

50 Years of Eastern National Lodekkas

In March 1954, Eastern National and its (by then) subsidiary Westcliff Motor Services took delivery of their first examples of the revolutionary Bristol/ECW 'Lodekka'. This was a groundbreaking lowheight double-decker design with normal-height internal layout and low floor, achieved by means an offset gearbox driving a drop-centre rear axle. Available only to the nationalised Tilling and Scottish Bus Groups, the 'Lodekka' evolved over the next 14 years during which time Eastern National amassed a fleet of 387 examples. 137 rear entrance LDs were followed by 2 broadly similar FS models; one unique 70-seat rear-entrance LDL6G prototype joined the fleet in 1958, followed by 247 front-entrance FLFs over the 9 years from 1960 to 1968. 15 rare FLF coaches included 5 of the 31ft semi-automatic FLF6LX variety, mechanically similar to 48 bus equivalents delivered at the same time. The very last of the coaches, 2614 (later bus 2946 and now preserved at Canvey), was delivered to EN on 16th August 1968. It carries the final chassis number of the 5,217 Lodekkas built (236.337).

Bus manufacturers had long sought to overcome the conflict between covered

roof double-deckers and the low height of many bridges, mainly those under canals and railways. Leyland produced and patented their lowbridge Titan as early as 1927, but to reduce body height by about 12ins (300mm) this involved a sunken upstairs gangway to one side with 4-seater benches set very close to the ceiling. Many buses were built to this design over the next three decades, but the drawbacks were considerable, both to the passengers and to the conductor. Gilford had a brave attempt at solving the problem with a prototype front wheel drive flat-floor double-decker in 1931, but sadly it was too far ahead of its time and disappeared into oblivion. Interestingly it was finished in Hillman's of Romford colours (although it never operated in service) - ENOC took over the residue of Hillman's in 1934 when London Transport compulsorily acquired the main Brentwood-Stratford route.

The Tilling group, of which both EN and Westcliff were part, benefitted from having its own chassis and body manufacturing companies, namely Bristol Commercial Vehicles and Eastern Coach Works at Lowestoft. After the Tilling group sold out to the state in 1948, only nationalised operators could take Bristol/ECW



Victoria Circus: a cyclist and a Corporation trolleybus overtake the prototype Lodekka LHY949 on demonstration to Westcliff Motor Services. Fortunately, the rather ugly front-end arrangement was not perpetuated on production models.

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products, but this did mean the manufacturing companies could concentrate on designing providing vehicles to suit the Group operators. Both EN and Westcliff had long standardised on lowbridge double-deckers, not only to cope with numerous low bridges but also because many of the depot buildings could not accommodate highbridge buses (something of a 'chicken and egg' question arises here of course). The principal obstruction was (and still is) the railway bridge adjoining Chelmsford station, through which a number of frequent long-distance and local routes have worked since the 1920s. There were many other examples of bridges and depots, compounded by those acquired

from Hicks, City and Moore's (whose low-bridge Guys continued in use with EN until the last ones went in 1975). In the Midland area (later passed to United Counties), there were numerous similar obstacles, particularly at Luton.

The 1949 prototype green and cream 'Lodekka' LDX6B LHY949 operated on trial for both EN and Westcliff. Once production started in full in 1954, ENOC's first LDs were delivered as XVX19-25, with Westcliff receiving XVX26-31. XVX19 arrived from ECW on 12th March 1954, followed a week later by Westcliff's XVX26. The earliest Eastern National LDs were numbered in the 'National' series as 4208-14/27/8 before a complete fleet

Brand new, with Westcliff fleet-names and first-series fleet number painted/transferred-on: **4227** (XVX 26). Seen at Pier Hill bound for Kent Elms Corner (misspelt on the blinds as 'Kent Elm Corner').

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1431 (XVX 19) negotiates the Cuckoo Corner roundabout and some period street signs on the trunk 11 route. An Ekco (radio and TV) Morris-Commercial van is in hot pursuit.

*Paul Harrison
Collection*





The droopy radiator grille on the early Lodekkas was replaced by a shorter and neater assembly on later deliveries. Southend-allocated **1509** (538 HVX), working a 25B to Highlands Boulevard, has just slogged up Belton Way from Leigh-on-Sea station. Note the later sloping canopy fairing.

*Paul Harrison
Collection*

renumbering took place in 1954, giving them numbers from 1431 upwards, and at the same time Westcliff was absorbed into Eastern National. The earliest 'Lodekkas' carried a third set of fleetnumbers from another renumbering in 1964, distinct vehicle classes being introduced at that time; the LDs formed the 2400 and 2500 series, the FLF coaches were 2600s and bus FLFs started at 2700 (eventually reaching 2931, excluding the coach conversions). Open top FLFs later became 2300s.

