

Hooking Up

When you passed your test, you were shown the basics of connecting units to trailers. You probably trained on a steel suspended trailer with a large gap between the back of the cab and the trailer headboard, without ABS. This leaflet approaches the subject in more depth, with tips about various workarounds for common problems you may encounter.

Safety first

You've lined up to the trailer you're picking up, and you've reversed under it. Did you check if it was actually immobile? The previous driver should have left it with the trailer brake ON. However, it's entirely possible that someone has left the "shunt" button pushed in, and you're about to push the trailer into the fence or another vehicle! Most trailers have brakes, either of the ratchet-and-cable type, or as is becoming more common, the two button system. This consists of a red button marked "PULL TO PARK" and a blue or black button marked "PUSH TO SHUNT". A few have a brake dump valve, which isolates the supply; this does the same thing as the red button. Remember, if you can't tell which button is which, pull BOTH after dropping, push BOTH after hooking up.

Too high or too low?

If the trailer is too low to pick up on the fifth wheel ramps, you'll have to lower the unit on its rear axle. Use the lift control to lower the axle, reverse under and then either lift the unit manually or reset it to the driving position. The lift control can be found behind the driver's seat.

If you can't get the unit down far enough, there are two things you can try. First and easiest is to dump the air out of the trailer suspension. This may raise the front of the trailer far enough. If it doesn't, you'll have to raise it by hand. Select low gear by pushing in the winding handle. If you can't remember which way raises it, it's the hard direction! When you've raised it far enough, mop your streaming brow and continue as before.

If it's too high, you'll have to raise the unit. The previous techniques apply, but with the added warning that it's possible for the pin to skate right over the fifth wheel and hang up on its leading edge. With a close-coupled outfit, you've probably hit the trailer with the back of the cab as well. Get out and look!

It's too tight and I'm too fat!

A common problem with modern trailers, especially those with forward mounted fridges, is that there isn't room to get on the catwalk and attach the airlines and suzies. Even if you do manage to squeeze on, there is a real danger of being trapped when you attach the red airline. When you reverse under, the front of the trailer is lifted, with the braked rear axles providing the pivot. When the brakes are released, the trailer drops forward. With a fridge, this means your forearms are likely to be caught by its front. The way to work round this is as follows: Reverse under the trailer so that

the gap between it and the cab is a comfortable distance. Then make sure that the trailer brake is ON. If you can, chock the trailer wheels. Under no circumstances must the trailer move! Leave the legs down, and lower them if they're not touching the ground. Attach the red airline and WAIT. If the trailer doesn't move, attach the other lines. If it moves pull the airline off QUICKLY. Recheck the brakes, including the unit handbrake. Try again, this time starting with the yellow airline. When you've attached the airlines and suzies, reverse under the trailer. Reapply the handbrake and finish hooking up.

Dropping the trailer

Before you drop the trailer, you should make sure it'll be on firm ground. A soft yard may keep baulks of timber to put under the legs; use them. Put the brakes on if fitted, take off the number plate, dump the trailer suspension pressure if the trailer has it fitted, wind down the legs until they're about an inch off the ground. Then pull forwards about three feet and lower the unit. You must make sure you're clear of the trailer pin before you do this or you'll strain the legs. In effect, the unit will be hanging off the trailer, which is a Bad Thing. Disconnect the lines and stow them. The sight of black greasy spaghetti bouncing on the catwalk isn't a pretty sight, especially when a line falls into the propshaft. Pull away gently until the unit is clear. On some vehicles, the only axle control is a dump valve. Use this to stop the unit springing violently out from under the trailer. This can rip off mudguards, lights and shortens the life of the suspension.

It won't hook up! It won't release!

Occasionally, the fifth wheel latch plays up. Most often, it can't be released. If the vehicle is parked on a hill, it "hangs" on the jaws. It can also simply be worn so that at rest it fails into the closed position. The best way of dealing with it is to apply the trailer brakes, engage reverse, and push gently against the trailer. Without unclutching, put the handbrake on. Select neutral and try it again. If it won't engage when you reverse under the trailer, try moving the handle back from the fully forward position. This is common in older vehicles.

Out of the ordinary

Sometimes, you'll be picking up continental trailers. These have two peculiarities: palm couplings and trailer boards. Palm coupling adapters for the UK consist of the trailer-side coupling (male for red, female for yellow) with a palm coupling-half attached. Fit the adapter to the trailer, then the airline to the adapter. Trailer boards are best regarded as larger numberplates. Hang them off the rear of the trailer and use the attached elastic cords to make sure they don't flap about. The electrical connection is made in the usual way, with the board plugging into a socket on the back of the trailer. Make sure the plug cord can't drag! A connection now becoming more common is the ISO7638 ABS data cable. This large round plug MUST be connected if there are connections for it. At least one death has resulted from failure to use it, and you will be fined £2000 if you're caught.