. either your face fits or it doesn't, and if it doesn't then you'll know about it. Whilst this is true of any firm, regardless of size, it can be more prevalent amongst the larger set-ups. There is one firm which is particularly known for this, but I shall leave you to investigate that for yourself. . . they are also known for employing a lot of "prima donnas", and are nearly *always* short of drivers as a consequence!

NB - If you've only just passed your test, it is worth bearing in mind that the larger firms generally want you to be *at least* aged 25 and have 2yrs experience. This is not always the case however, and they have been known to make exceptions when they're really busy, so don't dismiss them completely - a phone call will soon tell you what the current position is.

Addresses/phone numbers for some of the large firms can be found in the **Useful Contacts** section at the end of this booklet.

2. Medium-sized firms.

This category covers a multiple of sins, really. I am including it because, in my opinion, these people can provide the ideal "happy medium" from a driver's point of view. They can be running either contracts or spot work, although it tends to be the latter (see below for the reasons why). If they do contract work, it is more often than not on a subcontract basis through the large firms - this may well be the case with spot-work, too.

The sort of firm I am talking about runs between 10 and 30 (ish) trucks, and is large enough to have it's

own traffic office to allocate work. These people are *generally* not large enough to hold contracts with the shippers directly, hence the subcontracting element. This size of outfit quite often has it's own sub-contractors too!

The best thing I can do under this heading is to give you a few examples of ways in which they can be better to work for than other types of set-up:

Advantages compared to large firms

- They are usually small enough that all the staff know each other, and so are less impersonal. You can pretty much guarantee that the person on the end of the phone can remember what you look like!
- Because they are properly familiar with all their drivers, they are less likely to lay you off when the work goes quiet. They are also far more likely to notice if you are doing a good job, or when you go the "extra mile".
- Since a lot of their work can be spot work, you will get more variety in your working week.

Advantages compared to very small firms

- They are big enough to have half-decent kit, and keep it well maintained. The breakdown backup is generally better, and minor defects will usually be sorted out quicker.
- They have a better infrastructure, so you are more likely to be able to get holidays when you want, and arrange time off for doctors' appointments etc.

They usually pay better, being higher up the food chain. Pay is generally put straight into your bank account, and payslips/P60s/P45s etc. are easier to get your hands on.

It all depends on how you prefer to work really - I won't insult your intelligence by listing the disadvantages of this size of haulier, since I think that is fairly self-explanatory, based on what I've already said.

3. Very small firms, "subbies", and one-man bands.

This category almost warrants a booklet all of it's own - partly because it covers such a wide range of people, and partly because there are so many things to be aware of! Before I go any further, may I just make it clear that I actually quite *like* working for these types of set-ups, and have done so very happily up until recently. So please bear that in mind if I seem a little negative in places!

It is invariably the case that the bigger firms take one more work than they can handle, so they take on subcontractors to plug the gap. These are firms in their own right, who have vehicles on contract to larger hauliers. *Theoretically*, the large firm runs them as if they were their own. In practice, however, they will always give the "better" - i. e. higher paying jobs to their own trucks, and the subbies get what's left. This can mean that the quieter times of year, e. g. just after Christmas, can be very quiet indeed for these firms. Other reasons for work dropping off are numerous and can be anything from the driver having a personality clash with the traffic clerk who runs him; or a truck becoming "earmarked" as unreliable, which can mean that it gets run very loosely (with big gaps between jobs) in case it breaks down again. If the contracting haulier has real problems with a subbie or one of their drivers, they will simply kick that lorry off the contract - or, in bad cases, kick all the firms wagons off the contract. This is well worth bearing in mind *before* you tell the traffic office the price of fish on a lousy day!

Making a truck earn money as a subbie is a bit of an art form in itself, but it can be done. There are many owner-drivers out there who are very skilled at playing the system and make a decent living -

although it must be said that no one ever got rich this way!

This heading includes everyone from firms with 10 trucks on various different contracts through to the owner-driver with a second truck to boost his income - and every possible permutation in between! It is very difficult to give firm advice on something so varied, therefore I think the best way forward at this point is to list a few of the main things to look out for, then leave you to draw your own conclusions. I'll call this next bit. . .

Lucy's "You've been warned" List!

1. A good way to judge a subby is by the state of his kit. The days of people running ratty old sheds are thankfully fading fast, especially as lease deals are becoming easier and cheaper to come by. Many people are running fairly new trucks, with some sort of arrangement/contract with a local dealer or truck garage for their maintenance needs. However, there are still some real crates out there, which leads me to my #1 rule of subbing - **Don't ever take a job without having a good poke 'round the truck, preferably a test drive!**

Now, don't get me wrong, there are some really good guys out there who are running truly ancient trucks. But ask a few pertinent questions e.g. Who does the maintenance? What is the defect procedure? Who comes out if I have a breakdown? What about tyres and punctures? When are the inspections done (usually weekends, should be at least 6-weekly).

A good employer will appreciate you showing an interest. If any of the answers to the above questions seem a bit vague, probe further. If it all seems a bit hit-and-miss **don't touch it with a bargepole!**

2. Check the Tax and Operator's Licence Discs and make sure they are in date. See what weight the truck is taxed to - a lot of subbies only run to 38tonnes. Not a problem, but you need to know. The more unscrupulous types won't tell the contract-holder, then leave you to cop it! Get a name from the O-licence. If it is in someone else's name - the wife, for example - or if the trading name is different to that advertised, I'd smell a rat. Ask a few more questions. It may all be perfectly in order, but it's best to be safe.

3. Ask how you will be paid. If it is in cash, ask if you can be paid into the bank instead. If the answer is "no", for whatever reason, **walk away!** There is probably a tax fiddle going on. Ask how often you will get a payslip. Check and double-check pay-rates and how they are calculated. Ask what most drivers take home. Check whether that includes night-out. Basically, ask every question you can think of and then some. If you are unhappy about anything **walk away!**

4. Try and talk to other drivers or, failing that, **the contractors.** If you can't track down anyone who actually works there already, try and find out who the trucks are on contract with, and have a chat with them. Even a few well-placed questions in the local transport cafe can tell you things, which you would only otherwise discover once it is too late. Bear in mind, however, that transport is a very small world, and the "subbie world" is even smaller. And subbies quite often bear grudges. You'll have to use your judgement here, I'm afraid.

5. If you take a job, and anything bothers you, try and sort it out straight away. Always check your payslips. One of the big things with working for subbies is to **know when to walk away.** If you've got a problem which never gets sorted out, or defects which are never fixed, or you can't get a straight answer about anything, that is the time to jump ship!!!

Having said all that, there are some very well run small set-ups out there. If you find one, they can be an absolute joy to work for! After eliminating everything above, here is the basic . . .

Pros/Cons

The upsides include:

- You will always "be a person".

- You will normally work the running of the truck straight from whoever it's on contract to, which can give you a fair bit of control over what you do (within reason).
- If you do that bit extra, it will probably be noticed and appreciated.
- Subbies are often a bit less fussy about who they employ - a good starting place if you've only just got your licence.
- Life is never boring! You may well change contracts every few months.

As for downsides:

- They are further down the "food chain", so there is less money about. Wages tend to be lower.
- For the same reason, trucks are often older (although often higher spec. than a fleet truck)
- You may be expected to do some minor repairs. You may find yourself "limping home" more often than in other jobs, to save money on breakdowns.
- Few pay parking.
- Time off needs to be planned well in advance.

If you are thinking of becoming an owner-driver then subby work is ideal, as it will allow you to learn many of the "tricks of the trade" which may well prove to be invaluable (far too numerous to go into here . . .).

4. Firms who do container work to "fill in."

Pretty self-explanatory, really. Britain is a "nation of shopkeepers", which means that the vast majority of goods sold in this country are imported. And most of it comes in to the country in containers. Therefore, there is *always* container work to be done. Because of this simple fact, many firms who are mainly involved in other types of haulage use containers to "fall back on" when their regular work drops off.

Sometimes they keep a couple of trucks on different sub-contracts all the time, so that it is easy to switch a few more over when they need to. Sometimes they have a good enough relationship with the major hauliers, and a well enough established pattern of work, that they just switch over as and when. Either way you quite often come across drivers who changed job because they were bored with container work, only to find themselves straight back on it again!

If you are a new driver, and you've "cut your teeth" on containers, this can work to your advantage. Firms will take people on who have no experience at all in their specialist line of work, simply because they know they can shift them onto containers easily should the need arise. The most common types of firms to "fill in" in this way are those whose normal work has regular, seasonal peaks and troughs, so we're looking at bulk tippers in particular, and some people who pull fridges. It can be anyone though, really . . .

Obviously, this is only a summary, and there are many firms who fit into more than one category, as well as many who fit into none. But hopefully it has given you some idea of what to expect from different set-ups, and which might be the best one for you.

So What Do You Do All Day?

Right, so hopefully we've found you the right sort of firm to work for - now you'll be wanting to know what you'll have to do!

As I've already explained, trucks on sub-contracts are run in the same way as large-firm wagons, so the working day is - to all intents and purposes - the same for everyone. It also makes very little difference whether you are on contract or spot work. You are less likely to have been to your destination before on spot work, but the pattern is the same. The two types of work have been talked about a fair bit already, so here is a quick definition (from a driver's point of view) for those of you who have got a bit confused . . .!

Contract Work

This is basically where you pull boxes for the same shipping line all the time (boxes with the same thing written on the side). Big firms have contracts with several different shippers, and will generally assign different trucks to each one, for ease of planning. If the firm you are working for (or your firm is subcontracting for) has several contracts then they will shift trucks from one contract to another depending on which is busiest/making most money. Just because you start pulling for one shipper doesn't mean you will *always* pull for them . . . however, if you stay on a contract for a while then you will get to know where all the regular tips are, which makes life easier. If you are assigned a "dedicated" truck (usually painted up in the livery of a certain shipping line) then you will stay on that particular contract all the time.

Spot Work

Spot work is where you are assigned jobs on an as-and-when basis. The haulage rates are higher, so this work is very attractive to medium-sized firms who have their own traffic office. The downside is that they have to hunt around and take what they can get, which is time consuming and can be a little less secure. If you are on spot work then you will pull all sorts of different boxes, for lots of different shipping lines. If you get bored with doing the same tips over and over, this is the work for you!

Sometimes you may end up doing a combination of the two, but whatever type of work you end up doing . . .