Notable amongst the rear-entrance 'Lodekkas' was LD6B 1489, later 2458 (320GPU). This was the only EN LD of six LDs delivered experimentally in 1956 to

Tilling companies with the Cave-Browne-Cave (CBC) heating system. The most obvious feature of this was the radiator which, instead of being at the front of the engine, was mounted in two parts either side of the destination box. The system was reintroduced on 1963 FLFs, becoming standard until the final 'Lodekkas'. 2917-31 and coaches 2610-4 reverted to conventional radiators, probably as a result of experience with overheating problems.

EN took Gardner 5 cylinder engined LD5Gs as well as Bristol 6 cylinder LD6Bs. Standard LDs were 27'6" long, although regulations were relaxed in 1956 permitting 30ft long double-deckers. Bristol



An early view of **1491** (322 GPU) waiting on the forecourt of Bishops Stortford depot. It has the original body style incorporating the horizontal fairing under the canopy,

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produced six experimental 30ft Lodekka LDLs in 1957, but a much more radical prototype appeared in 1959; the second of two flat-floor air-suspension 'Lodekkas' became Eastern National 1541 (later 2510: 236LNO), and this unique 30ft rear-entrance bus has happily survived at the Castle Point Transport Museum on Canvey Island. Delivered new to Brentwood depot, 236LNO stayed there until 1973 before moving to Braintree (mostly for driver training, but also service use) and then CR from where it was withdrawn in 1977.

Following the success of the flat-floor prototypes, production of the new F series began fully in 1960. Four variants were

made available, but by far the most popular was the FLF, of which 1,867 were built for Tilling companies and the SBG. Arguably the finest FLF buses with EN came in 1967 with the 31ft semi-automatic FLF6LXs (2884 to 2931). Although the external body style was similar to previous vehicles, they were easily distinguishable because of their extra body length and forward-ascending staircases (not to mention the noise from the SCG gearbox). EN was the only customer for this longer variant beyond the Scottish Bus Group.

The FLF coaches mentioned earlier were bought for what became the X10 Southend-London express service and its

The Cave-Brown-Cave heating system meant grilles each side of the destination screens, the break in the upper cream relief band and an absence of opening windows at the front. Wood Green 1489 (320 GPU) picks up in Romford Market Place on the 'main road' (251).

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Collection*



Everyone's favourite bus: 1541 (236 LNO), the one-and-only 70-seat LDLX6G. Seen when brand new at Victoria Circus, also on the 'main road' 251.

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The rear of a later FLF compared with the front of an early one at Halstead depot.

1966-delivered 2873 (RWC 945D) shows the absence of upper cream relief band and inverted "T" indicators. (which made it easier for the conductor to change the blinds from the lower saloon).

New in 1962, 2735 (182 XNO) shows the earlier two cream bands and the LD-style radiator grille.

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Synonymous with the 'Main Road' (151/251) for many years, an early FLF features on this timetable leaflet.

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variants, and for a number of years they brought new standards of comfort and prestige to these routes. By 1973, with the X10 demoted to a limited stop service (400) and one-man (as it then was) operation, they were surplus to requirements but not yet life-expired. Some were loaned to United Counties, and then all except one were subsequently rebuilt as 70-seat buses (numbered 2932-46). Incidentally only Crosville had similar full coach FLFs, although Thames Valley had coach-seated versions for their routes into the heart of London.

'Lodekka' withdrawals started in 1971, initially the LD6Bs because of a worsening spares situation for Bristol engines. Several were re-engined as LD5Gs, the same exchanges between Bristol and Gardner engines affecting FLFs later in life. The last LDs went in 1976 and FLF withdrawals started soon afterwards. Mass influx of Leyland Nationals displaced the later buses, RELs having ousted the earlier withdrawals. Rapid moves towards driver-only operation undoubtedly foreshortened the lives of the later FLFs.

The last FLF6LXs were withdrawn in 1981, mostly following the closure of Wood Green depot and the truncation of the ex City 251 route at Walthamstow together with its conversion to OMO VRs. FLFs continued in use from Chelmsford and Hadleigh until by September 1981 they

Later Lodekkas had the "T" destination screens. In Tilling green but with white relief and the top relief band painted-out, Chelmsford-allocated 2520 (357 LPU) has just arrived at Maldon bus station from Chelmsford.

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had all gone.

Five FLFs carried all over advertisement liveries in service - 2790 (AVX958B) for *Typhoo Tea*; 2791 (AVX959B) for the National Coal Board 'Come home to a Real Fire' campaign; 2804 (BVX680B) for *Bambergers (Eastern) Ltd.*; 2837 (LWC663C) for *Southend District HCVA Home Heating* and FLF6LX 2927 (AVW396F) for *Tesco Superstore, Pitsea*. All 'Lodekkas' for EN (and WMS) were delivered in Tilling green and cream (except for the coaches), many LDs, the FSs, LDL and all the FLFs later gained NBC green.

