

# Carry on Trucking

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While many enthusiasts collect radios and televisions, broadcasting equipment is a more neglected area. The Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group (BECG) is a group of people who rescue, restore and conserve historic UK television equipment, focusing on the engineering aspects. We aim to use this to present television history to the public.

## In the sight of all the people

*Then the Queen arising out of her Chair, supported as before, the Sword of State being carried before her, shall go to the Altar, and make her solemn Oath in the sight of all the people to observe the premisses.*

On 2 June 1953 Queen Elizabeth II was crowned. Thanks to the largest ever outside broadcast (OB) in the UK, 75% of people in the UK saw her coronation live on TV; more than had ever seen a British monarch being crowned before.

The Queen's coronation marked British television's coming of age. Against the wishes of her advisers, the young monarch herself insisted on having cameras in Westminster Abbey. What's less well known is that the very first British OB had been at the coronation of her father, George VI. This was in 1937, not long after the start of the world's first regular high definition TV service, at a time when high definition meant 405 lines. Just three cameras and a single OB truck near Hyde Park Corner allowed viewers a glimpse of the royal procession.

## VIVAT REGINA!

At the 1953 coronation, Hubert Parry's 1902 setting of the coronation anthem *I was glad* was sung by the Westminster School choristers, complete with the cry: *Vivat Regina!* It was therefore only fitting that the project to re-create a coronation-era OB truck should be called Vivat.

There are no surviving examples of 1950s BBC television outside broadcast units, despite the '50s being such an important decade for the new medium of TV. Project Vivat has remedied that by re-creating a representative operational unit. It is based on a very similar early 1960s vehicle, fitted out with original early 1950s equipment. The vehicle is 390 EXH, originally the BBC's MCR23 (Mobile Control Room).

Before it reached us, Vivat was languishing as a redundant and derelict mobile classroom. After much work by BECG members, paid for by them personally, it now looks splendid in the original dark-green BBC livery. Most of the monitors and other equipment have now been installed. The cameras and associated equipment are Marconi Mk II and Mk III series, the models used at the coronation. Final wiring remains to be

done. The BECG would like to thank Bryant Unlimited which has sponsored the project with donations of cable and connectors.

Vivat has been used as a prop in several productions, most notably for a scene at Churchill's funeral in *The Crown*. Paul Marshall is a very good vintage cameraman!

## Inside and out - the OB story

While many early TV performances came from the studios at Alexandra Palace, there were also exciting events elsewhere. After that first OB in 1937, the BBC covered numerous events outside the studio. The football authorities worried that TV would reduce their crowds at matches, but tennis and boxing had no such qualms; Wimbledon was a regular OB fixture. The BBC used all its limited OB resources for the 1948 "austerity" Olympics.



1954 OB with Marconi Mk II Camera and Pye D16T TV as a monitor



Vivat restored interior



Vivat on set for "The Crown" with Paul Marshall playing a cameraman



Vivat in London



Vivat as found



Marconi Mk III camera on roof





Southern at AEC Rally 2014



Marconi Mk VII first generation colour camera



Southern interior



### Southern Television OOW 999G

We've been involved with Big Bertha, as she's affectionately known, since she was rescued from Meridian TV's car park in 1995. At that time the truck was just a shell with few original fitments and was painted in TVS silver. After a five year programme of repairing and refitting, she made her debut at the Newark Vehicle show in 2000 and was featured in Bus and Coach magazine.

OOW 999G was bought by Southern TV in 1968 as a bare chassis Bedford VAL 70. The outer coachwork is all fibreglass – this was a requirement as a lot of work would be done next to the sea. The electronics fit was done in-house by Southern TV engineers with help from the Marconi Company. This gives the unit a uniquely home-made feel in comparison to others in the fleet.

Originally fitted out with monochrome cameras, she was quickly converted to

colour operation using four Marconi Mk VII cameras and was used at the Investiture of Prince Charles at Caernarfon Castle, as was every other colour OB truck at the time.

When Southern TV lost its franchise in the 1982 ITV re-organisation, the truck passed to TVS which continued to use the truck throughout its reign, refitting it several times.

After the ITV franchise changed from TVS to Meridian, the truck was abandoned in a car park at Northam Studios. A kick of the tyres, some new diesel, lubricants and coolant and it was driven away to start its new life in preservation.

### In preservation

Southern has been shown in public many times. Events have included 10 years at the Lincoln Steam and Vintage Show, British Amateur TV Club conventions and an appearance at the Sandtoft Trolleybus

Museum. In 2008 we drove Big Bertha all the way back to Southampton and parked her outside the Rose Bowl for the celebration of 50 years of ITV in the south.

### Equipment

We have tried to restore her to the original colour fit-out using equipment of the original type where possible. Some original fitments have survived, including power, some woodwork, air conditioning, racks and audio patching.

The colour cameras can be up to four Marconi Mk VII. Monitors are a mixture of Pye monochrome and Barco colour. These are not 100% authentic but are much more reliable than the originals. Most of the other equipment is by Marconi.



