

# A Rural Surprise

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**It was an** ordinary, pleasant hamlet with, at first glance, nothing remarkable about it. Terry had programmed the Satnav and was taking us home via a slightly different route from the usual. My mind was happily in neutral as I sat back to enjoy the ride through the autumn countryside until, that is, he stopped the car in the main street through the village. Pointing ahead through the windscreen, he demanded, "Tell me what you see!"

I looked. I stared, as my jaw dropped open and, unable to process what my eyes were seeing, I burst out laughing.

There, in the garden of an ordinary, inoffensive house in a quiet corner of the East Midlands, loomed the vast grey bulk of a 1960s Tyne Tees outside broadcast unit. It was so utterly unexpected, so surreal, that I was unable to utter a word. Answering the unspoken question that hovered between us, Terry said, "That's the headquarters of the BECG" and everything immediately became clear.

Many readers may not be aware that, in addition to his love of steam railways and vintage buses, Terry's first and abiding passion was electronics, in particular anything associated with broadcast transmission and reception. After a working lifetime in associated fields, it was natural that in retirement he should seek out activities which gave

the opportunity to put his knowledge and skills to practical use. Thus, he became involved with the British Vintage Wireless & Television Museum at Dulwich and made the acquaintance of Jeffrey Borinsky, one of the founding fathers of the Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group (BECG). Following our move from Essex to Lincolnshire in 2017, it was inevitable that he should take an interest in the activities of the nearby BECG.

BECG was formed when a group of highly experienced broadcast engineers became convinced of the need to preserve and curate some aspects of television history which were in danger of disappearing forever, thanks to the speed of change and development within the industry. Much vital equipment has been collected over many years, including TV cameras, sound recording equipment, mixing desks and, of course, outside broadcast vehicles.

It is hoped that not only will these restored items of broadcast heritage be of interest to electronics and broadcast professionals but that they will also assist current and future generations to understand the past and to appreciate the global impact of television from the mid-20th century onwards. Additionally, they may well be of great interest to younger people who are considering a career in broadcast engineering, offering a fascinating overview of the industry's evolution and advances.

Shortly before his death, Terry had formed a plan to write about BECG's vehicles, thinking this very unusual collection deserves a wider audience and might interest NTT members. Sadly, that article never got written but in the course of a garden lunch during the extraordinary summer just gone, Jeffrey Borinsky and I agreed that a good idea should not be wasted. And so I decided to use some lockdown time to write the piece in Terry's stead.

For those of us of a certain age, the BECG's collection is a road trip through TV history. Race meetings, royal weddings, state funerals, election nights: these vehicles have been to them all. Now in the loving care of their new owners, some are restored to fully working order, others are at various stages of ongoing repair and conservation. You may even spot one appearing as a TV star in its own right in the occasional period drama.

## OOW 999G

**'Big Bertha'** was rescued from Meridian TV's car park in 1995. At that time the truck was just a shell with a few original fittings (power and interior fittings) and was painted in TVS silver.

OOW 999G was bought by Southern TV in 1968 as a bare Bedford VAL 70 coach chassis. The coachwork was a custom build by Dell of Southampton incorporating a standard Plaxtons front end (driver's area and front



The exterior of OOW 999G.



The equipment inside OOW 999G.

door). However, the vehicle outer is all fibreglass – this was a requirement as a lot of work would be done next to the sea.

After the coachwork was done, the electronics fit was done in house by Southern TV engineers with help from the Marconi Company (Broadcast Division) – this gives the unit a uniquely home made feel in comparison to others in the fleet.

Originally fitted out with monochrome cameras, OOW was quickly converted to colour operation using four Marconi MkVII cameras and was used at the Investiture of Prince Charles at Caernarfon Castle, as was every other colour OB truck at the time!

The truck was also used for Opera at Glyndebourne and for football matches – some of these jobs still exist in the form of stickers hidden in odd places!

When Southern TV lost their franchise in the 1982 ITV reorganisation, the vehicle passed to TVS who continued to use it throughout their reign, refitting it several times (and repainting it cream and brown, then silver!).

