

# **A review of the Thames Television OB fleet Part 1 (1968 to 1980)**

## **Television's shotgun marriage**

**By Phil Nott**

If you want to understand the history of Thames Television's outside broadcast (OB) trucks, it is necessary first to appreciate the tortuous way that the broadcaster came into being. Therefore, I am starting this review of the Thames OB fleet with a little history.

From its launch on 22 September 1955 until July 1968, the Independent Television Authority (ITA) contract to provide programming on the ITV network for London on weekdays was operated by Associated-Rediffusion. Another company, ABC TV, had the franchises for weekend services in the Midlands and North. Geographic and structural changes in the network, created by the ITA's 1967 invitation for applicants for new franchises, meant that ABC lost both these franchises because the two areas were to become seven-day operations.

ABC then applied for both the Midlands seven-day operation and the contract to serve London at the weekends, preferring the latter. It was widely expected that the company would win the weekend franchise in London. However, after an impressive application, that contract went to a consortium led by David Frost. The consortium became London Weekend Television.

This led to a serious problem for the ITA as ABC was a popular station, whose productions earned vital foreign currency. Its station management and presentation style were admired. But it was considered difficult for ABC to win the Midlands seven-day contract, because the existing five-days contractor, ATV, had also applied and was a large earner of overseas revenue, having won the Queen's Award for Export in 1966.

Therefore, the ITA forced a 'shotgun marriage' between ABC and Associated-Rediffusion, creating a company that would serve London on weekdays. Majority control of the new company went to ABC.

In discussions about the name of the new company, some directors favoured ABC London, while others suggested 'Tower Television' to reflect both the newly built Post Office Tower and the Tower of London. Eventually it was named 'Thames Television', after London's river.

On 30 July 1968 Thames TV began broadcasting in London on weekdays.

## **All change for OBs**

The newly formed Thames TV rapidly moved to modern transistorised technology in preparation for the launch of colour on the ITV network in November 1969. This meant in particular major changes for the large outside broadcast fleet.

ABC had always had a large OB capability to help it cover the whole of the North and Midlands from its base at Didsbury near Manchester. It provided much of the live sports coverage for ITV including wrestling, horse racing, motor sport, football and cricket. In addition, there were live light entertainment specials from Blackpool, morning worship and a live farming programme on Sundays that came from all over the region. There was a rumour (apparently not true) that the church for the live Morning Worship broadcast at 10am on a Sunday was chosen as being the nearest to the football ground used for a live OB on the previous Saturday afternoon!

The new London weekday franchise had different OB requirements. There was less reliance on sport but more OB programming of royal and political events, light entertainment (*Miss World*, *This Is Your Life*) as well as on-location video recording of drama (*Public Eye*) and consumer programmes (*Drive-In* and *Wish You Were Here*). Since most sport happened at the weekend, it now came under the remit of London Weekend Television.

In 1966, before it knew anything about the franchise changes, ABC Television ordered three new Outside Broadcast units, FNB460D, GNF951E and HXJ846F. These were to replace the three ageing units that had been in service since the station started in 1955. The new trucks included a number of firsts: all-transistor equipment, longitudinal layout and separate compartments for sound, production and engineering.

Road Transport Services built each truck on a Bedford VAL-14 twin-steer coach chassis. This had a low floor height and provided a superior ride for all the expected motorway driving around the North and Midlands. Marconi fitted out the units to operate with up to six Marconi MK V monochrome image orthicon cameras.

Following the formation of Thames TV in 1968, all three trucks transferred to the new Thames TV OB base at Hanworth, near Teddington, in Middlesex. The new signage had the word 'THAMES' in white lettering along the side but still used the original ABC light-blue livery.



