

The Big Read UK trade

A trucker's guide to post-Brexit disruption

As fears grow of a return to customs checks, the FT follows a British driver on his tightly scheduled journey across the continent

Chris Giles JANUARY 23, 2019

04:50 Wednesday, Bourg-en-Bresse

11 HOURS TO DESTINATION

“It’s pretty fresh this morning,” Wayne Widdecombe calls out of the cab of his 40-tonne truck sitting in a frosty industrial estate on the outskirts of Bourg-en-Bresse, more than 400km south-east of Paris. He had parked nearby and slept on a mattress behind the driving seat on one of his regular three-day round trips between Folkestone, near the Channel tunnel entrance, and Turin in northern Italy.

Ahead is what he hoped to be a seamless 11-hour trip lugging car parts for Jaguar Land Rover back to his UK depot. The 78 plastic boxes in the trailer contain the fans for engine cooling systems that have been manufactured by Alcaline’s supplier at Asti in the Italian industrial heartland. They need to arrive at JLR in Birmingham on Thursday — a small part of Europe’s highly integrated, [just-in-time automotive supply chain](#).

The trip is a chance to put theory aside and witness first-hand the reality of [Britain’s current “frictionless” trade](#) within the EU to help understand how that might change after [Brexit](#). If Britain ends up leaving the EU without any agreement to remain in the [customs union](#), it is journeys like these that will be the most important stress points.

The experience suggests a logistics system where everything is compressed — from the time that trucks need to deliver the goods to the tiny profit margins for haulage companies. And even without any customs procedures on the border, the [Channel tunnel](#) is already under intense pressure because of the weight of traffic and security fears about stowaways.

Long haul: Wayne Widdecombe's route



Mr Widdecombe's truck is owned by Alcaline, a haulage company near Folkestone, which largely operates on the Anglo-Italian route, specialising in luxury car parts. For the whole transport equipment sector, including finished cars, Britain exported £4.4bn of products in 2017 and imported £6.3bn from Italy.

The cab of his lorry is less than a year old, left-hand drive because it operates mostly on the European continent, and already has 143,000km on the clock. We are soon on the autoroute heading north at a speed-limited 90km/h (56mph) in the direction of Calais.

Time is everything. Drivers are supposed to take an 11-hour break between shifts. But because Mr Widdecombe had a three-hour break the day before, he was only required to stop for a mandatory nine-hour daily break and he wanted to get started early. "I'm not a great fan of driving at night but, because of what we do, the goods have to be there," he says.

This is a regular run for him. Leaving Folkestone on a Monday, he aims to be as close to Lyon as possible before stopping, then over the Alps on Tuesday to Turin, where he has a break,

and returns over the Alps in the evening before driving back to the UK on Wednesday. On Thursday, he will then go out half the way, meet an Italy-based Alcaline driver, swap trailers and return to his home in Folkestone on Friday.



Wayne Widdecombe has driven from the UK into Europe for the past 15 years

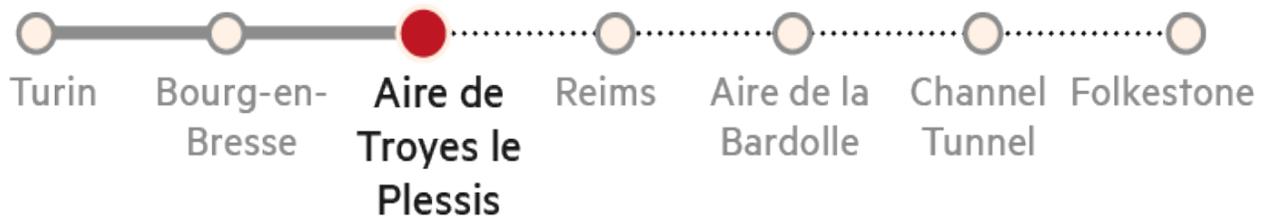
Hailing from Devon, Mr Widdecombe, 49, has been driving European routes for the past 15 years. But with internet on his phone, he can have British radio playing as he barrels up and down French motorways. “I like to listen to Nigel Farage on LBC, for my sins,” he says soon after we set off.

