

Sixty years of buses in East Kent

EAST KENT

turned out smartly, with a certain pride in its management.

By 1952 the company was emerging from a period during which its fleet and operations had been reduced significantly because of the war-time exposure of the area. The route network occupied the area east of a line from Faversham through Ashford to Rye, just over the county border in eastern Sussex, with express services to London and involvement in the South Coast Express service from Margate through Hastings, Brighton and Portsmouth to Bournemouth. Summer services and day excursions thrived in the still-fashionable coastal resorts. Extended tours had been introduced recently to destinations as far afield as Scotland and Wales, and on a small-scale basis to the Continent.

The company had started operations on 1st September 1916 with a mixed bag of 72 vehicles from five smaller firms. By 1952 it enjoyed a near-monopoly throughout its area, with 586 vehicles operating from depots in Ashford, Canterbury, Deal, Dover, Folkestone, Herne Bay, Rye and Thanet (Ramsgate), as well as outstations at Faversham, Hastings, Lydd, Seabrook and Wye. Because much of the fleet was only required during the summer months, winter stores for surplus vehicles were also owned in Margate and Broadstairs. 220 of the fleet were pre-war, 79 of them with post-war bodywork, and 66 were from the war years. The fleet ranged from 56-seat double-deckers (all with open rear platforms) on the busiest routes to 20-seat single-deckers on sparse rural routes. The buildings at Folkestone and Herne Bay remain in use today alongside newer sites at Ashford, Dover and Thanet and an outstation at Canterbury.

The first coaches with under-floor engines had arrived in 1951, enabling more seats to be fitted with a higher vantage point for passengers; 28 further coaches comprised new bodies based on the units of pre-war stock, helping to overcome the shortage of new vehicles. The withdrawal of trams in London in July 1952 allowed wider vehicles to be used on London express services, and a double-decker was allocated to Rye for the first time.



● *East Kent had a large fleet of AEC Reliances which were suitable for bus or express service work, including Beadle-bodied MJG 289 seen at Folkestone Bus Station.*

It was natural that, along with M&D, East Kent should provide the stimulus for the formation of the first specialist bus enthusiast society in 1952. It had always been an operator to attract interest, largely because of its proximity to London and its position in an area visited each summer by numerous holidaymakers; there were also many characteristic vehicles in the fleet, always



● *New in 1952 were the first of two batches of Guy Arab IVs with Park Royal bodies. Depicted at Maidstone is GFN 922, on Service 10 from Folkestone, jointly worked with M&D.*

Routine maintenance was carried out locally, whilst major work was conducted in Canterbury at the Central Works (mechanical matters) and a separate Coachworks (body repairs and repainting). The Head Office was at Harbledown following wartime evacuation from Canterbury.

The first double-deckers with doored rear platforms appeared in 1953, and growth continued during the decade to a fleet total of around 630 vehicles; but the change in social trends described under the M&D history also began to bite. Single-deck services were converted to one-man operation increasingly from 1955, especially outside the holiday season, and a trend developed of buying dual-purpose vehicles, used as coaches during the summer and one-man buses in the winter before being demoted to

all-year bus work later in their lives. In 1959, the first front-entrance 30ft double-deckers appeared with seating for 72 passengers, extending their influence to most of the company's area by the mid-1960s. 36ft coaches made their debut in 1962, and increasing quantities of 36ft single-deckers from 1967 following a trial batch in 1965. These allowed economies of operation, since fewer vehicles of greater capacity were needed to carry the same number of passengers. Frequencies were widened on many services, and the larger single-deckers, with seats for up to 53 passengers and the facility for one-man operation, eventually began to replace double-deckers. Surviving weekday evening and Sunday services were increasingly turned over to one-man operation, although there were some compensations as new estates were developed, particularly in the Ashford area.



● *First of a long line of AEC Regent Vs with Park Royal bodies were the forty fully-fronted examples, of which PFN 848 was photographed in Faversham.*

East Kent avoided the rear-engine format introduced by many other operators from 1959, until introducing (under influence of government grants) their first of the type in 1969 with twenty double-deckers (rapidly converted for one-man operation) and ten single-deckers. No more new double-deckers were purchased until 1976, although many mid-life examples were converted for one-man operation. Because of their older body style, these were generally used in this format only in peak hours and for schools services. The traditional conductor bowed out in 1981.