There are several things you can be sure of:

1. Long Days

Full 13 and 15-hour spreadovers are the norm, as is using the 16-hour split shift rule, often several times a week. Make sure you know your tacho law inside out and backwards, because you'll be using it to the full! This is because you also do -

2. A Lot of Sitting Around

Containers are loaded to the roof, and are usually handball - if you are going to pay to ship a container, it makes sense to avoid wasting space by filling it up with pallets! It takes about 2hrs to tip a 20ft container, and about 4hrs for a 40ft. Sometimes it'll be a lot more, sometimes a lot less - it depends on what's in it. Most hauliers start charging *demurrage* (waiting time) after 3-4 hours. But that's the average. And the best bit is - **it's not your job!** Containers are "no-touch" loads. You can help if you like (and if the customer lets you), but you won't be insured if you injure yourself. Folding money usually increases the container driver's inclination to ignore this fact, however . . . **Yes, you will be offered the odd "backhander"!** Just bear in mind that you are *never* expected to get in the back, and if you do and something drops on you/you fall out the back/you trip over something . . . well, on your own head be it! Once you're empty, you'll find -

3. There aren't many reloads

Container jobs are paid (to the hauliers) as round trip, so there is very little backloading - also, this country doesn't export a great deal, so there aren't that many loads to be collected. If you're on a subcontract then backloads are considered a bad thing, because in most cases they don't earn the truck very much - sometimes just mileage. Most of the time you'll take your empty to your home port/railhead or the nearest port/railhead. Whether you have to load a box or not, you will sometimes find that -

4. You'll Go Into Places For No Apparent Reason

Let me give you few examples of things that have happened to me to show you what I am getting at here . . . a) Tip a 40ft box in Scunthorpe, take the empty to Leeds. Get it lifted off, then replace it with an *identical* 40ft box. Go and reload it in Doncaster . . . b) Tip a 40ft box in Northampton; discover it has a hole in the roof, so it's classed as "damaged". Take the empty to Birmingham to exchange for a "damaged" box (!). Get there only to be told what you already knew - that the first one is damaged enough, thanks - and book it back out again. Take it back to Southampton . . . c) You get the idea.

Odd though it may seem at the time, there are actually reason for why both above happened; in a) If I had gone straight to Doncaster with my existing box, then the job would have earned a lot less money for the haulier than it did by going through Leeds, even after you offset the cost of the additional mileage. This, apparently, is something to do with it being charged at a "reload" rate (so a lower rate) in the first instance, whereas by going through another depot it is classed as a job in it's own right, and earns accordingly. That's how I understand it, anyway... In the second instance roughly the same thing is happening. Also added to this is the fact that it is not actually the haulier's responsibility to decide whether a box is "damaged" or not, as far as I know.

It is actually very common to take boxes into various places (which I will talk about later) to exchange and be told to keep it on. This is mainly an attempt on the part of the yard-bods in these places to save themselves unnecessary work, and keep their queues down. It can get a little frustrating and irritating sometimes (especially on a Friday afternoon when you would rather have gone straight home!), but is actually saving you time too, since otherwise you would have been waiting for a lift for the old and new boxes, which can take quite some time!

5. You may well do a fair few nights out, early starts, late finishes.

This one really depends on where you are based and how far away that is from the place you are principally pulling out of. If you live/are based close to the port/railhead where you get the majority of your work from, then you will be home more often. But there are many people who are based a good hour or so - or sometimes further - away, in which case you'll be expected to stay out all week. I know a *few* people who purely drive days, and are home every night, but be prepared to stay out just in case. When you go for interview, expect to be asked how you feel about being away, as it really is part and parcel of the job. Personally, I've always pulled principally out of Southampton, but I live in Dorset. I go to work on a Monday morning and stay out until Friday night. If I lived in Southampton then some weeks I would have been home most nights, others I would have been out. It depends on how the jobs work out. Some firms like you to load your Monday box on the Friday night, some expressly forbid this. Some firms expect you to run in on a Saturday. Others like you to run out on a Sunday, so that you are waiting at your Monday tip ready to unload. You will often be running either very early in the morning - like 2am early; or very late at night - like 2am late! It really does depend on which jobs you are allocated. One thing is for certain - if you have driving to do, and you are legally able to do it, then

the chances are you will!

If you have specific needs, then you really should mention this to whoever you are going to work for *before* you start. Also bear in mind that it is not always possible for them to accommodate those needs, even if they have said they will do their best - with the best will in the world, no-one can predict that crash on the M6 which means you are stuck out on a Friday night. Equally, there will be times when you get allocated something that means you *have* to go up the road on Sunday evening, because there quite literally isn't anything else.

Bear in mind, too, that keeping legal on the tacho is principally **your** responsibility. The person who is running you also has umpteen other trucks to think about, and they will *not* be able to keep track of how many hours you have all done on any given day. They will do their best, but it just doesn't always work out. So if you get given a load which you cannot legally do/get there on time **say so then and there!** If they tell you to take it anyway, then do so, and do your best, but don't run illegally. By warning them of the situation in advance, your back is covered. If you are going to run out of hours for the *week*, or are not able to start early enough for the job on a Monday, then say so. You will probably be given something else.

6. You will probably get most of your work from one place

In most cases, the port/railhead that you start off from is where you will keep returning. You may well go to others from time to time, but you will nearly always wind up back at base at some point. So if you are running out of Southampton, for example, that is where you will keep returning to with your empties. If you are running out of Felixstowe, then you will keep coming back into Felixstowe; if it's Manchester, then back to Manchester you'll mostly go.

There *are* glaring exceptions to this, however, especially if you are normally away all week - my current firm deliberately keeps us *out* of Southampton, preferring to keep that work for the people who just do days. This is also more likely to happen if you are on spot work; contract work tends to be mainly specific to one base. There are also some people who run out of, say, Southampton, then go and get work out of Thamesport all week, running back to Southampton (or wherever) on a Friday.

Which leads me neatly into my next section . . .

Where do the boxes come from, and where do they go?

There are 3 main types of places that loaded and empty boxes are pulled from and returned to. They are:

1. Container Terminals at Ports.

This is where the boxes arrive in the country, and where they eventually leave again. Many firms have yards near these ports, and get most of their work directly out of them. The main ones are Felixstowe, Southampton, Thamesport, and **Liverpool**. Addresses can be found in the section at the end of the booklet. Some of the other ports have small container terminals/berths too, but those are the major ones.

2. Railheads.

These can be found both at ports - where the containers are loaded on to trains straight from the ships - and inland - where they are transferred onto lorries for the final part of their journey. Many firms pull boxes "off the train" and have yards in the vicinity. The main ones are run by **Freightliner** and are to be found at Barking (E. London), Birmingham (Aston), Cleveland (Middlesbrough), Felixstowe, Leeds (Stourton), Liverpool, Manchester (Trafford Park), Seaforth, Southampton, Thamesport, and **Tilbury** in England; **Cardiff** in Wales; and **Coatbridge** in Scotland. Addresses are in the section at the back. There are other railheads too, some run by other firms, but again, these are the biggies.

Most of these places also have a repair and storage area, so you may well find yourself taking empties in there to be exchanged for different sized boxes, damaged boxes to be exchanged for sound ones, and vice-versa.

Freightliner also have their own lorries, and shunt vehicles at the ports, incidentally.

2. Other Container Yards and Storage Facilities.

3.

There are countless other yards, mainly clustered around ports and railheads, which store and repair empty boxes - far too many to even *start* listing them here! I say empties, because most of them use Forklifts to lift the boxes, which will not take the weight when they are loaded. There are, as ever, exceptions to this. Some of the major container hauliers have their own storage facilities in various different places - the ones which immediately come to mind are **Securicor** and **Pentalver's**, although there are many others.

Once you have got your hands on your loaded box, you'll be wanting to know what sort of places they get delivered to, and the answer to that, I'm afraid, is just about anywhere - *quite often regardless of whether you can get a wagon in there or not!* This is probably covered in with the next section:

Systems for loading and unloading boxes at these places.

All of the systems are slightly different at all of the above places, and they change frequently, so I won't even attempt to go into them in detail for fear of misinforming you! What I can do, however, is give you a rough idea of the parts of the system which are common to all of them, giving you a rough idea what to expect. From there, the best thing to do is either confirm the details with your Traffic Office nearer the time (if they know, which they don't always), or ask another driver when you get there. We were all new to each of them once and you can go years without visiting them all (I know I haven't), so people will be happy to point you in the right direction. The booking office will normally point you in the right direction, too. Here goes:

1. Container Terminals at Ports.

I'll break this down into stages . . .

- **The first thing that will happen when you get to any container port is that you will join a queue. .**

This will be a series of lanes leading either under a canopy or to a cabin. Either way, join the queue. If there are lots of lanes - which there probably will be - then it doesn't generally matter which one you join. If I were you I'd pick the one that looks shortest, although they will probably all be about the same. The only time it matters is if there is a fast track scheme running (as at, for example, Southampton), in which case your office will let you know if you are in it, so that you can join the appropriate queue. Don't worry, though, fast-track queues are usually labelled as such and, ironically,

tend to be the longest! By the way, get used to the words "queue" and "wait", 'cos you're going to hear them a lot . . . (author is rolling her eyes!)

- **Next you need to book in.**

This is usually done in a Driver's Reception, which will either be to the front of the queues, or to one side. **Put on a hi-viz vest or jacket** - they may not serve you unless you are wearing one, and they are compulsory once you are inside the terminal. You'll save yourself time and hassle if you write all the information that the office will need on a separate piece of paper, ready for when you are asked for it. Usually they will want: **your registration number, your haulier** (or the name of the haulier you are subcontracted to, if that is who you is running you), **the number of the box you are exporting** (i.e. the one you are dropping off), **the seal number for that box** (if it is loaded - you don't need this if the box is empty), **a pin number/load reference for your import box** (the one you are collecting will usually be loaded). Empties come from one of the various storage yards. Your Traffic Office will give you the number, and sometimes the box number for your import box (if you need it - usually they can get this by checking against the pin number). Not all of the ports need all of the above, but it's always better to have too much information to hand than too little! At the end you will either end up with a piece of paper or a swipecard of some description (at Southampton you get this at the barrier on the way in and need the number off it to book in, and to hand in shipping notes).

A clerk behind a desk, or at a computer terminal does the actual booking in one of two ways, either. If it's a clerk, then join the queue for the desk (there's that word again) and then give them your piece of paper with your info on it. If it's a computer terminal, then follow the instructions on the screen, and enter the information as you are prompted for it. Any problems in either case, and it's time to ring the traffic office again . . . (If you are on a fast-track schedule then you may find that the computer terminals are alongside the lanes, so that you don't need to get out of the cab unless you have shipping notes.)

If you have a loaded box to drop off, then the shipping notes generally get handed in to the desk. If not, then the desk will be able to tell you where they *are* supposed to go (e.g. at Felixstowe they go into a bank of boxes along the opposite wall, there is one for each shipping line).