Thames TV livery 1968

ABC TV livery 1966

The 1969 ITA Year Book stated that Thames TV's mobile division consisted of three mobile control rooms, with one being already converted to colour. The move to colour OBs in 1969 was a big commitment for Thames, both technically and financially

Fred Atkinson, Thames's OB Manager at the time, wrote in the Thames in-house magazine

*"The scheduled date for the completion of the first major OB Unit in colour which will be equipped with four camera channels is 1 April 1969. The conversion of this Unit is taking place at the present moment at Hanworth. It is envisaged that by November 1969 Thames will be the possessors of two four channel Units and a two channel Unit"*

Eventually Thames sold two of the units (FNB460D and HXJ846F) to Racecourse Technical Services. It kept GNF951E and converted it to colour, using Marconi MK VII cameras. The unit remained in service with Thames for over 10 years before being sold to Sony, who used it as an HDTV demonstration unit.



*HXJ846F last seen in a field somewhere in the New York area, its RTS dark green livery having been washed away by the weather, revealing its original Thames TV light blue livery underneath.*

## **Unit 2 GNF951E**

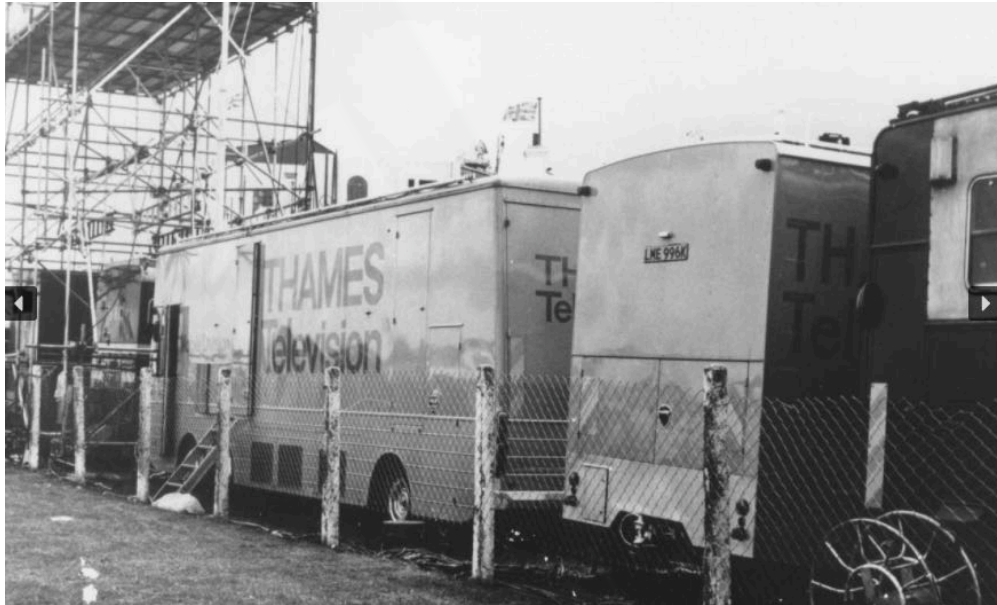
GNF951E became known as Unit 2 in the Thames TV OB fleet. Now owned by BECG, it is in the process of an ambitious restoration to near its original operational condition.

One of Unit 2's annual highlights was covering the Derby horse race on Epsom Downs as the main OB Scanner for the live four-day event. Since Unit 2 did not have integral VTR (video tape recording), captioning or an on-board generator, separate support vehicles had to provide these services. Since there were also numerous links trucks, camera/ cable tenders, elevated platforms and scaffolding towers for long range micro-wave links, this created quite an 'OB circus'. There was even a Ford Escort van with a tea urn in the back, roaming around Epsom Downs, dispensing a brew to the thirsty OB crew.

The Derby course is a 1 mile, four-furlong circuit, with the start position as far away from the main grandstand as you can get. Therefore, the links vehicles were often Land Rover based to cope with the rough terrain.

I talked to a number of old Thames TV OB crew members, who said that Derby week meant a great time out on the downs - if the weather was good. If it rained, the Downs quickly become waterlogged, making the ground treacherous. In addition, the team had to cope with race goers, some a little worse for wear, wandering around the race course, as well as the overall carnival atmosphere that was unique to this historic race meeting.





