

TX to Viceroy

The first new generation Van Hool and a remarkably unused 40-year-old Duple were among the talking points at this year's UK Coach Rally. **ALAN MILLAR** was there

The UK Coach Rally often offers clues to trends in the coach industry as a whole. This year's on 21/22 April — the 58th since it began in 1955 and the third since it relocated from Brighton seafront to the Peterborough Arena — was no exception.

It provided the first showing of a right-hand-drive version of Van Hool's new TX range of integral coaches, was the first occasion when operators entered examples of the DAF-powered integral range from Spanish coachbuilder Irizar and it reaffirmed Volvo's long standing position as leading supplier of coach chassis in the UK.

The rally itself remains an enigma. Is it a showcase for the coach industry to demonstrate the quality of its hardware



Parrys' sixth Coach of the Year, Van Hool Astron TX17 YJ12 KFC, moves up ready to receive its award at the end of the two-day rally.





The unused Duple Viceroy-bodied Ford R192 now owned by Sharpe's of Nottingham. It had just over 200 miles on the clock and left by low-loader.

and skills of its best drivers to the travelling public? Does it present an additional opportunity for operators and manufacturers to strike business deals? Or is it primarily a social event, where operators and drivers compete for trophies but above all just let their hair down a little and enjoy each other's company?

It certainly achieves the last of these aims, but this year's attracted limited support from manufacturers and other trade suppliers prepared to take up display space. And the Peterborough Arena — it used to be called the East of England Showground — is on the edge of this new city, making it difficult for the coaching community to engage with the general public.

New section for buses

The number of vehicles entered this year was down on the previous Peterborough rallies, with just 37 vehicles taking part in the concours d'elegance judging and driving competitions. Three of these were buses from independent operators, persuaded to enter now that the rally has a separate bus section for the first time.

That was the same turnout as the rally achieved in its last year in Brighton, but was down by 10 on last year and 23 on the first Peterborough rally in 2010. This also proved to be the year that the new site lost the charmed meteorological factors that bathed it in bright warm sunshine for its first two visits

to the Arena. The second day was mainly cloudy, chilly and — for part of the afternoon — wet and windy. A bit like Brighton could be when the sun failed to shine.

But there have been changes to the format, as retired coach operator Steve Telling — of Tellings-Golden Miller fame — has bought into the organising company behind the event and is trying to make it more appealing. The driving tests are more challenging and arrangements for the prize giving have changed, with the audience following the announcer from coach to coach around the site, rather than a line of coaches moving among the people.

And instead of a traffic commissioner handing over the trophies, this year the honour fell upon Peter Hendy, commissioner of Transport for London, who also was prevailed upon to bring along New Bus for London 'Borismaster' prototype LT1 and his own personally preserved London Routemaster RM1005, which he drove in the annual directors' challenge between the bosses of some of the participating coach companies.

Winner of that particular challenge was Darren Brown of his family's Crawley Luxury, who was Driver of the Year in Brighton in 2009. This year's top driver was Richard Grey of Greys of Ely, while the rally's first Bus Driver of the Year was Liam Spencer of Loughborough-based Paul S. Winson, whose new 8.9m Alexander

Dennis Enviro200 was judged Bus of the Year against an older and longer Enviro200 from Stephenson's of Essex.

The one other bus entry came from the rally's longest established participant, Kenzie's of Shepreth, Cambridgeshire, which has been in most if not all rallies since the first one went to Clacton in 1955. This was a heritage rather than hard working vehicle, but a most unusual one nonetheless. It has the Local Traffic bus version of the Van Hool Alizée body on an 11m Volvo B10M chassis. In old bus industry terms, it is a dual purpose DP with 51 coach-type seats.

One of only two built for the UK, to a Scandinavian specification with thick fire-retardant floor, it is the only one surviving. It was new to Hutchison of Overtown and had migrated to East Anglia before Cyril Kenzie acquired it in dilapidated condition.

Van Hool's new flagship

But back to the coaches. Not only was this the first showing of the Van Hool TX, but the coach in the rally was the first built for the UK, for Parrys International Tours in the West Midlands. The 14m tri-axle Astron TX17 is the forerunner for a larger batch likely to be bought next year to replace Parrys' entire fleet of Van Hool T9 integrals.

Such has been the evolution from T9 to TX — the new body uses the same structure and is clearly of the same family — that the changes are not immediately obvious unless

both models appear side by side.