When, in turn, TVS lost the franchise to Meridian, the new company decided that they didn't need such a large vehicle and so it was left in their car park at Northam Studios where it came to the attention of BECG members. A "kick of the tyres", some new diesel, lubricants and coolant and it was driven away to start its new life in preservation.

Following a five year programme of repairs and refitting plus a respray into the original Southern TV livery, 'Big Bertha' was ready to meet the public once more and made her debut appearance at Newark Vehicle Show in

2000 and also featured in Bus & Coach magazine. Since that first appearance, BECG members have tried to attend at least one event with her each year – as well as helping keep up with the maintenance (both vehicular and electronic); being seen out and about enables both vehicle and BECG to remain "alive" in the public's mind.

### NUB 327F

**This is one** of two Outside Broadcast trucks acquired by Yorkshire Television (YTV – *not to be confused with the present-day company YTV Canada Inc*) at the time of the company's creation in 1968. Known as the "Yorkshire Twins", these two vehicles literally opened the service on 29th July – the studios were not finished in time!

Originally painted in "Yorkshire Gold", they were fitted out in the Marconi factory at New Street, Chelmsford. The chassis is a Bedford KML and the bodywork, in corrosion resistant aircraft-grade duralumin, was built by Road Transport Services (RTS) of Hackney.

Yorkshire disposed of this truck to the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) who planned to make training videos. Unfortunately, this was too much for them to handle so the vehicle was passed on to Harefield Hospital Television who had similar plans and came to the same grief; the equipment was just too old and unreliable. HHTV eventually used it as a store room outside their studios.

Twenty years later, BECG was looking for spares for the Southern TV truck and contacted HHTV. After an inspection showed it to be in remarkably good condition, sale of the

complete vehicle was agreed subject to HHTV being granted planning permission for a new storage unit. Happily, permission was forthcoming and, in January 2001, emptied of stores but with lots of interior equipment, both original and additional, still fitted the vehicle was prepared for the move to her new home. 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 into life and the team drove away.

Disaster struck just as they were about to join the M25; the only hose that hadn't been changed (the thermostat hose) split and the coolant was lost. They were parked under the motorway junction bridge and the sign said "No Parking"! The police came around several times but left the stranded group alone. The trail of coolant probably told the story although you might have expected that sheer curiosity about such an unusual vehicle might have prompted a courtesy call at the site of the breakdown! A trip to a local motor spares shop produced something that would do and the journey resumed.

Once home, and after a good clean out, refitting and repair of equipment began as and when time allowed. Most of the production areas were intact and a mixture of cameras and control gear were fitted to make a sort of 'chameleon' rather than a strict preservation such as 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 TV country. So now it needed a



NUB 327F from the outside.



Lots of monitors inside NUB 327F.



hasty paint job as it was still in CEEB red and blue with HHTV's heart logos on the front and side. A quick repaint 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, stunning this observer into speechless laughter sixteen years on!

In 2005, some group members took the truck to the Marconi reunion at the Sports & Social Club in Chelmsford and the designer was very pleased to see it again. Anglia TV attended with one of their small ENG (electronic news-gathering) satellite trucks and 'TTTV Unit 3' and her crew featured live on About Anglia in the Anglia East sub-region.

The next day they obtained permission to take the truck back to New Street works and parked it outside building 720 where it was originally fitted out. Several ex-employees came to look and take turns sitting in the driving seat!

## TUW 171S

**This is a** Bedford TK cab and chassis with 330 diesel engine and five forward speed gearbox. New to the BBC in September 1977, it was based at Kendal Avenue, London as LMVT-1 and was originally fitted with two Ampex Quadruplex reel to reel video tape recorders (VTRs).

It was refitted internally in 1982 and more equipment was added over several years as required for particular productions. At that time, BBC London had a second identical unit, LMVT-2, and three other, similar, mobile video tape vehicles. The units were frequently

used in multiples to enable on site editing and slow motion effects work to be carried out while a continuing event was being recorded.