*Unit 2 at the Derby in the mid 1970s*



*Unit 2 filming an episode of Drive In in the mid 1970s*

## Unit 1 HMP676K

Unit 2 was joined by Unit 1 in the early 1970s (unit numbering wasn't always sequential). It was designed to work as a self-contained remote scanner, equipped with two or three Marconi MK VII four-tube colour cameras. Externally, the design was similar to Unit 2 but

with a shorter wheelbase and only two axles instead of three. Unit 1 was unique in having an Ampex 1200 quadruplex colour VTR and a small generator, making it reasonably self-sufficient. The vehicle was built by A Smith of Great Bentley Ltd, based in Colchester, the first ever OB vehicle that the company built. Fitting out was undertaken by Marconi.



*Unit 1 at Sandown Park Races on the far side of the course from the grandstand, powered by its internal generator. Next to it is a Thames TV elevated-platform truck.*

This versatile unit worked on a variety of productions for sport and light entertainment programming and, in particular, a new motoring show called *Drive In* pioneered by OB director Jim Pople. The unit followed new cars round a test track, with one Marconi MK VII camera fitted to a 'cow catcher' at the rear and another on the roof. It must have been quite scary, with that heavy Ampex 1200 VTR in the back of the vehicle being swung around on the bends. This innovative motoring programme was the forerunner to programmes like *Top Gear*, which today only needs a hand-held UHD camera in the back of a Range Rover.





*Unit 1 approaching a sharp bend during the filming of Drive In in the early 1970s*



*Unit 1 filming another episode of Drive In in the early 1970s*

## Unit 4 LME996K and beyond

By the early 1970s other remote units were being introduced. These had a simpler and more traditional design based on a Bedford TK chassis. Unit 4, pictured below, was one of this generation, described, like Unit 1, as a remote scanner. It had two Marconi MK VII colour cameras, plus an internal generator, and a pneumatic aerial mast, but no on-board VTR as the unit was only used for 'live' work i.e. sport and news.



*This picture of Unit 4 was taken at Doncaster Races, not long after the unit returned from OB service for ITV Sport at the 1974 Soccer World Cup in West Germany, hence the ITV World Cup 74 branding. The Bedford CF camera tender for Unit 4 can be seen to the left.*

Remote units were becoming more popular as production requirements changed. For example, outside scenes for drama productions were now being shot on video tape, not on film. This was mainly to avoid the contrast between interior drama scenes, shot in the studio on video tape, and exterior scenes, shot on low-grade 16mm film. However, at the same time, Thames TV set up a new film division to make TV drama on 16mm film only. This company, called Euston Films, went on to make gritty dramas including *The Sweeney* and *Minder*.

While drama was now shot completely on either videotape or 16mm, new hand-held cameras were being introduced to allow drama to be shot on the street without the need for large OB cameras and the accompanying circus of OB vehicles. The first portable camera in regular use was the Philips LDK 13, which could be carried on one's shoulder. All the camera electronics were now in a heavy back-pack.

Although Thames TV undertook the first TV demonstration of the LDK 13 in a live episode of the children's programme *Magpie*, London Weekend Television was the first TV company to actually shoot a drama series on location. It recorded its new



drama series *Upstairs Downstairs* on videotape. The first full drama that Thames recorded on videotape was *Public Eye*, recently shown on Talking Pictures TV. In the later colour episodes, light blue OB department Bedford TKs can be seen lurking in the background in many shots, if you look closely enough!



Thames's LDK 13 'starring' in an episode of *Magpie* in 1972



LWT's LDK 13 on location for *Upstairs Downstairs* in 1973

Unit 5 was another Bedford TK remote unit, pictured below at a drama shoot in Petersfield in 1976 for a series called *Warrior Queen*. This was one of the first dramas shot on videotape by Thames TV with the hand-held LDK 13 cameras. The picture shows the unit with a front 'cow-catcher' attachment fitted in order to shoot moving action on horseback. A full crew was inside including a PA, vision mixer and director. It must have been crowded





*Unit 5 shooting Warrior Queen. Note the 'cow catcher'.*

In the period 1968 to 1980, the largest investment in OB vehicles was in a new scanner, the new Unit 1 which entered service in 1979.

