



CLASSICS LOCKER

# RECREATING THE MAGIC OF TV'S EARLY DAYS

■ Story by Ruth Slavid ■ Photos by Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group

A newly formed charity in England is preserving and using a number of vintage outside broadcast trucks that were originally used in the UK in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

*Southern at a rally for the 50th anniversary of VAL trucks in 2014.*

**K**ey to the history of broadcasting, these outside broadcast trucks have been or are being fitted out with original equipment in full working order – and are finding use in today's broadcasting and films.

One of the trucks, Southern, last year took part in the celebration of the 50th anniversary of colour broadcasting on BBC1 and ITV. On Friday 15 November 2019, Southern TV broadcast news live from an event at Birmingham City University, with part of the broadcast

going out from the 1968 truck, using vintage equipment.

And an earlier truck, Vivat, was used in filming of episodes of *The Crown*, showing Winston Churchill's funeral in 1965, and the investiture of the Prince of Wales (Prince Charles) at Caernarfon Castle in 1969.

Acquiring, maintaining and operating the vintage broadcast equipment is a passion and challenge, and the same is true for the trucks. Why is the effort worthwhile? Paul Marshall, chair of the Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group (BECG)

and the man who originally acquired the trucks, says: "Working in electronics [he is an electronics engineer] you are conscious that everything is tomorrow's landfill. When the opportunity comes up, especially if it's a whole truckload of kit, it gives you an opportunity to save something for posterity."

Southern was built for Southern Television, one of the regional UK commercial broadcasters, on a Bedford VAL 70 chassis in 1968. Dell of Southampton was the coachbuilder. "Because it was designed just as a chassis, the coachbuilders could start from the chassis up," Paul says.

The VAL was an unusual choice for a truck, as most of them were used for coaches. They were popular in the early days of motorways, because their twin front axles meant that they could cope with a blowout at speed and therefore were safe. Non-coach uses included a horsebox for the German Olympic team and as a pigeon carrier.

The main reason that







*Vivat back to its former glory in the livery of a Coronation-era BBC outside broadcast truck. Here it's on location for shooting of The Crown.*

Southern – and other TV operators – chose a VAL was because it was considered a good-looking, sleek vehicle – it had a good image. Money was not really an issue because the cost of the trucks was relatively insignificant compared with the cost of the equipment that went inside them. The broadcasters wanted a high standard of coach building and a stylish appearance.

For Southern, Dell built the bodywork in fibreglass, since much of the service would be in corrosive sea air. In fact, it travelled more widely

than expected, including to Scotland to cover football. The truck was in remarkably good condition when Paul acquired it in December 1994 – it had been in service until January 1994 and had always been kept under cover.

Most of the maintenance that was needed was cosmetic, although some of that was substantial. Sam Booth, who drives the trucks when needed, worked with his brother Kev and with Paul to respray Southern to its original colour scheme and logos. On other parts of the project, BECG also

worked with a local garage, A & G Commercial in Lincoln. A specialist in the repair and recovery of HGVs, it is sympathetic to old vehicles.

Southern, like BECG's other vintage trucks, doesn't travel far these days – in fact it never has done, with a total of only 64,000 miles (103,000km) on the clock. Today, there has to be a balance between driving the trucks enough to keep them running well, and not going too far because vital parts may wear out. If they have to travel a distance, it will be on a low loader. The furthest that Sam has driven



*The Vivat as found by BECG.*

Southern is back to its original home in Southampton on the south coast – nearly 200 miles (320km) and a six-hour journey. When Southern travelled to Birmingham (about 90 miles/145km), the engine filter became clogged partway through the trip by the growth in the biodiesel that forms part of all diesel today. On a cold, wet English winter's day, Sam had to lie under the truck at a service station to remove and clean the filter.

He was not, however, on his own. It is always better, he said, to have a passenger, because there is a blind spot on the driver's left. What is it like to drive otherwise? "There isn't a lot of power," says Sam. It has an 8.2-litre engine, which isn't a lot for an 11.5-tonne truck, and the engine is only 143bhp. "Modern trucks are just point and go," Sam says. "These older ones haven't got the power. They have a bigger range of gears – which means there are more things to play with."

Changing gear varies as well, depending on which gear you are changing. "You have to remember where you are on the gears," Sam says. "It soon lets you know when you have got it wrong." And although in theory the truck does have synchromesh, it is not very reliable. "It can catch



*The Vivat's interior houses equipment from another era, the 1950s in fact, as used by the BBC.*



you out,” Sam says. “I always double declutch.”

Sam generally drives in ear defenders, as Southern is pretty noisy. And in winter a warm coat is another important accessory, as the truck can get draughty. Everything is a stretch, Sam says, as nothing is close to hand. “You can’t just float your foot across – it’s like playing a big organ and dancing at the same time.”

Vivat is a very different beast. In fact an early 60s vehicle, it is being refurbished as a broadcast truck from the 1950s, a period from which no original operational outside broadcast trucks survive. This is made possible because the truck itself, a Commer, former BBC MCR 23, registration 390 EXH, is very similar to the outside broadcast trucks used in the 1950s, including at the Queen’s coronation. The BECG is currently fitting out Vivat with original broadcast equipment from the era.

The truck itself was in a sorry state. After a chequered career, it ended up as a static classroom, and suffered a combination of adaptation, vandalism and neglect. It was therefore not in good condition when BECG acquired it. Some of the problems were with the bodywork, which is aluminium over steel and ash. It had rusted and rotted in places.

Another problem is getting mechanical spares. Unusually for a TV truck, Vivat has a petrol engine. This was a BBC specification, on advice from the military. It was believed that the vibration from a diesel could shatter delicate valves (vacuum tubes) in the broadcast equipment. Although this was not the case – valves were pretty tough by then – it was still BBC policy.

The starter motor and the wipers needed repairs, which Sam carried out. A & G scoured the country for a brake master cylinder and fortunately was, eventually, successful. Although it would theoretically be possible to machine new metal parts, recreating the rubber ones would be trickier. Another problem is that, long term, brake fluid tends to damage rubber components. BECG has had long and inconclusive discussions about which is the best brake fluid to use.

Sam says Vivat’s 4.75-litre engine is “dinky compared with today’s engines”. And it has a huge steering wheel, which means that you are sitting quite a way into the body of the truck when driving. Vivat hasn’t, Sam says, “got low-down torque and it goes a lot better when it’s warm”. On both these trucks, he adds, “you are driving by the seat of your pants”.

Vivat is already quite a star. Although



*Driver Sam Booth in Southern.*

not yet fully fitted out, she had two appearances in the second series of *The Crown* and also appeared in the first series, as a truck with cameras on the roof at the Queen’s wedding. These trucks are not only of historic importance but are also fully functioning pieces of living history – more than justifying the effort involved in maintaining and restoring them.

*Southern was designed from the chassis up (Bedford VAL) as a TV van. Here it is outside the workshop that did much of the restorative work.*