By the way, don't worry about abandoning your lorry in the queue whilst you do all this. If the one behind gets booked in before you then he will simply drive round your wagon. I know it all seems like a bit of a bunfight, but that's containers, I'm afraid.

- **Then you queue to get a slot number.**

This is what the queue you have joined is actually for. The way you get to the point of being allocated a slot varies from place to place, and the queuing systems vary only in how bad they are! At some (e.g. Felixstowe and Thamesport) each of the lanes leads under a canopy with little offices between the lanes. At others (e.g. Tilbury and Southampton) up to 12 lanes have to squeeze down into just one or two, which causes massive hold-ups as I'm sure you can imagine. In these cases there is generally a marshal to keep order, but not always - in which case it's a free for all, I'm afraid.

Once you eventually get to the end of this queue then you use your card/paperwork to get a slot number. In some places (e.g. Thamesport) you place your card in a reader and go into the hut next to the lane for a printout. In others (e.g. Felixstowe) you take your booking-in paperwork into the hut and hand it in. The bloke in there will issue you with a slot number. At some of them (e.g. Southampton) you hand your card/paperwork straight through a window into a kiosk, where the slot number is issued. Don't panic if you're not sure what to do - just watch where the other drivers go before you get there.

In most cases, this is the point at which you need to undo your twistlocks (if you haven't already done it to give yourself something to do!). Once this is done remember to **drive carefully** as it is only the weight of the box which is holding it onto the wagon!

- **Next, head for your slot . . . well, sometimes . . .**

Theoretically you now head to the slot which you have been allocated. Sometimes you will get 2

slots: one to lift off your export and another to get your import put on. Sometimes you will get both done on one slot. Still other times, if your export is empty, you will be directed to a Forklift Park to have it taken off, *then* you go 'round to your slot (this is generally quicker than having it done on a slot). I say theoretically, because sometimes when things are *really* busy you will be given a pager and sent to a holding area to wait until there is a free slot, at which point you will be called forward. This can take some time! Obviously if you are only dropping, or only picking up, then you will only need one slot.

Don't worry too much about actually *finding* your slot. Most of these places are reasonably well signed - plus you can always ask the person who gave you your slot number to put you on the right road.

There are various different ways in which container docks are serviced, which basically gives you two different types of slots. The bigger ones (e.g. Felixstowe, Thamesport) have large **RTGs (Rubber Tyred Gantries)** to lift and load the boxes. In these cases you will find lots of boxes stacked up in rows which are lettered. To find the right slot you head down the row with the same letter as your slot number until you get to the right one. You then line up with it making sure that your *trailer* is fully in the slot, and your unit is tucked in out of the way of the gantries - so the rig is all in a straight line. The gantry reaches across the top of the stack *and* your lorry, so it picks the right container up and loads it straight away.

The smaller terminals (e.g. Southampton and Tilbury) have smaller **Straddle Cranes**. At these docks you will be sent to a large Transfer Area or Pad. There you will find that it is laid out a bit like a lorry park, with numbered spaces, often with stacks of tyres separating them. You simply find the one with the right number and back into it. The straddlers will come along and lift the box off then take it away.

- **Once you're on your slot . . .**

Then you wait for the straddler/gantry to come along and do its stuff. If you need to go to another slot for the second box then you do so as soon as the first one is lifted and then wait there, too. Be warned - you can wait for a long time on these slots. An hour or even two is not uncommon. If you have waited and waited and still nothing is happening then ring your Traffic Office who will tell you what to do. Sometimes they will ring the docks and try and hurry things up. Sometimes they will give you a Control Room number for the docks and ask you to ring it yourself. Sometimes they will tell you just to be patient.

The rules whilst you are actually *on* your slot vary (surprise, surprise). When RSGs are used, you may have to move whilst the box is held over your trailer, so that the twistlocks can be lined up. You stay in the cab whilst the box is lifted/loaded. Once a box is loaded you check in your mirrors to make sure all the twistlocks are engaged (in other words that the bits that stick up have located through the holes in the corners of the box), then give the RSG driver thumbs up by sticking your arm out of the window. If they are not properly engaged then you'll have to get out and yell up to the driver. Be warned - gantry drivers *can* have real attitude problems. Something to do with looking down on people all day, I think.

When straddlers are used then you get out of the cab and stand in front of your truck, where the straddler driver can see you. If he doesn't get the twistlocks lined up properly you need to use hand signals to tell him so (and I don't mean the ones involving fingers, tempting though it can be if you've had a long wait!). You can help him by signalling which lock isn't lined up, and which way he needs to move the box. There are no official signals - anything that is clear and visible will do. You don't have to signal at all; it just makes everyone's life easier if you do! When the straddler has loaded the box he will wait until you have checked that all the twistlocks are engaged (through the holes) and given him the thumbs up before driving off.

At Thamesport you stay in the lorry. It is also *essential* that you don't move once you have had your export taken off (unless you have been told to, of course). This is because the RTGs there are all automated - they are driven by computers with sensors instead of people. When the RTG takes your

box off it "remembers" your *exact* position in order to be able to put the next one on. . . so you can imagine what would happen if you moved. . . !!!

In both cases, there are two things you must be sure to check. **1. That you have the right box.** If you weren't given a box number when you were sent in to the dock then have a look on the slot number paperwork. It should be on there. If you don't check at this point and then discover that it is the wrong box at the exit gate, then you will have to go through the whole system again, after your office has re-booked you. Loads of hassle and red faces all 'round! **2. That the box is the right way 'round.** The doors on the box need to be at the back of the trailer!!! Otherwise, again, lots of hassle and red faces. The only exception to this is when you have been asked to load two 20ft boxes "back to back", when you should have a set of doors at *each end* of the trailer - I'll get to this later. You may also have to trail 'round three different slots to sort this load out. . .

If either of these things are wrong, then it's a phone call to the office - yet again - or the dock control, then a wait to get it sorted out. . . what a surprise, eh?

- **Next you book your export box out.**

This is pretty easy. Follow the signs to the exit gate. Once there then you will either go under a canopy, or into an office or hut. Whichever it is, you need to check the seal of your loaded box and write it on your paperwork, in the place provided. Double check the box number, too - this may also need writing on. You may also need to sign for the box at this point - unless you were already asked to when you were booked in or given a slot. You then need to either take the paperwork in to the cabin/office, where you will be given a gate pass; or feed the information off it into a computer terminal (if you still have a swipe card then you'll need this too), in which case the paperwork *itself* will become the gate pass. If this is the case then it will say on it somewhere which bits they will expect you to hand over at the gate. At this point make sure you ***fasten your twistlocks!!!***

- **Last bit. . . through the security gate.**

Follow the signs to the exit, stop at the gate, hand over your gate pass/paperwork, wait while they cross-check the numbers, then away you go. . . until next time!!!

I know it all seems incredibly complicated and overwhelming, but it's actually surprisingly easy when you get there!!!

It's just the waiting about that gets to people - but as I already warned you, that's container work!!! Obviously the above instructions don't cover every permutation of every system - you always need to ask someone what you need to do when you first go into a Container Terminal which is new to you. It should, however, have given you *some* idea what to expect, and make it easier to follow the instructions when you are given them.

2. Railheads.

Again, I'll break it down. . .

- **Find the right gate.**

I know that sounds daft, but it can be easier said than done. Some ***Freightliner*** terminals have one gate for everyone. Some of them have one gate with 2 separate gateways, one for loaded boxes, one for empty. Still others have totally different gates for each. Confusing, eh? The good news is that they are *usually* quite good at signing them, although - as ever - this is not always the case. If you really can't suss it out then either ask someone in the queue (yes, more of those I'm afraid) or just pick the nearest and hope for the best - if it's the wrong one then you'll soon be told where you should be! Oh yeah, and don't forget to **put on your hi-viz vest** at this point, because they won't let you in without one.

- **Book your incoming box in.**

This is usually done at the gatehouse. You should have been given a reference number - known as a *lift reference* - when your Traffic Office sent you in. If not, ring them up and ask for one - although

it's worth checking the delivery note from the previous tip/load, as some of them put it on there. **Freightliner** lift references generally follow a set format - you'll recognise one when you see it, after a while. **If your box is loaded** then they will take the relevant details (or send you to an office where they will take the details) and then (usually) ask you to go straight to the train. This is because the choice of lifting equipment is limited to a forklift or a gantry. Only the gantries can safely lift most loaded boxes. **If your box is empty** then they will send you to the inspection area.

- **Empties - inspection and lift.**

Once you are in the inspection area (quite often under a canopy) someone will come and have a good poke around the box and then give it a grading. If you have a 20ft box on a 40ft trailer then you need to slide it to the back, as they need to be able to look inside it. This is simply to determine where it is going to be put once it has been taken off. Damaged boxes are actually dealt with by a separate department called **Freightlinercare**, but this doesn't really effect you, so don't worry about it - I've only mentioned it in case you hear people talking about it when they tell you what to do next. Whilst you are being inspected, **undo your twistlocks**. You'll be given a slip of paper with the box number on it - this is your *lift-off document*, which you will need to get your lift. Some places will get you to take an inspection slip into an office to get this.

You will then be directed to the lifting area. You will probably join the ubiquitous *queue*. There someone will take your lift-off chitty and tell you where to go (no pun intended - although some of these guys can be a bit mardy. . .). Sometimes you just follow the forklift driver. When he has you where he wants you (another Freudian slip?) your box will be lifted off. The reason for all the positioning stuff is quite simple - it will put you as close as possible to the stack where your box is going to be stored. Having done this then you need to get out again. Usually there is a one-way system, although it will not always be well signed - and woe betide you if you go the wrong way! **If in doubt, ask!**

- **Loaded boxes and empties going on the train.**

The same thing applies to both. You will be directed towards the railway line (either from the gatehouse/booking office if loaded, or the inspection area if empty. As always, there are exceptions to this . . .) and told to just park up anywhere along side the train in the lift queue (which is sometimes the same as the load queue - check if you're not sure), it doesn't make any difference. **Do not listen to this - it could cost you hours!** Usually the crane driver will start with the truck nearest to the front of the train and work back. Sometimes the queue will shuffle forward, sometimes it won't - it depends on how long people have been waiting and whether they are still awake. If you follow the "anywhere" bit of the instructions then you end up slotting into the first available gap . . . and could be sat there for ages wondering why a) people go steaming past from time to time and b) the crane never seems to get any closer! I'm afraid this is yet another example of the dreaded *container free-for-all* . . . go as close to the front of the train as you can get, stay awake, and shuffle forward religiously. Don't worry about queue jumping people - they would do it to you if they weren't enjoying the afternoon film too much. Don't ever allow a truck-sized space to develop in front of you, because by the time you start the engine and take the handbrake off *there will be another truck in it!* Now, don't get me wrong, I haven't done the train thing at all **Freightliner's** railheads, and I'm sure some of them are very orderly and fair. I can only speak from personal experience. But that personal experience tells me that *it's each man for him!* So don't say I didn't warn you - but don't come knocking on my cab door when that burly Glaswegian bloke in the Scania appears with an unimpressed expression on his face because you queue jumped him either - use your common-sense and a bit of courtesy here, as far as you can!