He has strong views about the practices of drivers from other EU countries. “The Italians never seem to be speed restricted. They’ll all do 95 [km/h],” he says. France’s [gilets jaunes protests](#) have caused him much grief in recent weeks, especially as he thinks they had the support of some French police when barricading roads and holding up hauliers, but he respects their solidarity.

And he blames eastern Europeans for holding down pay among truck drivers. “No one pays well. I was making exactly the same money 10 years ago — it’s like they’ve fixed it. I’m being reasonable here — don’t need a million quid a week.” By paying a salary of £30,000, he says, UK-based hauliers struggle against eastern European rivals who pay their drivers less than half his wage.

“It’s very competitive. The eastern Europeans undercut everyone.”

08:25 Aire de Troyes le Plessis



As it becomes light, we take a coffee break, and pull off the A5 shortly before turning on to the A26, the motorway known as *L'Autoroute des Anglais* for the sheer weight of British traffic heading south through Champagne country wanting to avoid Paris.

With Brexit such a polarising topic in the UK, it is the first time we've talked about it. Here, Mr Widdicombe's views are far from those of Mr Farage, the Brexit champion and former leader of Ukip who he listens to on the radio. "I didn't vote, so I don't have a say," Mr Widdicombe says. "I would vote Remain next time. That's just because of my job.

"People voted on immigration," he adds. "I've got no problem with people working and paying into the system."

After a little over 20 minutes, we're back on the road, with the tachograph, the machine in the cab recording [truck drivers'](#) hours according to EU regulations, telling us we have under an hour of driving time before we need to make another stop for at least 30 minutes.



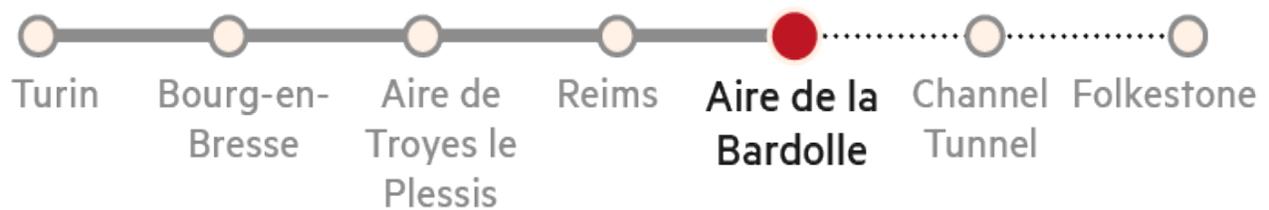
Chris Giles and Wayne Widdecombe en route to the tunnel

[Non-EU migrants and the criminal gangs](#) who try to smuggle them from France to the UK are a daily problem for drivers on the stretch of road up to Calais. Mr Widdecombe has twice had people break into his load and, if they are found in the UK, the driver is held responsible. In both cases he had suspicions and reported his concerns to the authorities. Now that camps have been cleared from Calais, the risk has moved south, so Alcaline forbids its drivers from stopping — even to go to the toilet — anywhere north of Reims, some 275km from Calais.

Mr Widdecombe's bosses, with whom he gets on well, can check at any time where the truck is and regularly call in to ask him "how you getting on?", even though they already know. For him, this is much better than working for a haulier that uses a computerised fleet management system, in which every move is controlled by an algorithm and orders come by screen message.

The tachograph is now saying we have 15 minutes before the mandatory break and, because he has driven the route so often, Mr Widdecombe knows we can just make it to the next layby to park, which we do with seconds to spare.

09:40 Aire de la Bardolle



Mr Widdecombe gets out a camping stove, opens his fridge and makes tea. After the break, he checks the load and seals it with an additional security lock. The plastic boxes are stacked from floor to ceiling of the trailer and there is no physical space for anyone to stow aboard. On the trip out to Turin on Monday, he was carrying a mixed load of heavy magnesium oxide and multiple smaller loads grouped together. These are documented on the consignment note, a part-handwritten and part-typed document that describes the load and the dispatch and arrival points. This is the extent of the paperwork for the loads he carries.