LMVT-1 was acquired by the present owner in 1992, the BBC having removed all the VTR machines and some other equipment. Since then the unit has been used as a sound control room and as an editing suite, with minimum modification, while renovation and restoration work proceeded, at a slow pace. Replacement VTRs and an audio recorder have been found and fitted along with some slight internal modification to accommodate this kit.

By 1999 it was clear that the original cellulose paint had oxidised and a repaint was needed. Rust was appearing and various bodywork repairs were going to be necessary.

Restoration work started in August 2008. The cab was in a very poor state and was replaced. Significant other bodywork repairs were carried out, the radiator rebuilt, water pump and all hoses replaced, brakes serviced, and the electrical system repaired and enhanced. The vehicle was repainted using synthetic 2-pack paint, retaining the original livery.

Further work is planned involving refurbishment and upgrade of technical equipment.

## CURRENT PROJECTS

### EHX 86V

**With their insides** built in 1979 by Link Electronics Ltd and entering service in 1980, these Type 5 television outside broadcast mobile control rooms, or Scanners as they are also

known, were a direct replacement for the type 2 Scanners built in the late 1960s for the first colour outside broadcasts. Ten type 5s were built for the BBC and EHX 86V was one of six based in London.

Designed and built on a Seddon Pennine twin-steer chassis, the type 5 weighed 17 tonnes and had a longitudinal layout with three compartments: sound, production and engineering. This layout allowed more room for staff, seating five people in each of the engineering and production areas, and two people in sound.

Officially designated LO6, like all the BBC television outside broadcast units, this vehicle was also known by a second number, in this case CMCR 20. (Colour Mobile Control Room 20). This was a unique number as the numbers ran consecutively for every BBC scanner.

LO6 spent all its working life based at Kendal Avenue in London, the BBC Television Outside Broadcast base. It was the first mobile control room to be equipped with eight triax-controlled camera channels, a new concept of camera data and picture transmission developed by Philips. These were the cameras that captured the famous Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer kiss on the Buckingham Palace balcony following their wedding.

That royal wedding in 1981 was the highlight of LO6's career. It parked outside St Paul's Cathedral along with two other units filming the wedding ceremony plus the Colour Mobile Central Control Room, which took pictures from other units filming the procession as well as the above-mentioned kiss on the balcony.



The exterior of the Bedford TK-based TUW 171S.



More equipment inside TUW 171S.





EHX 86V was built on a Seddon Chinese Six chassis.



A large bank of screens inside EHX 86V.

Most of LO6's early years were spent in Downing Street, following political events, or in Bournemouth filming Summertime Specials. It ended its working life capturing snooker and bowls tournaments.

LO6's service came to an end in 1992, when the BBC donated it to the Science Museum along with five Philips LDK 5 cameras. This was in contrast to other BBC OB units which were sold to other broadcasters either here in the UK or abroad. During its time at the Science Museum, LO6 was on display outside the Film & Television Museum in Bradford, where visitors could look around inside it. It later transferred to the Science Museum's storage facility at Wroughton alongside a BBC Type 2 that was already in the Science Museum's collection.

During a reorganisation at the Science Museum in 2014, the museum decided that it only needed one example of a television outside broadcast unit and that it would keep the type 2.

Thankfully, the museum donated the type 5 to a private collector, saving it from the scrap yard.

### 390 EXH

**The early 1950s** was a very significant period in the development of broadcast television, especially with regard to outside broadcasts. While such broadcasts had been a reality since before the war, it was the prospect of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 which caused the whole idea to take off and really launched television for the masses in the UK. The Queen's coronation was viewed by at least 20 million people in Britain and another 200 million people across the planet (via live relays and tele-recordings).

These days, that 220 million figure doesn't seem too large in the light of 'Live Aid' and the Beijing Olympics, to name but two, but back in 1953 there were no satellites and only the beginnings of the Eurovision network. For North American audiences, the

Coronation broadcast was seen via tele-recordings delivered by the RAF using three flights of Canberra jet bombers. This coming-of-age of television in 1953 heralded a great decade of innovation and technical development throughout the 1950s. The advent of ITV in 1955 was another huge stimulus and outside broadcasts became a popular and regular part of the daily television fare.