The trains are loaded with gantries similar to the **RTGs** described at some of the ports above. There are some differences . . . most notably that most of them have the driver slung in a turnable pod beneath the framework, rather than up top; and some of them run on rails rather than tyres. Otherwise they are the same. **Make sure you undo your twistlocks before the crane gets to you.** Usually you have to yell up to the driver to tell him what you want, and which train it is going on. Whoever sends

you to the train when you book in should tell you this - if they don't then ask.

- **Back to the office . . .**

They will book the box on to the train, unless it was done when you booked in. This is where you go to book your outgoing box, er, out. You will need a reference for this, another job which your Traffic Office should have done, else it's back on the phone to them! They will give you a piece of paper to get the box loaded.

- **Picking up loaded boxes.**

This is generally a train job again. There may or may not be a separate queue for loading. If there is then check where it is and join it. If not then join everyone else. Then it's the same drill as above . . .

- **Picking up empties.**

Same place as you went go to get rid of empties, only you'll get sent somewhere different once you're in there - again as close as possible to the stack yours is in. Some of the **Freightliner** depots have more than one "empties" yard, but they *should* be marked up. As usual, if in doubt, ask.

- **Last trip to the office.**

You will need to fill in the container number, haulier, and seal number (if loaded) on the loading chitty, then take it into the office. They will get you to sign, print off a gate pass and direct you to the out-gate **Do your twistlocks up!**

- **Through the exit gate.**

Someone will check your paperwork and, assuming everything is OK, you are free to go!

A couple of points worth bearing in mind. . .

There are, as I'm sure you can see, various ways in which you can save time. The most obvious is to do the paperwork for the incoming and outgoing boxes all at the same time, so that you are not going 'round and 'round the same bits of the system unnecessarily. I would suggest that you do the whole thing the long way the first time, and then you will be able to see how you can best cut it down in future, unless you're the adventurous type. In which case, the staff are usually more than happy to help get you out of there as soon as they can - it reduces the queue! This is particularly true if you may end up keeping the same box on - as I talked about under "going into places for no apparent reason". There will be an area for people to park up while they are doing the office bit, so you needn't worry about blocking the place up whilst you sort out the best plan of action.

I apologise if this all seems a bit vague, but to be honest with you, it is all a bit vague! I haven't been into all of the **Freightliner** depots, for starters, (few people have) and every one that I *have* been into has a slightly different way of doing things. They also seem to have a remarkable capacity for waiting until you get familiar with one system, and then changing it!

Maybe some of you could help improve this section by submitting your own "discoveries" for the next edition . . . this applies to the port section, too!

4. Other container yards and storage facilities.

The information I can give you under this heading is (mercifully) brief, because it includes so many places, and (what a surprise) they all do their own thing. To reduce it all to the bare bones will give us a few stages that are common to *most* of them. Here's the breakdown (a lot of the details should be fairly self explanatory nor that you've ploughed through all the information above, so I'll stick to just the headings wherever possible) . . .

- **Join the queue. Put on Hi-Viz.**
- **Undo twistlocks.**
- **Once you get into the yard (or in the last few places in the queue if it's moving slowly) take**

all your references, box numbers, etc. into the booking office. Some places have somewhere to park up whilst you do this. Sometimes you just nip in and abandon your truck in the queue. As with everywhere else, if you are in someone's way then they will just go 'round you. If there isn't room to get 'round then still don't worry - you've just found out why the queue is so slow!

- **Join the internal queue.** Or, if it is all the same one, stay in it. If you have been blocked in, then edge your nose forward until someone gives way.
- **Give your lift off/load documents to the bod in the Hi-viz and the hard hat** who is either working his way along the line, or standing at the end dealing with people as they get to him. He will tell you where you need to be.
- **Once you've done your stuff** - be it a lift, a load, or both, then **do your twistlocks up.**
- **Go back to the office and book out** - same parking rules apply as on the way in. If you've picked an empty up then they will need the box number for the paperwork. You will be asked to sign for it, too. You will be given your part of the paperwork and then. . .
- **Away you go!!!**

Refreshingly simple, isn't it?

A Final Word on this Section . . .

I know I said this at the beginning, but I'm going to repeat it here to make sure. Humour me, if you would. The above instructions are not intended to be comprehensive, just to give you some idea what to expect. There is always *someone* to ask about the specifics, even if it ends up being the bloke next to you in the queue. However, I always find it easier to understand/remember directions if I have a rough idea what they may be when I ask - that is where this guide is supposed to help you . . .

Also, reading the above makes it all sound dreadfully complicated - or even convoluted (if you'll allow me a slightly eloquent moment!). Rest assured that, in practice, ***it is all really remarkably simple!***

Good Luck!

What sort of things are transported in containers?

Short answer -You name it!

For ease of reference, I'll break this section down into two main parts:

What's in the boxes?

You would be truly amazed what you find when you open those doors - one oddity with container work is that generally you won't know until that point! You can often hazard a guess from the name of the place it's going to - a delivery address of **UK Card Company** or **Next Distribution Centre** is a bit of a giveaway - and some firms will tell you; some won't mention it at all; others will just tell you if it is a particularly high value load - and a lot of them are!

The reason for all this mystery is fairly simple - all the haulier is contracted to do is deliver a sealed container. Unless there is some specific requirement - **ADR** (dangerous goods certification and

associated equipment) for example, there isn't really any need to know. They'll quite often warn you about the high value stuff so that you can make sure you park up somewhere as secure as possible if you stop overnight - *in an ideal world* you'll be doing that anyway . . . although I fully appreciate that those of you who don't get paid parking (which up until recently included me) will find laybys and industrial estates suddenly very attractive!

I remember finding it quite disconcerting when I first started doing container work (I cut my teeth on General Haulage) to turn up at place and be asked what was in the back, and have to admit that I hadn't a clue! The paperwork will generally just give a box number and the name of the port/railhead where you got it from, with a place for the customer to sign that it was delivered, that it was sealed, and to note down the seal number. This can cause it's own inherent problems, which I'll talk about in the section below . . .

To give you a better idea of the variety involved, here are some of things I have had in boxes recently . . . fridges, DVD players, sofas (some leather), assorted computer stuff (CD ROM's, CD cases, keyboards, "mice", speakers, etc. etc. etc.), the "tubes" found in TVs and monitors, complete TVs and monitors, the freebie toys and models you get on the front of magazines, greetings cards, clothing, dolls, parts for lorry axles, hardwood timber, scrap aluminium (loose!), toothbrushes, hairspray/deodorant, whole streetlamps, watercress, printing machines, tins of baked beans, packaging for factories, computer tables, electrical components, TV/VCR combinations, windscreens, charcoal (loose), stainless steel pans. . . the list goes on. . . . I even know of one place where they have 40ft boxes full of sex toys delivered!

If you've got **ADR** then you will get boxes with things like car batteries, and even explosives! There are also "tanktainers" and flat-packs too - don't worry, I will talk about them too!

Basically, if it gets imported or exported, you'll find it in boxes! Have a look at the labels/boxes next time you're out shopping - if it came from abroad - particularly outside Europe - then it may well have got here in a container!

What sort of places do you take them to?

Again, the list is long and depends on the load . . . Regional and National Distribution Centres (RDCs and NDCs) are the obvious ones, in which case prepare to be there for some time - although not usually as long as if you brought in a non-container truck (see below). But that really is just the tip of the iceberg. I've tipped everywhere from big warehouses to farms, tiny "cottage industry" type factories to large plants, and old mills which were built in the days when everything came on by horse and cart - which are laid out accordingly!

Some of these places really can be tiny . . . the worst, to my mind, are "Personal Effects" jobs. These are mostly collections, but not always, and usually involve going to people's *houses*. A Personal Effects job is where someone is leaving the country and has ordered a container - usually a 20ft one, but by no means always (you'll be getting used to hearing about exceptions by now . . . in this line of work there's an exception to *everything*) - to ship their furniture and personal belongings. Which, as I'm sure you've worked out by now, means lots of squeezing down residential streets . . . lots of fun! What doesn't help is that most people who order these things don't a) appreciate how big a 20ft box actually *is*, and b) don't anticipate it arriving on a 40ft trailer! Of course, there are rigids and wagon and drags on container work and in an ideal world all the Personal Effects jobs would be sent in on the back of one, but I'm afraid it just doesn't work that way . . . and even when it does it doesn't always make life easier. If you are in an artic, then this is one of the many occasions when you are better off "sliding" the trailer *before* you go in to the street where the customer is - if you are wondering what I'm talking about, don't panic, I'll talk about trailers shortly! Sometimes it is quite impossible to get

anywhere near the house, in which case you'll have to arrange to meet the customer at the nearest appropriate place (arranging as in ringing up your Traffic Office and letting *them* sort it out - although suggestions are always appreciated, since you are the one who's there and can see where it could be done) and have the load ferried 'round. This *will* take time . . . and is also one of the times when a "backhander" is sometimes forthcoming, if you don't mind giving them a hand!

Another situation which you will more than likely encounter is when people have things shipped by container for the first time . . . I went to a Somerset shoe factory not long ago with what was only their second container. The place where I actually got tipped was a nice big warehouse, with a nice big yard, on the local trading estate. Unfortunately, the factory - which is the place I was given the address for - is in the middle of a housing estate. I turned up at 11pm, after being told by a passing copper (who I'd flagged down) that I'd be able to park up for the night there, only to find myself inching between parked cars . . . which was fine, until I got to the last 90 degree bend . . . someone had parked a six-wheeled tipper right on the junction, and I couldn't get 'round. It was too dark - and by this time too foggy - to risk trying to back out again, so all I could do was start banging on doors and trying to find the bloke whose tipper it was. He eventually came out (having got out of bed) I felt awful, but it was a daft place to leave it - a fire engine couldn't have got through, either) and, to cut a long story short, I ended up just sticking one side of the truck on the pavement outside the factory - it was more of a scout hut, to be honest - and keeping one ear open all night!) It turned out in the morning that all their other deliveries were being sent straight to the warehouse, with a phone number to ring when they arrived - why they didn't do this for the containers as well was beyond me! Another driver on the same contract, but in a wagon and drag, turned up whilst I was tipping, having been given the same address - except that when he tried to get down there the neighbouring school had just opened, and the "Mummy-run" was out in force! We filled our Traffic Office in on what the crack was - and what the other non-container wagons had arranged - and it was sorted out for the next guy that went in, something which is always worth doing if you hit a problem like that. The next guy could very easily be you . . . again!