The car parts business is mostly a one-way trade for Alcaline, with Italian components coming in for JLR, Aston Martin, McLaren, Bentley and Rolls-Royce. On the return trip, it often takes just empty plastic boxes folded flat. Alcaline needs to fill all the trucks on both trips, says the owner, Lorenzo Zaccheo, just to make a 1.5 per cent profit margin when nothing goes wrong.



David Zaccheo, the operations manager at Alcaline in Hythe, organises the company's logistics. Margins are tight and delays are costly

10:15 The road to Calais

With 330km still to go before the Eurotunnel entrance near Calais it means a little under four hours more driving, with the scenery becoming steadily less interesting. Mr Widdecombe dislikes this part of the drive and he is expecting a far from frictionless experience at the Channel tunnel.

“The tunnel used to be a good thing,” he says. “It works well when it works well, but Eurotunnel don’t do busy.” He predicts it will take two to three hours from reaching the tunnel entrance to leaving it in Folkestone.

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He is right. This is not frictionless trade. Most of the delays are caused by the sheer weight of traffic rather than checks and controls. He says

Wednesday is one of the peak times to cross, but “it’s pretty busy all of the time now”.

It is not surprising that things have become more congested as [Eurotunnel’s traffic figures](#) show the number of trucks has more than doubled since the financial crisis from just under 800,000 in 2009 to a little over 1.6m in 2017. Mr Widdecombe is convinced that if there were significant new customs checks — either in a no-deal Brexit or if Britain leaves the EU customs union and every consignment requires a declaration — Eurotunnel would grind to a halt.

“If every truck had to clear customs, you would have miles of queues,” he says, citing Switzerland, which has aligned its goods standards with the EU but is not in its customs union. “No one likes doing Switzerland. It’s a pain in the arse. We use a clearing agent at the border or before the border so when you arrive at the Swiss border all the paperwork is correct . . . There’s lots of queueing to get paperwork stamped”.

14:00 Arrive at Eurotunnel



The truck arrives in Calais

As we arrive at Eurotunnel in Calais, the process is everything Mr Widdecombe forecast. The terminal is busy but not overwhelmed and large trucks are everywhere. After 10 minutes in the first line, we peel off left to a voluntary check for immigrants on board because this removes the driver's legal responsibility for stowaways. "If they find them here, it don't cost you nothing," he says.

Drivers stop under a canopy and run out to have a piece of paper stamped to prove they have had the check, while cameras scan the tops of lorries and dogs walk around the loads sniffing for people. About 20 trucks at a time are processed in batches. It is efficient and does not cause many delays, but we do not check in until 14:47, hitting the unstaffed French border eight minutes later and reaching the UK border at 15:07.