With no complete 1950s outside broadcast unit surviving in the UK, a hazy idea of building a replacement began to take shape amongst a group of like-minded engineers. It would be a recreation of an early 50s BBC Scanner, similar to a type used at the coronation, but based on a near-derelect early 60s petrol-engined Commer truck, previously with the BBC and known to them as MCR 23, using accumulated Marconi MkII and MkIII series equipment.

For various reasons, the project has only progressed in fits and starts, but finally, the whole assembly of vehicle



The BBC green exterior of 390 EXH.



The inside of 390 EXH.



and operational broadcast television equipment is at last coming together. Upon acquisition of the vehicle, it was immediately obvious that a lot of vehicle work, both inside and out, would be necessary. That has taken a lot of time and money but finally fitting out and testing of the television equipment has now begun in earnest. It is hoped that the full story of this restoration, which BECG calls Project Vivat, may be told in a future issue of the *Digest*.

### GUL 644W

**This is another** Bedford TK chassis with fibreglass cab, 330 diesel engine and four forward speed gearbox.

Described as “a compact CMCR with comprehensive technical facilities ...”, the vehicle was registered to the BBC in

1980 and stationed in London where it was known as LO-21.

It was one of three similar units at the BBC, one of the other two being known as LO-22 and also based in London. The third unit went to Birmingham.

LO-21 has a body built by MVC, Modern Vehicle Constructors (Gowering Group) and fitted out internally by Ampex in Reading. Her original livery was grey with green stripe, changed to two tone grey when a repaint was carried out.

When new, LO-21 entered service fitted with two Philips LDK-5 cameras but was later upgraded for up to six cameras on Triax cable and fitted with VTR equipment. Other kit was added, including an air-operated pump-up mast, vision and sound mixers. In her

final years with the Beeb, LO-21 was re-engineered for remote control of golf buggies and given the identifier RCV.

At the end of their service, LO-22 moved to Ireland and was subsequently broken up there; the Birmingham unit was sold at auction and exported. LO-21 was stripped of her internal equipment and sold into preservation. Restoration work is now in progress on the only UK survivor of this type.

### GNF 951E

**Originally ordered by ABC**

Television in the mid 60s, and with bodywork by RTS of Hackney built on a Bedford VAL14 chassis, this vehicle transferred to Thames TV in 1968 with the franchise change of that year. It remained in service with Thames for some ten years after which it had a varied career. It was purchased by Sony with whom it spent some time in Italy while in use as a demonstrator unit for high definition TV. Subsequently, it has been a mobile advertising billboard (promoting the Great Dorset Steam Fair), a mobile home, an art gallery and a costume store!

Now safely in the care of BECG, the unit is undergoing bodywork restoration and will eventually see a rebuild of the interior with both monochrome and colour cameras of the correct period.

In more normal times, one of the group's aims is to take the units out whenever possible to vintage rallies and other historic vehicle gatherings for the wider public to see and appreciate a little of our collective social and technical history.

While this has not been possible in 2020, it is hoped that “normal service will resume as soon as possible”, to borrow a phrase and that these magnificent giants will be out and about once more, showing off the technology which has influenced all of our lives and which lives on in the hands of dedicated volunteers.

Much more information about the vehicles and their interior fittings, along with a list of forthcoming events – when these are once more permitted – can be seen on the website: [becg.org.uk](http://becg.org.uk)

BECG is a registered charity (No.1189469) financed entirely by its founders and by private donations. If you would like to learn more or offer to help in any way, please email [contactus@becg.org.uk](mailto:contactus@becg.org.uk).



A Bedford TK chassis with an unusual looking cab forms the basis of GUL 644W.



The exterior of GNF 951E. For several years this travelled the steam rally circuit promoting the Great Dorset Steam Fair and the National Traction Engine Trust.