One thing to bear in mind with first time customers is that a lot of them are not really aware of how the container system works - something which I'll briefly cover later on - and so you get a barrage of what may at first seem like rather daft questions. The most common one is for them to ask if you've got *so-and so* on. Of course, nine times out of ten you haven't a clue, and it can take a bit of time to explain the whole "sealed box" thing to them. Another common problem in these cases - and quite often at places where they have containers regularly, too, believe it or not - is when the load is short (when something which is supposed to be on it is missing). At this point you have to explain the sealed box thing . . . again . . . and *gently* point out that since the missing stock is on the other side of the world, there isn't a great deal you can do about it there and then. Yes, you or they can phone your office, but they will say the same thing. The best thing for them to do is either contact the supplier direct and take it up with them, or talk to the shipping line. However, both of these things can be done once you've gone. If they wish to note the discrepancy on your paperwork then let them - this is actually common practice, as is writing "load not checked" next to the signature. You know and I know that it will make *no* earthly difference to the haulier whether they put "2 pallets short" or the Lord's Prayer in Swahili; so long as the container was sealed on arrival then our job is done. But if it makes them feel that their backs are better covered, then let them get on with it. This can be a problem if the box was a "split tip" - i.e. contained deliveries for two different places. This is uncommon, but does happen. There are ways of covering your back in this case, which I'll talk about in the section about security. The important thing to remember is that there is no reason for them to keep you there whilst they deal with it - if they do try and stop you from pulling out then contact your Traffic Office and let them know, so they can get it sorted.

I've kept my favourite "newbie container customer" problem 'til last, because it always makes me chuckle . . . they quite often won't realise that you aren't going to unload it for them! (It makes me

laugh because the look on their faces when they discover this fact can be a picture). Again, *polite*, firm explanation is the key here. Explain that you are not actually *allowed* to handle the freight, and that you are *not insured* to get in the back of the box. And, again, if you have problems phone your Traffic Office.

I could waffle on for *pages* under this heading, but I think you'll be getting the idea by now, plus, I don't want to spoil the fun by warning you about everything. The most important thing to remember, in my opinion, is **not to get rattled** by dodgy customers. There really is no point. You can scream and shout all day long, but you are only raising your stress levels for no reason. If you need to explain something then do it **politely** and **calmly**. **Don't allow yourself to get dragged into an argument!** If you have real trouble then **ring your Traffic Office and let them sort it out**. That, at the end of the day, is one of the things they are there for. They don't want you wasting time any more than you want to be wasting it. And, like it or not, they have more "clout" than you will. It's amazing how many customers will meekly accept something they were previously happy to argue until the end of time, just because it was an office bod who told them rather than a driver. No, it's not a good state of affairs; no, it shouldn't be like this; yes, your word should be taken as coming from a professional - which is what you are - not dismissed as being the waffle of a "grunt"; no, people shouldn't assume that all lorry drivers have the intelligence of a gerbil . . . **but that's the way it is, so learn to live with it!**

Easier said than done, I know, but stress is a major cause of illness and early demise amongst truckers - so don't go putting yourself on the list for a heart attack for the sake of a few cartons of toothpaste, or whatever. Remember that the place *may* be full of idiots, but *you* get to drive out of the gates at the end of it - *they*, on the other hand, have to stay and work with each other - day in, day out! There are some really *good* tips out there too, where they'll bend over backwards to make your stay there as pleasant as possible - some of them have their own showers . . . some of them will have a kitchen you can use . . . some of them will bring you a cup of tea (it might have come from a machine and taste like dishwater, but the thought's there) . . . I've been made toast and supplied with that morning's papers before . . . I've spent a happy couple of hours on the Internet . . . I've even been given a special "hospitality key" for the vending machines when I got held up for six hours one Friday - as much tea/coffee/choccie bars/crisps/sandwiches/flapjack/cans of coke as I could consume! (Shame I wasn't hungry, really! Did bring some chocolate bars home for the other half, though . . .) One warehouse I went into was overrun with pasta - the fancy kind in the Italian wrapping - so they were giving every driver a 6kg carton to take on with them!

The moral of the story is that for every lousy tip there are at least as many average ones and "diamonds" out there, and the law of averages says that you'll get to go to those too!

How are containers unloaded (tipped)?

There are several ways in which containers get tipped, but the vast majority are backed onto loading bays. If you are told to go on a bay then back on with the doors still shut to start with, so that the seal can be clipped (taken off). Then pull forward, open your doors, and back on again. You need to be fairly accurate when you do this, as they will need to get a ramp (dock) in the back so they can roll pallets in and out. Don't pull off the bay until you are told that you can - this is a Health and Safety thing. Many of the larger places won't touch your load until you hand your lorry keys in to them.

Some places will put a conveyor belt in the back of the box to carry cartons off more quickly. They have one or more people in the back putting the cartons on the belt, then others at the other end catching them and putting them on pallets. Conveyor tips *can* be quite quick.

Sometimes you will be tipped either in a yard, or with your back end inside a roller-door. In these situations either a moveable ramp is put in the back so that a forklift can get in and out, or they will

have a couple of stacks of empty pallets which they will stack the load straight on to. Some places will have a platform (or "table") which they will ask you to back on to.

If you have two 20ft boxes on a semi-trailer (artic trailer) then how they are tipped depends on you were asked to have them put on the trailer. If they both have their doors facing backwards, then the front one will have to be lifted off so it can be tipped. Generally you will have to load them "back-to-back". When this happens you will have to drop the trailer so that the customer can open the back doors and access the container. These loads don't go on loading bays, for obvious reasons.

Soft-tops and Flat containers are generally unloaded by crane or, with some flatbed loads, by forklift.

Whatever method is being used, the customer may ask you to lower the suspension on the trailer. You can only do this if you have air suspension. If you have spring (mechanical) suspension then the height is fixed.

Most trailers are on air these days, but there are still a few around that aren't. Just in case you're not sure, or don't know how to tell the difference, here's a **very** over-simplified diagram to show you what to look for. The picture on the left shows a wheel on springs, and the one on the right shows an axle on air.

Drastically over-simplified diagram showing two different types of suspension



Fig 1 : side view of trailer wheel with spring suspension, showing spring hanger and springs.

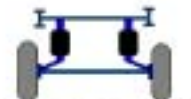


Fig 2 : view of trailer axle with air suspension, looking from the rear of the trailer forwards, so that the airbags can be clearly seen.

Obviously, there is a lot more under there than is shown above (plus, I can't draw to save my life, never mind with a mouse!) but this should give you a rough idea what you are looking at.

If your trailer is on air, then you will find a handle on the chassis at the back. (It could be on either side.) Generally you will have to push it in and then turn it to one side to lower the suspension. Some of them only need to be turned. The direction should be marked on there somehow, but you may have to find out by trial and error. As far as I remember, usually you turn the handle towards the front of the vehicle to lower and towards the back to raise but that is not always the case. To reset the suspension to "ride" position you return the handle to the centre and/or pull it out. **Don't forget to do this** before you drive off, else you will burn holes in the mudguards and possibly damage the tyres - and, believe me, trailer tyres aren't cheap! (Some newer trailers automatically reset themselves once you get above a certain speed, but it's safer to do it yourself, then you can be sure.)

A quick bit about reloads:

Apart from the obvious (that you're collecting rather than delivering) there isn't much to say about reloads, other than what I've already covered above. They tend to be phone loads, so you'll have to write your bit of the paperwork as above - unless your office already knew about it when you collected the original loaded box, in which case the paperwork will be given to you then. You have to sign the shipping notes (including a CMR, which is a customs-related delivery note), which will be handed in at the Drivers Reception or Booking In place when you ship the box or put it onto a train. They will keep a copy for their own records, too. The most important thing is to make sure the box is **properly sealed** before you go. The seal goes on the door which has to be opened first - i.e. **the right hand**

door (I've never yet come across an exception to this) and goes through both the handle and the keepers which hold it into its stowing-slot, so that the box cannot be opened without breaking the seal - it doesn't really matter which of the two handles on this door you choose, as long as it's the right door, although most people put them on the one furthest from the hinges. It is important to make sure that this is done properly *before* you leave the place you where you are loading, else you will have problems when you come to ship the box. If there turns out to be something missing from the load when it gets to its destination, then the seal is the only way to prove that it had nothing to do with you, so it is well worth taking a few minutes to make sure that it is on there properly.

Seals are provided either by your firm (if that is whose office gives you your jobs) or by the contract-holder (if you are on a sub-contract and are run directly by them), along with blank paperwork for phone loads. **Don't let yourself run out!** They have a number on which you will need to let your Traffic Office have before you load, along with a box number (stencilled onto the container sides) if it is a box you have picked up especially for the job. The customer will also need both these numbers to put onto the shipping notes. It is important that these numbers are right, because they are used to book the box through customs and onto the exporting ship. The customer may also want to add their own seal - this is fine, and can go through the other handle on the door, but *yours* is the one that it will be booked under, so make sure that you keep it separate from your "stash" once you have told everyone what the number is, so that you don't accidentally put a different one on the box - easily done if you're not careful!

Some customers will want to put the seal on themselves, some will want to watch whilst you put it on, some will be happy for you to just do it in your own time . . . whatever happens, remember that when you sign the shipping notes, you are also signing to say that you have received the load and it has been **properly sealed**. So, again, check that it is done properly.

One last thing . . . there are a few boxes, mostly American ones, which have a place for an extra seal. This is labelled, and can be found at the bottom of the handlebar for the *inner* handle of the *right* door. It is up to the customer whether they want to add a seal here too, but it only for additional seals - yours goes in the usual place.

What special equipment do you use?

I reckon it's about time I started talking about some of the kit which is peculiar to container work - especially since I've mentioned most of it already, albeit in passing. I'll also give you a list of some of the less unique things that you will nonetheless find very useful, if not essential. Let's kick off with:

1. The Containers Themselves.

"Why on Earth do we need a bit about the actual containers?" I hear you cry in despair, "Surely they're just metal boxes with doors on the back?" Well, yes... but there are several different *types* of metal boxes, and you might find it useful to know what they are when people ask you about them - what sort of box it is can affect a reload, for example. It can also affect which route you take to your tip.

Sizes - length.

There are several different sizes of container. As far as length goes, the most common ones are (as you probably know) **20ft** and **40ft**. However you may also come across **30ft** and **45ft** ones, or even **10ft**!

