



TV CLASSICS

VINTAGE TRUCKS: BROADCASTING

Two vintage trucks being lovingly preserved by the Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group prove that not all television repeats are really such a bad thing

WORDS AND PHOTOS: RUTH SLAVID

Commercial Motor On a smallholding near Lincoln, among the Lincoln Longwool sheep and the occasional aggressive turkey, you will find some unusual trucks. This is the base where the Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group (BECG), a newly formed charity, keeps a number of vintage outside-broadcast trucks that were operational in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Key to the history of broadcasting, these trucks have been or are being fitted out with original equipment in full working order – and are still finding use in today’s broadcasting and films.

One of the trucks, ‘Southern’, recently took part in the celebration of the 50th anniversary of colour broadcasting on BBC1 and ITV. On 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.

Meanwhile an earlier truck, ‘Vivat’, was used in the filming of episodes of *The Crown*, showing Winston Churchill’s funeral in 1965 and the investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle in 1969.

LABOUR OF LOVE

Acquiring, maintaining and operating the vintage broadcast equipment is a passion and challenge, and the same is true for the trucks. So what makes the effort worthwhile?

Electronics engineer Dr Paul Marshall, chair of the BECG and the man who originally acquired the trucks, says: “Working in electronics, 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

Return to glory: (top left) Vivat has been restored in the livery of a Coronation-era BBC outside broadcast truck; (above) Southern appears at a rally for the 50th anniversary of VAL trucks in 2014

opportunity to save something for posterity.”

Southern was built for Southern Television, one of the regional 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,” explains Marshall.

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 they could cope with a blow-out at speed and therefore were safe. Other non-coach uses included a horsebox for the German Olympic team and even a pigeon-carrier.

The main reason that Southern and other TV operators chose a VAL was because it was 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



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compared with the cost of the equipment inside them. The broadcasters wanted a high standard of coachbuilding 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 Southern travelled more widely than expected, including to Scotland to cover football. The truck was in remarkably good condition when Marshall acquired it in December 1994 – it had been in service until January 1994 and had always been kept under cover.

TRUE COLOURS

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 Marshall to re-spray Southern in its original colour scheme and logos. On other parts of the project, BECG also



from the 1950s, a period from which no original operational outside broadcast trucks survive. This is possible because the truck – 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, as it was believed that the vibration from a diesel could shatter delicate valves 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 Booth 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 in the 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.



Modern trucks are just point and go. These older ones haven’t got the power



WARMING UP

Vivat’s 4.75-litre engine is, “dinky compared with today’s engines”, says Booth. And it has a huge steering wheel too, which means you are sitting quite a way into the body of the truck when driving. It hasn’t got any low-down torque and “goes a lot better when it’s warm,” he adds.

On both these trucks, he concludes, “you are driving by the seat of your pants”

Vivat is already quite a star. Although not yet fully fitted out, she had her 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. □

worked with a local garage, A&G Commercial in Lincoln. A specialist in the repair and recovery of HGVs, it has a sympathy with 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 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 Booth has driven Southern is back to its original home in Southampton – nearly 200 miles and a six-hour journey. When Southern travelled to Birmingham (about 90 miles) 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

he reports. The truck’s 8.2-litre engine isn’t a lot for an 11.5-tonne truck, and only kicks out 143hp. “Modern trucks are just point and go,” Booth 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,” Booth 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 you out,” Booth notes. “So I always double declutch.”

EAR-BASHING

Booth generally drives in ear defenders, as Southern is pretty noisy. And in winter a warm coat is another important accessory, as it can get draughty. “Everything is a stretch as nothing is close to hand,” he states. “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. An early 1960s vehicle, it is being refurbished as a broadcast truck



A noisy ride: (top) Southern restored to working order at a demonstration with working cameras; (above) driver Sam Booth usually wears ear defenders in the cab

winter’s day, Booth 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 says, 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,”



Back in action: (top left) Vivat fitted out with original broadcast equipment used by the BBC in the 1950s; (left) the sad state that Vivat was in when first found by BECG; (above) Vivat on location for shooting episodes of *The Crown*