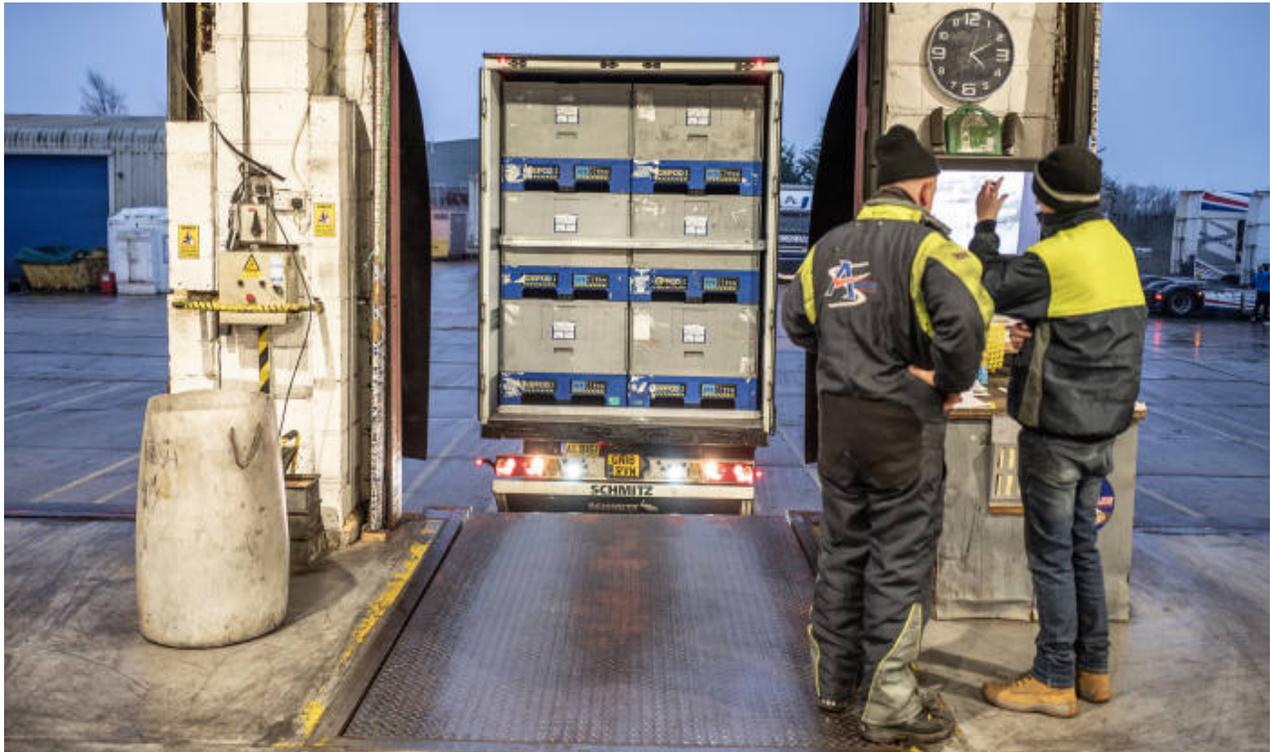
Mr Widdecombe shows our passports but no paperwork, simply declaring that it is car parts and we have additional security on the rear of the truck. That is all the UK Border Force wanted. Then we become stuck behind two trucks in front that have been pulled over for further checks. We cannot move for 15 minutes.

Once the blockage is cleared, we are allocated a line for a specific shuttle and finally drive on to the train at 16:00, two hours after arriving at the terminal. We travel through the tunnel in

an eerily quiet carriage for truck drivers, none of whom talk to each other, and we drive off the train at 16:53 French time.

17:02 Arrive at depot

ONE HOUR LATER THAN PLANNED



The automotive parts are unloaded at the Hythe depot ready for their journey to Jaguar Land Rover in the Midlands

The whole border experience has taken just under three hours. By 17:02 we've arrived at the Alcaline depot close to the M20, more than 12 hours after setting off and with eight hours, 36 minutes of travel showing on the tachograph.

Mr Widdecombe watches his load emptied, ready to go to JLR on Thursday and for him to take a cargo of empty pallets on the same route starting early on Thursday. He does not go home: instead he prepares to bed down in his cab overnight to get another early start.

Photographs by Charlie Bibby

Logistics Can tunnel operator maintain the flow?

If cross-Channel trade is not frictionless now, what will happen after Brexit when additional customs and regulatory checks are required?

The logistics community is clear about the potential nightmare. The Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association have warned of gridlock on the roads of Kent

[Eurotunnel](#) sees things differently. After the crushing defeat of Theresa May’s Brexit plan in Parliament last week, it issued a statement saying “with or without a deal, traffic flow through the Channel tunnel will be maintained”. The company has not done a good job convincing drivers of its plans, but a spokesperson insists they are extensive.

Eurotunnel expects drivers to arrive at its terminal with customs declarations complete and pre-notified, much as Mr Widdecombe has to do when going to Switzerland now. Then it aims to scan the documents and upload them into its systems automatically, so that at the same time the current voluntary check for migrants happens, the drivers can have a customs compliance check too.

“We’re educating customers to make sure people are ready,” the spokesperson says. “Those not ready will get controlled.”

Few others in the industry share this confidence. Pauline Bastidon, head of European policy at the FTA, asks: “What happens if [customs documents] have not been done? If the scan shows there is not valid customs documentation lodged, the truck will not be able to access the ports (or Eurotunnel) and will have to do it there and then.”

If that overwhelms the terminals, traffic would soon spill out. Worse, says John James, chairman of Star Cargo, one of the few customs agents operating in Dover and Folkestone, there simply is not the capacity to handle the declarations suddenly.

“The problem is there are not enough agents to do the work,” he says. “That will create phenomenal delays at the ports.”

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