The 30ft ones tend to be "bulk" containers used for carrying powders, and they go on tipping trailers. This is a bit of a specialist thing, and you would be best off talking to people who carry them about the ins and outs. You won't be expected to know about them for a regular container job. There are a *few* ordinary 30ft boxes, but they are not in widespread use - if you do get allocated one then you will already have a skeletal which will take them (most can, these days) and will need to "slide" them to tip, just as you do with a 20ft. I'll cover sliders when I talk about trailers.

The 10ft ones are also not in general use, and need a special trailer. In fact, I've only ever seen them sat about in storage yards - I never actually seen anyone pulling one! They are the favourite of the "builders' container" hire people, and often end up being converted into tool stores for on sites.

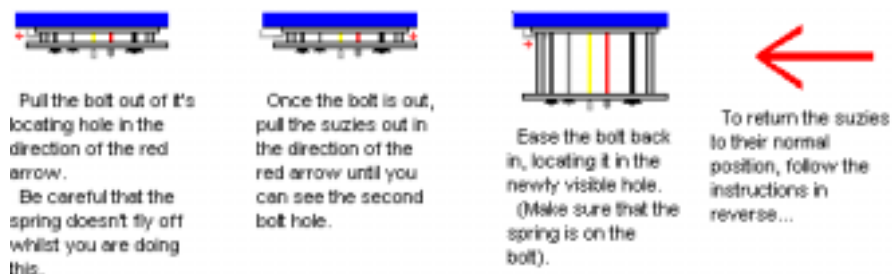
45ft boxes are slightly more common. They are only really used by the Americans - their truck length laws allow trailers to be up to 53ft now - although they can still only go to an "all-up" weight of 36 - 36 1/2 tonnes in most places over there! They fit on a regular 40ft skeletal trailer, and basically look like a 40ft box which has had an extra 2 1/2ft welded onto each end. The locks meet up with the bit of the box that looks "original", and the rest hangs over the front and back. The only other requirement for a trailer to be able to take these is to have the suzie - inlets on an extendable bar, so that they don't get snagged and chaff on the front overhang of the box. (again, see trailers below.) The diagram below the relative sizes of the various boxes in relation to each other - the **red arrows** show where the twistlocks will engage.



The wide-angled mirror is next to useless in these situations. Your blind spot is also a lot bigger whenever you turn. Make sure that the first time you get on of these containers you also give yourself extra time and space until you get the hang of it. Also watch out for unsuspecting pedestrians and cyclists. The headboard really will swing out a *long* way, and you don't want to accidentally decapitate someone! The *weight* in the front bit pulls you about a bit, too.

It really is quite an odd experience the first time - it's hard to explain really. You'll see what I'm getting at when it happens - just **take it steady!**

Below is a quick diagram showing those "extendable suzies" that I mentioned:



A Quick explanation of how to use extendable suzies for 45ft boxes.

Sizes - height.

40ft containers come in two heights. **Standard** boxes are 8ft 6" high, which gives an *average* overall vehicle height of 13ft 6". **Hi-cube** boxes are 9ft 6" high, which gives an *average* overall vehicle height of 14ft 6".

I'm emphasising the "average" above because it is **vital** that you double-check this for your vehicle. Exact vehicle heights can vary quite considerably - particularly with artics, where the height of the fifth wheel can mean that the same trailer can be two different heights when it's coupled to two different units. A couple of inches can make the difference between clearing a bridge or causing a major accident, **so always check!** Also make sure that the height you work on is when the box is empty - the weight of a load can depress the suspension enough to lower the overall height, but this will catch you out once you have tipped, if you're not careful. So always work with an **empty** measurement.

You can tell the difference between standard and hi-cube boxes quite easily, because the box-height will be written on it somewhere. Hi-cube boxes are usually clearly labelled as such, with big labels saying "**Warning - high container**" or something similar. They also usually have yellow and black striping painted on the front corners and/or edge, too. Your paperwork will probably give you a good idea, too. ("DC" usually means standard, "HC" means Hi-cube). If, for some reason, you really *can't* tell, and there's no one to ask (and no other container trucks to measure it against), then err on the side of caution and assume it's a hi-cube until you find out otherwise.

The good news is that there is **no such thing** as a 20ft Hi-cube, so they are always standard 8ft 6" boxes. **As far as I know** all 45ft boxes are standard too, but it might be worth asking around to confirm that one (and 30ft boxes, for that matter - again AFAIK they are all standard). 10ft boxes are also definitely always standard, but you're unlikely to ever have to pull one.

The only other things to watch out for where height is concerned are loads in soft-top boxes, and those on flat-pack containers. In fact, let's cover those next.

Specialist Containers.

1. Soft-top boxes.

Soft-tops are just like ordinary boxes except that they have a plastic-coated tarpaulin roof instead of a metal one - hence the name. I've only ever see 40ft soft-tops, but there may be 20ft ones out there - if you spot one let us know and we'll update this!

The sheet-roof is held on with an elasticated cord, which goes through loops in the sheet and then round hooks on the top of the box. These boxes are used for carrying high loads - usually machinery - which won't fit in a hi-cube box. They are tipped with a crane, which will lift the load out. (And loaded the same way, obviously.)

The main thing you have to watch with these boxes is how far the load comes out of the top, as that will determine how high your vehicle is. The best thing to do, to be brutally honest, is to make a really healthy guess and then add a bit. The load isn't allowed to be ridiculously tall, anyway. Just be careful - if you're not sure whether you are going to clear a bridge then **get out and check!**

2. Flat-pack boxes.

There's probably another more official name for these, but that's what I've always called them! These things aren't so much boxes as platforms - used like a flatbed truck. They have a floor and front and back wall, but no sides or roof. When they are empty the walls fold down onto the bed (hence flat pack). Empty flat-packs are transported in stacks of 3-5, with interlocking twistlocks through the corners to stop them falling off.

These "boxes" are used for carrying things that won't fit into a regular container. The loads are fastened down with ratchet straps, just like a flatbed road. Don't panic too much about these - they

tend to be pulled by a few specialist people. If you *do* get to work with them, then ask for more details when the need arises. I won't bog you down with them here.

3. Tanktainers.

These are basically cylindrical tanks, which are surrounded by a frame. The frame is like a skeleton of a 20ft box, and allows the tank to be lifted and loaded at the docks like a container.

Tanktainers can be *very* unstable and are pulled by firms who specialise in these loads. They have the pumps and other equipment fitted to their trailers and trucks to empty them. I won't go into any more detail now, since you *shouldn't* be asked to carry them in a normal container job - you'll get training for all the kit if you do (if you don't then ask for it.).

5. Bulk Containers.

I've already talked about these above - they're the 30ft boxes used for carrying bulk powders etc, which are pulled on special tipping trailers. Again, they're a specialist sort of a thing, so I won't go into more detail. As above, if you get to pull them then make sure someone shows you around the kit and explains the safest ways of tipping them.

Reefers.

I don't know why I've kept these until last, really, considering that out of the five types of box listed here reefers are the ones you are most likely to have dealings with!

Reefers are refrigerated boxes. You can spot them easily because they are generally white, and have what looks like a big fan (amongst other things) on the front end. This is the cooling gear.

Reefer boxes differ from ordinary refrigerated trailers/lorries in several crucial ways . . . For starters they **hold their temperature** for a lot longer without actually running the fridge. In fact they will stay cold for anywhere up to 12 - 24 hours (depending on who you talk to!). It is quite normal to pick up a chilled load for delivery the following day and not have to run the fridge for the at all! Generally, though, the fridge will be running, but you probably won't have to do anything to it. This is because **the actual chilling kit is run off electricity**.

Reefer boxes are plugged into power points on the exporting dock, again on the ship, and then for a final time at the receiving dock whilst they await delivery. They also have batteries built into them, so they will continue to run for a while once they are loaded onto a truck. Once the batteries flatten then the motor will stop, but the box should hold its temperature until you tip it.

If the reefer contains a particularly sensitive load, or it is going to be outside the time limits before it gets delivered, then you will have to get a **Genset** fitted to power the fridge. A Genset is basically a small generator, which is attached to the chilling equipment at the front of the box with bolts, and then plugged in. If your load needs a Genset fitted you will be told to take it straight to one of the container storage yards which provides a reefer service. Someone will fit the Genset for you and show you what to do with it - I won't go into it here because a) there are several different makes, and b) the people who fit it for you will be able to tell you far more, in a far easier-to-understand manner than I ever could. It will also then be fresh in your mind.

If you pick up a reefer that is running, but are not told to get a Genset, then it is always worth double-checking just in case.

Sometimes you will get a reefer that contains a non-reefer load. This is just where they had run out of regular boxes in the country where the load came from! So don't panic if you are told to deliver a reefer to a car plant!

Reefers come in 20ft, 40ft Standard and 40ft Hi-cube sizes, so watch your height. They also tend to

be a bit heavier than normal boxes, because of the chilling equipment. Add a Genset and they are heavier still!

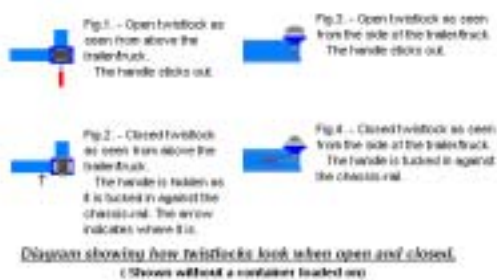
So that's your different types of box covered. Now for the stuff they are carried on.

Trucks on Container Work.

There are all sorts of trucks used on container work. There are rigids, which are usually six-wheelers, and which carry 20ft boxes. There are some four-wheel rigids, too, which take the lighter 20ft boxes. There are wagon and drags, plated to a full 44tonnes. They can take two 20ft boxes at the same time, and tip them in two different places - at the same time! Hauliers tend to like them for this, as it means they make extra money, but there aren't many people who are experienced with wagon and drag, and even fewer of those people are prepared to drive them. So there aren't very many out on the road. Then there are the artics. Which brings me onto trailers. Incidentally, the stuff about **twistlocks** applies to all container trucks, so it's worth looking at even if you don't have a Class One.

Twistlocks.

Twistlocks are so easy to use, they're hardly worth explaining! So much so that I'll give you a diagram instead.



So there you have it! Basically the handle needs to be sticking out at 90 degrees to the vehicle for open, and tucked in against the chassis-rail for closed. The box, by the way, will rest on top of the flat plate. The lower half of the twistlock "fills the gap" where the bottom edge of the container corner is, so that the top half can turn to lock the twistlock. I know it doesn't look like much to hold 20-odd tonnes of freight onto a trailer, but these things are a lot stronger than they look - twistlocks are used to hold the containers on the ship, and cranes and gantries lift containers using them too - although they have little motors on to turn them open and shut. Whoever came up with the design must have made a fortune!