Although all of the single deck bus fleet had been adapted for OMO (the normal term at the time, although now

more properly called OPO) by 1972, there were only 24 such double deckers (VRs 3000-23). Deliveries of new vehicles at that time were very slow, and consideration was given to converting some of the many FLFs in the fleet. Consequently 2898 (WVX525F), which was awaiting repairs to fire damage sustained in Thundersley, was rebuilt at Central Works in the period up to September 1972, losing its CBC heating to make room for a driver's upper deck periscope as well as having its staircase reversed.

Following service trials with 2898, it was reported that up to 45 FLFs might be converted for OMO. In fact only a further 7 vehicles emerged; the next three were

FLF 2706 (86 TVX) seen in its latter years in NBC livery on Chelmsford town service 44B.

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The FLF coaches were later down-graded to bus use. A recognition point was the shallow upper-deck rear window. The panel below obscured the coach seat head-rests originally fitted. 2945 (AVX 974G) at Basildon.

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Relegated to driver training duties, and painted blue, former 2464 (882 GVX), now numbered 0882. Seen in Brentwood depot yard.

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2924/6/7 (AEV818/20E, AVW396F), work being carried out at Central Works and Prittlewell Works. These particular vehicles were not fitted with CBC heating, making the conversion work a little easier. The next three were rebuilt at Marshalls of Cambridge, namely 2928/9/31 (AVW397/8E, AVX 973G). The last vehicle to be adapted was 2942 (AVW401F) in January 1974, with many of the modifications incorporated whilst undergoing conversion from a coach. Of these vehicles, though, only 2898 and 2942 saw much use as OMO vehicles.

Replacement for the remaining open-

top KSWs was considered in 1973 using former Brighton Hove & District FS6G convertibles. In the end this came to nothing, and the KSWs continued in use (one remaining in the fleet to this day). In 1978, though, FLF 2937 (RWC608) was converted to open top, entering service in NBC white with green relief. 2937 remained unique, though, retaining its chrome coach detailing; happily it has survived into preservation. Numbered 2300, it worked alongside the KSWs at Southend for the 1978 season. The following winter a further three FLFs were converted: 2863 (RHK348D) becoming 2301;

2848 (MVX885C) as 2302 and 2850 (NTW943C) as 2303.

No history of EN's 'Lodekkas' would be complete without mention of *On the Buses*, ITV's comedy series filmed using FLF6LXs in and around Wood Green. For studio scenes, a mock-up FLF was built by EN, using a number of body parts supplied by ECW. The resultant 'vehicle' normally carried registration number YDU265D, although this appears to have been swapped for various other numbers during filming. Fleet number 2552 was always reported to have been carried,

As already mentioned, the first Lodekkas to be withdrawn were LD6Bs with 2408-11/5/32/52/67/71/2/5/6 all being officially taken out of stock in September 1971. The following month 2428/31/51/8/68/93 were dispensed with, replaced mainly by new RELL saloons. The Scottish Bus Group decided at a very early stage to dispense with its early Bristol VRs, largely because of reliability problems; in the same year Alexander (Midland) arranged to exchange its entire fleet of 15, registered SMS31-45H, for a similar number of older FLF6Gs from EN. Accordingly 2865-73/8-83 became Alexander (Midland) MRD195-209, officially in October 1971.

One of the more exotic uses of redundant FLFs was by Top Deck Travel, a company which specialised in overland

travel to the Far East and Australia. They built up a large fleet of Bristol LD6Gs (consequently none came from EN) and FLFs, and also developed an operation in the USA. Heavily rebuilt inside to accommodate sleeping and eating accommodation, painted cream, orange and black, and given (sometimes cryptic) names, a number of EN vehicles served between about 1983 and 1996 when most operations ceased. Those known to have operated were 2710 (90TVX) 'TC' or 'Top Cat'; 2839 (LWC665C) 'Loff' ex Eastern Counties; 2853 (OVX297D) 'Viking'; 2875 (STW763D) 'Rush'; 2877 (STW765D) 'Stew'; 2892 (WNO980F) 'Wino'; 2900 (WVX527F) 'Da Bus' - now rebuilt for private hire use by Peter van der Merwe, Dordrecht, Holland; 2913 (WWC743F) 'Acko' and 2940 (KNO949C) 'Rafferty'.

Others survive - happily 2400 (XVX19), 2510 (236LNO), 2849 (NTW942C) and 2614/2946 (AVX975G) are at Canvey Museum whilst there are a good many others (mostly FLFs) still dotted around the world. Some are heavily modified, but 50 years on from the first LD's arrival the breed still lives on. And of course there is a strong family resemblance to the Bristol VR, the last examples of which have just made it in service to the 50th anniversary of Eastern National's first 'Lodekka' entering service.

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Smartly presented in London Buses red: former 2900 (WVX 527F) is now with Peter van der Merwe, Dordrecht, Holland.
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