● *The standard double-deck bus for NBC companies was the ECW-bodied Bristol VRT. East Kent XJJ651V shows off the poppy red and white livery of the time at Dunkirk.*

In 1969, East Kent, until then part of the British Electric Traction (BET) group, was nationalised, and the well-known red and cream livery gave way to National Bus Company (NBC) schemes from 1972. Coaching activities were reduced, and bus services underwent frequent revisions in the constant drive for economies, using new route numbers which, whilst satisfying computerised management systems, probably deterred customers. Joint management with M&D from 1973 led to employees feeling a loss of local identity, especially when second-hand vehicles appeared, and the national financial situation meant that local authority support declined for loss-making services deemed to present insufficient social justification. History will probably judge this period as the nadir of the company's fortunes.

Separation from joint management with M&D took place in May 1983, and political changes at national level led to the dismembering of the National Bus Company, East Kent passing into private ownership in May 1987. Meanwhile, deregulation of the industry led to far-reaching changes in the way in which services could be operated, and minibuses made their appearance in 1986 with an initial fleet of 45 vehicles able to offer better frequencies than the larger vehicles they replaced and to thread around estate roads not served before. A new livery for "big buses" and coaches bore many similarities to the pre-1972 style, whilst minibuses sported a bright yellow, and there were cautious service initiatives. Occasional threats arose from competitive independent operators, though few prospered; one of the more threatening, Marinair of Cliftonville, was bought out. Whilst these were perhaps years of survival rather than development, the trends of the previous period were at least arrested.



● *East Kent introduced this livery after privatisation, and bought two batches of MCW Metrobuses, including F764 EKM at Ramsgate Harbour on a local Thanet service.*

By September 1993, when the company was purchased by the Stagecoach group, the operation was almost wholly bus work,



● *East Kent used a bright yellow livery for its large fleet of minibuses in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This Ford Transit, C712 FKE, was photographed at Elms Vale, Dover.*

revitalised and robustly-publicised route network almost wholly based on commercial strength rather than relying on local authority funding (as well as largely reverting to pre-1970s route numbers), and attractive fares packages both for regular and occasional customers. The Canterbury head office has also overseen the Hastings & District operation since November 2002, and that at Eastbourne Buses since December 2008, both with similar incremental growth.



● *Substantial investment in recent years has seen an influx of new buses like GN59EWX, a Scania N230UD/ADL Enviro 400 branded for the 'Triangle' and seen at Tankerton.*

with minimal seasonal variation. Coach work was limited to London express services and a handful of contracts; excursions and tours had been surrendered long since. There were many who were pained by the second rapid loss of local identity, and the management economies which were introduced with an almost ruthless immediacy, but Stagecoach had clearly appreciated the potential of a company which was leaner than ever before in its history. After initial consolidation, and new ventures of mixed success, there can be no doubt that the new venture has seen considerable expansion and initiative, with many services enhanced to frequencies not seen for several decades, if ever. In nineteen years under Stagecoach control the fleet has grown from 240 to 310



● *ERV116W, a Leyland National 2 new to City of Portsmouth, wears the original Stagecoach livery at Sandwich, one of many vehicles transferred from other parts of the group.*

Many of those who founded The M&D and East Kent Bus

Club or who worked for the company in 1952 would have been in a position then to look back on a company which had built itself up over 36 years from nothing through several difficult periods. There are substantially more of us in 2012 who may well form similar impressions if we cast our minds back over a similar period to 1976, and whilst the past cannot be re-written, the future looks positive. The M&D and East Kent Bus Club looks forward to its next sixty years of recording what happens.

"It gives me great pleasure to congratulate the M&D and East Kent Bus Club on reaching its Diamond Jubilee on behalf of Stagecoach in East Kent and East Sussex.

"The Club's role as a focus for enthusiast activity and information has ensured that our activities are accurately reported and understood, offering us friendly advocates for whom we are most grateful. The existence of the Club has helped promote an interest in the operations of East Kent Road Car that has brought us some very committed employees.

"The Club's comprehensive and accurate record keeping is justifiably legendary. I keep a library of *Invicta* news sheets on my office shelf as the simplest form of reference for the development of our operations, and in this respect special mention should be made of the ever-modest Nicholas King for master-minding its monthly creation, and of the regular reporters.

"The last 10 years have been an era of unprecedented passenger growth for buses in East Kent, and we look forward to the club's continuing positive contribution as we strive to make greener, smarter travel the right option for even more people."

Jeremy Cooper, Commercial Director, Stagecoach in East Kent and East Sussex