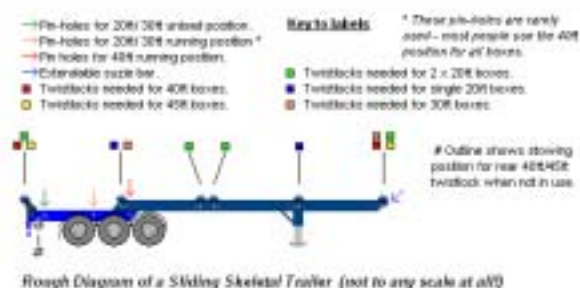
Skeletal and Sliding Skeletal Trailers.

Sliding skeletal trailers are probably the things which intrigues people the most about container work. I've lost count of the number of times I've been asked "How do you unload those small boxes in the middle of the trailer?" Well, wonder no more . . .

Basically, a skeletal does exactly what it says on the tin. It's the bare skeleton of a trailer - just the chassis and running gear - with twistlocks mounted on the cross-members for attaching different sized boxes. The vast majority of skeletal are sliders now, because they are so much more versatile. A sliding skeletal can take 20ft, 30ft, 40ft, and 45ft boxes.

A slider is actually made up of two parts - upper and lower sections. The lower section is the rearmost. When 20ft and, less commonly, 30ft boxes are loaded, they sit on the upper part of the trailer - the forward piece. This is better than having them on the back, like the older fixed trailers, because it gives better weight distribution. When it is time to unload/load the container, the trailer mechanism is used to pull in either two or four "locking pins" which are holding the two parts rigid together. The trailer brakes are locked on, and the driver is able to "push" the box to the back of the trailer.

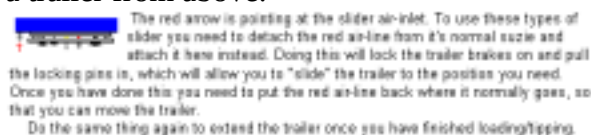
What is *actually* happening is that the upper (front) part of the chassis is being slid *over the top* of the lower (rear) part, shortening the trailer. In the diagram below, the lower part is coloured a brighter blue than the upper half, so you can distinguish between them more easily.



There are a ridiculous numbers of systems for operating these trailers and I would be here for days if I tried to tell you how to use all the ones I've come across, never mind the one's I haven't. Most of them, however, basically use one of two main systems, or a hybrid of both. As long as you know what the common "stages" are then it's never usually too hard to work out what you have to do to the trailer to make them happen - a lot of the newer and fancier set-ups even come with an instruction label! (That's if some idiot hasn't painted over it that is. . .). Here are those two systems for you:

1. The older, "airline" systems.

These systems basically work by disconnecting the red airline from the trailer to lock the brakes on, and relocating it onto another inlet to pull the locking pins in. The diagram below shows the suzies on a trailer from above.



Personally I think that these older systems are the best. Because they are so simple, there is very little which can go wrong with them, and there are no temperamental sensors to worry about. On the downside, you *do* have to keep getting up and down off the catwalk behind the unit - although after some of the hassles I've had with the newer systems I consider it a small price to pay!

2. "Lock and Go" systems.

Sounds more like a haircare product than a trailer system, doesn't it? There are any number of variations on this type of system, but they all work along the same sort of lines . . .

Once you have established that there is no "extra inlet" that to attach the red airline to, then you know you've got a **lock and go** trailer. Take a stroll around it. As well as the little box with the parking brake button in it there will also be another one with the slider button inside. To be honest, it could be anywhere along the chassis, although they tend to be found just above the landing legs. Which side of the trailer it is on also varies - usually depending on whether the trailer was built in this

country or on the Continent - but it will normally be on the same side as the winding handle for the legs.

Basically, all you have to do is either push or pull the button (although there are some where you twist it) and the system is activated. This action will either immediately cause the locking pins to pull in, or will set them up so that they pull in when you put your foot on the brake pedal. It should also lock the back brakes up for you ready to "slide". Some of the brake pedal systems need you to depress the pedal twice - once to lock the brakes, and then again to pull the pins in. You should here air rushing about when you do this, so you'll know something is happening

You slide the box to where you want it and then either touch the brakes again or get out and pull/push (whichever is the opposite of what you did first) the button to get the pins to pop back out. Most of these systems have a safety feature which means that the brakes won't release until the pins are properly located in their holes, so you may need to shunt backwards and forwards a little bit until they engage before you can go anywhere. Usually you will hear a "*clunk*" when they are properly located, but get out and have a look if you're not sure.

To "stretch" the trailer back out again you follow the same routine. And that's it. Easy peasy. Couldn't be simpler. Well . . . *theoretically* . . .

Now, don't get me wrong, when they work then these systems are great. Unfortunately, however, they can be a little . . . temperamental. So I will also include this:

Lock and Go basic troubleshooting guide!

The following list contains a few things that are worth checking before you ring for help, since they are also the first things you will be asked to try when you do! It is by no means exhaustive, so don't ever be afraid (or too proud) to ring and talk to the experts.

- **Problem 1** - Brakes won't lock up.
Possible cause/solution - You may have a "hybrid" system on your hands, where the brakes are not controlled by the lock and go button. See section below.
- **Problem 2** - Locking pins aren't pulling in.
Possible cause/solution - There are several possibilities here. Check the following:
 - a) *Are you on level ground?* - Because these systems use sensors to tell whether or not the pins are in place, they can be very fussy about only being used on the flat - even more so when you are heavily loaded. It seems to be side-to-side slopes rather than front-to-back ones that cause the most problems. The system will not pull the pins in if it senses that there is more weight on one side of the trailer. Even being on a *very* gentle slope can have this effect. The answer is to find the flattest, most level bit of ground that you can and slide the trailer there, then take it to where it is needed in this position, returning to the same spot to stretch it out again. Be warned, however, that a lot of places that take containers don't *have* any level ground - which is why I find this fault particularly irritating. If you find yourself in this predicament then be prepared to spend a long time trying various places until you find one that the trailer "likes". Making sure that the unit and trailer are in a dead straight line before attempting to slide helps too.
 - b) *Are the pins trying to pull in?* - If one or both pins looks like they are moving a little bit and then stopping, then they may well just be stuck. Try giving them a good clout! Use either a hammer or a mallet and a bit of wood (if you can find one). Scaffolding bars are quite good for this job, too! If they are just sticking, then tapping the offending pin or pins is often enough to solve the problem. This may cause them to suddenly "do their stuff", or you may have to tap them all the way in. If they are not giving at all, then try one of the other possibilities.
 - c) *Are your brake lights working?* - Yes, you did read that correctly! This only applies to those

systems that involve depressing the brake pedal to get the pins to pull in. If your system *doesn't* involve doing that then this suggestion won't apply. The bit of the kit which tells the trailer to pull the pins in on these systems works by picking up the electrical signal passing between the stop-lamp switch and the brake lights - therefore if your brake lights aren't working then the trailer won't be able to tell that your foot is on the pedal! If it turns out that this may be causing the problem then check all the usual things - fuses, bulbs, electrics line properly connected etc etc. Failing that you'll need to get someone out to find out what is happening. Even if that is *not* what is causing all the trouble, you still need to get the brake lights working before you can go anywhere.

d) Is only one pin refusing to move? - If so, then you need to go under the trailer. If you have a look at the back of the locking pin on the side that is working, then you should be able to see a small spring of some sort connecting the pin to the bar that pulls it in and out. (This bar will lead into a diaphragm chamber, like the ones on the brakes). The *only* thing that keeps this spring in place is its own tension, and they are prone to detaching themselves. Once you know what you are looking for, then have a look at the side that is causing the problem. It may be that the spring just needs re-attaching. It is easier to do this when the pins are located, so reset the system by pushing/pulling the button (whichever is the opposite of what you did to start with) before you try it!

e) Can you hear a lot of continuous hissing when the pins are trying to pull in? - It is normal to hear a burst of air, but this should stop. If it doesn't then get under the trailer and see if it is coming from the vicinity of the back of the offending pin. If so, then you may have a shot chamber. You'll need to call someone out to change it if that is the case, but you will have saved both the breakdown bod and yourself a great deal of time if you can tell him what you think the problem may be, so that he can arrive with the right part and tools to do the repair.

- **Problem 3** - Pins won't relocate.

Possible cause/solution - Dodgy ground again! Sometimes the two pieces of chassis won't line up properly, so the pins can't locate in their holes. If you are sliding the trailer to tip/load then just manually reset the system by pushing/pulling the button (the opposite of whichever you did to set it) and *carefully* reverse onto wherever you need to be. The problem may well sort itself out once you extend the trailer again. *Don't try and go forward like this!* If you have one pin (both pins on one side on a 4-pin trailer) engaged then you will be putting excessive strain on that pin (or side). If you have no pins engaged then you will just pull the trailer back out to the 40ft position again! If you are extending the trailer ready to go then try manually resetting the system (as above) and *carefully* shunting about until you find some ground that is level enough for the pins to be able to locate. **N. B. Do not do this on a public road!**

- **Problem 4** - Brakes won't release.

Possible cause/solution - As in Problem 3 above. If you are *sure* that both/all the locking pins are properly located through their holes, then just manually reset the system by pushing/pulling (whichever is the opposite to what you first did) the button. As I said, only do this if you are *sure* that the pins are locked in place - if you are *not* sure then follow the instructions for Problem 3 above.

As you can see, these systems can be *very* irritating when they cause problems, but fortunately most of them are very easily solved. Obviously there are other things that can go wrong with them too, but the ones listed above are the first things you will be asked to check/try if you ring up for help. **Some of these possibilities may equally apply if you have trouble with an airline-controlled system**, so are well worth being aware of whatever trailer you pull.

3. "Hybrid" systems.

As I said at the beginning of this section, there are many different permutations of the above systems. Some need you to disconnect your red airline to lock the brakes on and then push a button to do the pins, for example. Others have two separate buttons. Some of the newer trailers have "claws" which are hinged under the chassis-rail instead of locking-pins - these can be quite good, actually, since you don't get so many "locating" problems. The *important* thing to know when you encounter a new trailer is what the main stages of the "sliding operation" involve, and then it's just a matter of working out which one of various possibilities will allow you to do each one.

The Main Stages of Slider Operation.

- 1. Stop the vehicle so that the unit and trailer are in straight line.
- 2. Lock the back (trailer) brakes on.
- 3. Pull the locking pins in.
- 4. Slide the box to the desired position.
- 5. Relocate the locking pins in their new holes.
- 6. Release the brakes.