## Yorkshire / Tyne Tees NUB 327F

ITV used to be a collection of regional companies that were friendly rivals, each with its own identity and traditions. So why the curious split personality? This truck was built for the newly formed Yorkshire TV in 1968. After various adventures it is now in the BECG, but in Tyne Tees colours. How did that happen?

Built by Marconi on a Bedford chassis, it was one of the "Yorkshire Twins" that opened the service in 1968 (literally, as the studios were not finished!). Later it was sold to the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) as a production vehicle for training videos, and then acquired by Harefield Hospital Television, where we first set eyes on it. Fast forward twenty years to 2001 and it was decaying so we agreed to purchase it and preserve it.

We collected it in January 2001. It still had lots of equipment fitted, both original and additional. It was covered in moss and hadn't been started for ten years, but a pressure washer, some new hoses, fluids, diesel, batteries and a large "battery boiler" coaxed it back to life and we drove

away. A split coolant hose was the only incident on the way back to base.

After a good clean out we started to refit and repair. We fitted a mixture of cameras and control gear to make a sort of chameleon rather than a strict preservation like the Southern truck.

Things were pushed along by a request for the truck to appear in the 2003 Christmas special of *The Royal* filmed in Scarborough, which was Tyne Tees country. A quick paint job and some decals supplied by the production company transformed the old Yorkshire truck into *Tyne Tees TV OB unit 3* and that is how it has stayed ever since. It has subsequently had a new high-quality respray.

## Out and about

In 2005 we took the truck to the Marconi reunion in Chelmsford where it received a very warm welcome. Pictures from the truck went out live on Anglia TV news.

In 2006, a special event took place at Alexandra Palace in North London to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the start of the BBC

television service. We used the truck to make a programme using vintage technology – two Marconi Mk IV cameras and one Marconi Mk V camera cabled back to the truck, which was parked on the terrace outside the studios. We had several working 405-line sets supplied by enthusiasts to display the programme live in the old transmitter hall and it was also carried by a local amateur television repeater.

The truck has been to many other events, including a BVWS Harpenden meeting.

## Equipment

Besides having a dual personality, several types of equipment are fitted so it can be used as a technology exhibition. Monochrome cameras are Marconi Mk IV and Mk V using 4.5" image orthicon tubes. Colour cameras are Marconi Mk VIII plumbicon.



Yorkshire/Tyne Tees as found at Harefield



Yorkshire/Tyne Tees in fake snow for "The Royal"



Yorkshire/Tyne Tees



Yorkshire/Tyne Tees in fake snow for "The Royal"



Yorkshire/Tyne Tees in original Yorkshire livery





ABC-Thames in service with Thames TV



ABC-Thames as found



Jeffrey working on stripping out ABC-Thames



ABC-Thames interior as found

### ABC-Thames GNF 951E

Our latest acquisition has a long and interesting history, taking it from ABC to Thames to Sony. It finally became a mobile home.

### History

After the Football World Cup was awarded to UK in 1966, ABC Television ordered three new Outside Broadcast trucks. These trucks were state of the art, incorporating a number of firsts:

- All-transistor equipment
- Longitudinal layout (the operators face sideways, not forwards)
- Separate operational compartments for sound, production and engineering.

The trucks were built on Bedford VAL-14 chassis, fitted out by Marconi and supplied to operate with up to 6 Marconi Mk V image orthicon monochrome cameras.

Following the ITV franchise changes in 1968, these trucks were transferred to Thames Television which kept GNF951E and converted it to colour, using Marconi Mk VII cameras.

The unit remained in service for over 10 years before being sold to Sony, which used it as an HDTV (High Definition in the modern sense of 1000+ lines) demonstration unit. During this period the truck spent some time in Italy making pioneering HD programmes.

A new owner in 1992 used it for several purposes including as a mobile home, an art gallery and a costume store. BECG acquired the unit in 2018, with a view to restoring it as an outside broadcast unit. The vehicle is in good running order and the bodywork has little rust. Apart from the air conditioners and some 19" rackmounts, very few original fittings survive. We plan to equip the truck with Marconi Mk V image orthicon and Marconi Mk VII plumbicon cameras, giving the unit both monochrome and colour capability.

So far, we have stripped out the mobile-home interior. Further restoration will have to wait for money and effort to become available.



### Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group

We are a small group of qualified and experienced professionals dedicated to the survival and interpretation of television history. Our main purpose is to promote and demonstrate vintage TV. We have achieved many successes in this field while privately funded. We are now applying to become a registered charity.

The BECG will bring together much equipment, currently owned by the founders. We have many cameras, monitors, video tape recorders and all the less visible paraphernalia that are needed to make TV programmes. The biggest parts of our equipment are four outside broadcast trucks; they are the main feature of this article.

This article was written by Jeffrey Borinsky, BECG Treasurer, with contributions from fellow founders:

Dr Paul Marshall (Chairman)  
Dave Hill (Secretary & Webmaster)  
Martin Pritchard  
Richard Harris  
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To learn more about us, or help us in any way please email at: [contactus@becg.org.uk](mailto:contactus@becg.org.uk)

More information on the trucks, their equipment and other BECG activities can be found at: [www.becg.org.uk](http://www.becg.org.uk)

Much of the equipment shown in this article is available to hire for film and TV production.