The unit was based on the BBC Type 5 design, since the BBC had ordered two chassis that it did not use in the end. Instead it made them available to Thames TV and HTV, both of which needed new OB vehicles.

In terms of technical fit out, Thames Engineering decided not to follow the recommendations of the builder, Link Electronics.

The company bought a vision mixer and LDK5 cameras from Philips, monitoring equipment from Tektronix, and colour monitors from Barco. The VTR was an Ampex VPR20, sound was by Neve and Calrec.

Thames OB Units were always at the very limit of the chassis' weight plating and this was also the case with the new Unit 1.

Because Unit 1 was based on the original BBC Type 5 design, it was originally specified with a massive long-range fuel tank of more than 100 gallons, to allow it to travel to Scotland and back without refuelling. This was replaced by a more conventional 25 gallon tank.

Other unusual modifications included the use of tubeless tyres and alloy wheels to keep the weight down.

Thames had regular arguments with the Department of Transport over the method of weighing, for example whether it should be the sum of all wheels individually, or the total as recorded on a weighbridge (never the same).



*Unit 1 (NLH357V) under construction in 1979 at Link Electronics, Andover*

## **Thames TV OB fleet livery**

The rebranding of the OB fleet from 'ABC TV' to 'THAMES' was pretty simple.

The light blue livery, adopted when ABC started in 1955, remained when ABC became Thames in July 1968. The words 'ABC Television' were simply replaced by the word 'THAMES' within the dark blue band that ran along the waist-line of most OB vehicles at the time. The ABC 'triangle' logo was simply painted out.

The new station did not inherit any OB vehicles from Rediffusion, whose OB fleet was much older and had not changed much since 1955. Some of the Rediffusion OB fleet went to London Weekend TV, while it awaited the arrival of its own newly ordered OB vehicles.



*A typical ABC Bedford TK, new in 1966, OB tender with the new THAMES name emblazoned on the side. This vehicle was actually one of the tenders for CMCR Unit 2*

By the early 1970s, there were complaints both internally and from the general public that, with an OB fleet of more than 40 vehicles with just the word 'THAMES' on the side, people did not know if they belonged to the local water board, the gas board or their local ITV company. Therefore, the word 'Television' was added in lower case to distinguish the Thames OB vehicles from the local utility company vehicles. The words 'THAMES Television' were painted on the side with 'Television' beneath 'THAMES' in a new medium-blue colour but still with the overall body colour in light blue. The words 'Mobile Division' were also added to the larger vehicles, and the dark blue waistband stripe disappeared.



*Unit 1 sporting the new early 1970s livery with the words Mobile Division added*

A further new OB vehicle livery was introduced in the late 1970s. It had a more striking corporate look of two-tone blue, with yellow cabs for Bedford TKs and Leyland Boxer tenders. The typeface remained the same, but the word 'Television' was now in capital letters and a golden-yellow colour. Also, for the first time, the



famous Thames 'Sky-Line' station ident was incorporated in the livery in a stylised version in black, surrounded by a black or blue border.



*Unit 1 in the new livery with the skyline logo in black on each side.*



*Unit 5 in the new livery with yellow cab with a smaller skyline logo in black with blue border on the cab door sides.*



*Various OB vehicles in the new livery at Sandown Park in 1980*

By the late 1970s, the Thames TV OB fleet had grown to more than 40 vehicles, making it the largest OB fleet in ITV. Still based at Hanworth, Thames was increasingly asked to lend its trucks to help with OB productions for ITV across the country.

At the same time, discussions began about fundamental technical and structural changes to the TV industry. In the second part of this article, covering 1980 to 1992, I will look at the impact of those changes on the Thames TV OB Fleet and the UK outside broadcast industry as a whole.

*With thanks to the many former Thames OB personnel who assisted with their memories and photos, and special thanks to Peter Mason, Jim Pople and Bob Warren.*

**Written and Compiled by Phil Nott**

**© Phil Nott / BECG 2020**