Don't worry about pushing the box off the end of the rails, or extending the trailer so far that it ends up in two pieces! There are "buffers" at the end of the runners which mean that you cannot do this!

A quick note about 30ft/20ft running positions.

This was noted on the diagram at the top of this section, but I will mention it again here just in case you didn't spot it.

Most trailers have three possible positions - fully extended, fully shortened, and another one in between. This is often marked up on the trailer as being the "20ft/30ft" running position. Whilst there is no reason why you can't use this if you want to, very few people do. It is far easier to just have the trailer "fully out" whenever you are driving. It makes life easier when you come to change boxes, as you don't need to muck about sliding the trailer to take a bigger container, and it is easier to find the right place for the pins to locate when you always just go to one or other end of the runners!

Just for the record, I did try this middle position out once, just out of interest. I found that, for me, it made too little difference to be worth the hassle! By all means give it a try, however - you might feel differently.

On a more serious note there is one thing which is **vital** to remember. ***Do not ever try and drive away with the trailer shunted into its shortest position!*** The trailer will be dangerously unstable like this, and may even tip over. It is okay to *creep* short distances in this position - for example if you have had to move to level ground to slide the trailer - but **don't ever** set off down the road without extending the trailer first. Not doing this is **a recipe for disaster!**

Twistlocks that are in the way!

You've probably worked out by now that there are times when all those twistlocks are going to get in the way. (Have another squint at that diagram and you'll see what I mean). The answer to this natty little problem is very simple.

All the twistlocks except for the ones at the very front and very back of the trailer can be "dropped" so that they are flush with the chassis. To stow the ones that you are not going to need simply push from underneath so that the *whole* twistlock - *including* the bottom half which doesn't

"twist" - is above the level of the platform that they sit in. You need to do this with them in the "open" position. Then you just turn the *whole thing* so that the handle is parallel with the chassis of the trailer, and let them drop down. To lift them up again when you need them then you just do the same thing in reverse.

It is important that you "drop" the unused locks *before* you have your box put on, else it will sit on top of the spare locks and damage them, and the ones that you *do* need won't be able to engage.

There are also a few trailers where the twistlock platforms are hinged, with a bolt to hold them in place. These are fairly self-explanatory.

The front twistlocks stay up all the time - just stow the handle against the chassis in the "closed" position.

The rear twistlocks are usually mounted on pivoting arms, which project a short way from the back of the trailer. (As always, there are exceptions to this, but it is far and away the most common arrangement.) There is usually a bar or pin holding them in place, which has a handle on the end and a chain attaching it to the trailer itself. If you look at the diagram (again) you can see how the arms will sit when they are stowed. To stow them, first you need to "close" the twistlocks, but do it by turning the handle the opposite way to usual, so that it is pointing *behind* the trailer - this way it will wind up pointing forward once the arm is stowed.

Next you need to turn the handle so that it is lifted out of its retaining slot. Then you can pull the pin out. With this done, simply lift the arm up and bring it towards the front of the trailer. It will pivot around its hinge. Let it drop and it will settle in the stowed position - it's best to support it, rather than literally just dropping it! Then put the pin back so that it is holding the arm in place and *stow the handle in its slot!* It is particularly important that you do that last bit properly, else the pin may fly out and damage a passing car, or worse!

Obviously, to put the arm back up again then just reverse the process. A *tip* - if you have trouble getting the pin in or out then try lifting the arm slightly so that the weight is no longer resting on the pin itself, and the holes are better aligned.

It is important to stow the rear twistlocks *before* you attempt to slide a 20ft/30ft box to the back of the trailer. If you don't then the box may hit them *before* it hits the end of the runners, and damage them.

Fixed (non-sliding) trailers.

These are a lot less common nowadays, as they are less versatile than sliders, and the weight of the load isn't so well distributed when carrying 20ft boxes.

Apart from the fact that they don't slide, they are to all intents and purposes the same in practice as sliders. The only real difference is that the smaller boxes have to be loaded on the back of the trailer rather than in the middle, so that they can be tipped. This means that they pull slightly differently, too - personally I've found that they tend to feel like the back end is trying to swing out when you go 'round corners, but that is just my experience and opinion.

Other problems with small boxes and fixed skeletons are again caused by the way they are loaded. Because the weight is all at the back you have to watch that you don't overload the rear axles. You may also find that you suffer from poor traction at times, because there is not much weight over the drive wheels.

There are also still a few 30ft trailers in operation. They are unpopular these days because they

are, again, lacking in versatility, and perhaps more importantly, they are very easy to tip over. These trailers are easy to spot because of their shorter length, and the fact that they can only carry single 20ft and 30ft boxes.

There are a couple of other types of trailer around which are used on regular (not tipping or tanker) container work. I will only touch on them very briefly because they are really more specialist bits of kit, and you should be told everything you need to know about them in the unlikely event you are asked to pull one.

The first is the "splitting" semi-trailer. These are triaxle trailers which have a pair of additional axles located on the *front* half of the trailer, normally lifted out of the way. They can take two 20ft boxes and actually separate in the middle. The driver drops the front axles and "splits" the trailer so that he ends up with two short vehicles. He can then leave the back box at a delivery and take the front one off to tip somewhere else - just as you can with a wagon and drag. These trailers have been around for a while, but becoming more popular recently. For the moment, however, it is still fair to describe them as rare.

The other is the sort of trailer that is used by firms such as **Containerlift** who are based in Southampton. These trailers have two cranes attached, one at each end, so that containers can be lifted off the back and left for the customer to tip in his own time. They are then picked up again at a later date. This method of working is very popular in countries like Australia, for example, where all boxes are dealt with this way. It has never caught on in a big way over here, however, mainly because no one has enough room to store the containers until they are picked up again!

Personal Equipment.

Here's a very short list of things which **you**, the driver, will need to take with you. Some of them are essential and you can't do the job without them. Some of them are just things that I find invaluable to have with me.

a) Things which (should) be provided by your employer:

- **A Hi-Viz jacket - or at least a Hi-vis vest.** All the docks and container yards will refuse to serve you without one of these, and a lot of customers want you to wear one too.
- **Gloves.**
- **Safety boots.**
- **Hard hat.** By no means essential but very handy to have if you can get hold of one - you never know where you could end up tipping!
- **Container Lock.** Contrary to popular belief, containers *are not* safe from thieves. So much so that the whole security thing will get a chapter of it's own.

b) Things which you need to provide yourself:

- **Maps.** At least a UK national road map, preferably one with bridge heights marked on it. You'll find that you end up with quite a collection of A to Z type maps after a while too. You are better off buying the county ones, rather than individual towns.
- **A mallet or hammer.** Great for bashing stubborn twistlocks shut, and dealing with those pesky locking pins on the trailer.
- **A crowbar.** Useful for all sorts of things, really. Levering open container doors is one that springs to mind. The doors tend to be incredibly stiff - all that sea-salt corrodes the hinges.
- **Means to make at least a cup of tea.** Not all places have facilities that they let drivers use, and you can be stuck for very long time.

- **TV and/or plenty of reading material.** To help kill time in all those queues!

A Serious Bit About Security.

It is a common misconception that containers are not bothered by the sort of people who slash curtainsiders etc but this is very definitely ***not true!***

The seals on loaded boxes are not strong enough to deter people who want to get inside, so a ***container lock*** is essential. These take several form, but the most common type is a flat metal collar which hooks 'round the handlebars on the doors and locks in the middle. ***You must fit a container lock if you stop with a loaded box.*** There are more and more reports of seals being tampered whilst people are on rests and breaks. If a box is broken into and a container lock was not fitted then ***you, the driver, will be held responsible.***

Even this doesn't always put them off. Most people are now aware that containers regularly contain high-value loads, often made up of consumer durables which are particularly tempting to a thief because they are so easy to sell on.

I know personally of several incidents, and have heard about many more where determined criminals will come equipped with either an angle grinder or an oxyacetylene torch, so that they can cut the container lock off.

There are even extreme cases where thieves have been unable to get in to the container, so they have simply taken the whole lorry. My previous employer lost a truck this way from near the docks in Southampton. It was recovered several weeks later. All that was left was a burnt out shell.

Then there are the problems of fuel theft - people siphoning truck tanks. Some firms prefer you to keep your tank locked; others work on the theory that if people want to help themselves then they will do - locking the tank just means they'll have to shell out for a new cap when the existing one gets smashed off. Ask what your boss would prefer, and stick to it.

So what are we, the drivers, supposed to do?

Apart from the religious fitting of container locks, it's just a matter of being sensible. There are very few truly secure places to park in this country, and those that have been upgraded charge a small fortune. I also appreciate that a lot of the smaller firms and subbies don't refund parking expenses, and paying for parking 4 - 5 nights a week will make a big dent in your wages. But if you can park in truckstops and service areas then do. There is no guarantee that nothing will happen, but there is a lot to be said for the old adage about "safety in numbers".

If you have to park in lay-bys then try and pick one with other lorries in it. Try and find out what time the ones immediately in front and behind are planning on leaving. If it's feasible without anyone getting blocked in, then try and park up so that your nose is right against the truck in front's back doors, and then get the one behind to do the same. That way it is harder for people to get in through the back doors, or for them to try and drive the truck away unwitnessed.

If you end up stopping in an industrial estate overnight then try and get under a streetlight and close to a CCTV camera if the adjoining buildings have them. If you are tipping in the morning then ask if you

can park up on the customer's premises. Failing that, try and get within yelling distance of a manned gatehouse. Let them know you are there, and ask them to keep half an eye on things for you. Even better if the site has regular patrols. If you can, park so that something is obstructing your back doors, even if it is only a van or car. Again, park with other wagons where you can.

If you think someone is breaking into your trailer, or siphoning your fuel ***do not*** under any circumstances ***try and be a hero!*** No load is worth risking your personal safety for. If you can make a *quiet* phone call to the police then do so, but don't draw attention to yourself. If the worst comes to the worst and you suspect someone may be going to try and steal the lorry, then start the engine and drive away if you can.

Some times of year are worse than others for container crime. Christmas is a particularly rough patch, for obvious reasons, as is the middle/late summer. Some parts of the country have higher crime rates for lorries, too. The West Midlands are becoming particularly notorious of late. Talk to other drivers, your traffic office, and customer's transport offices to find out what the "word on the street" is, enabling you to be particularly careful in those areas.

I don't want to put anyone off, but I don't want you go out there without your eyes wide open either. ***Think about what you are doing and where you are parking, and look after your own personal safety first at all times*** and you won't go too far wrong!

Happy Trucking!

Written by Lucy Richmond. No. 9 in a series published by the Professional Drivers Association