When Van Hool unveiled the new range at the Busworld show in Belgium last October, it made things easier for the inexperienced by fitting extra large badges on all the exhibits on its stand. But among the changes Parrys insisted upon was to revert to the previous smaller badge on its coach, as Dave Parry — just like the growing number of bus operators who do the same with their vehicles — wants to use the front dash panel to publicise his coach travel brand, not the name of a vehicle manufacturer barely known outside the coach industry.

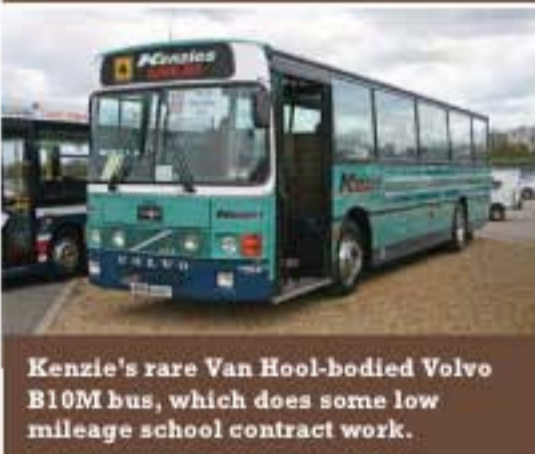
Few could have been surprised that this well built, high-specification 48-seater with MAN engine was judged Coach of the Year. It could hardly have gone to anything else this year and the award cements Parrys' position as the most successful operator in the history of the rally. This was its sixth Coach of the Year since 2000 and its third with a Van Hool.

Irizar appears to be using the rally to help raise awareness of its integral range, sold in the UK in competition with its bodies on Scania chassis. This year's event attracted no Scania of any sort, but there were two DAF-powered 12.9m Irizar i6 integrals, one of a pair for Lucketts of Fareham and another used by Stewart's of Mortimer on corporate business work in the Thames Valley around Reading. As a hitherto committed Scania customer, Lucketts will be looking closely to see how the DAF-engined i6s compare for fuel consumption and general reliability.

Also new but in the trade display area



Besides the UK Coach Rally, Lucketts also took DAF-powered Irizar i6 integral YN12 BVS to the London Bus Museum's spring gathering at Wisley the following Sunday.



Kenzie's rare Van Hool-bodied Volvo B10M bus, which does some low mileage school contract work.

Today's coach industry could tell the public about the active and passive safety features of modern vehicles

rather than entered in the rally, was a Tata Hispano Intea-bodied MAN shown by BASE, the Lancashire dealership within the Holmeswood Group. This vehicle, aimed at the budget rather than high end of the market, was destined for Impact of London.

The one large Caetano coach in the rally was a 14.2m tri-axle Volvo B13RT with 59-seat CT650 body, the design better known in other applications as the Levante. Caetano has supplied in excess of 200 Levante bodies on two-axle Volvo B9R chassis to National

Express and its contractors and before that built some on longer tri-axle Scania, but only NatEx-owned The Kings Ferry has these long Volvo versions, one of which was entered at Peterborough.

Twelve of the 34 coaches were Volvos (including two B10Ms and a B9M), with five Mercedes-Benz, three each of MAN, VDL and Bova, two each of Setra, Van Hool and Irizar integral and one each of Irisbus Iveco and Toyota manufacture. Van Hool headed the body line-up with seven coaches, followed

by five Plaxton, three each Bova, Volvo 9700 and Beulas, two each Caetano, Mercedes-Benz, Irizar and Setra, and one body each by Jonckheere, Marcopolo, Sitcar, Tawe and EVM.

Top standard coach was a Plaxton Profile-bodied Volvo B7R from Stanley Travel in Co. Durham, a model no longer in production. A wheelchair accessible Mercedes-Benz Tourismo commuter coach for Clarkes of London, expected to see service at the London Paralympics, was top touring/express coach, and top mini/midi was a 9.35m Mercedes Tourino of Paul S. Winson, a 2008 vehicle acquired secondhand but looking good as new.

Stepping back in time

Although Kenzie's Volvo bus was the only heritage vehicle entered in the rally, once again there were several preserved coaches in a separate display.

The one attracting most attention was a 1971 Duple Viceroy-bodied Ford R192 acquired recently by Sharpe's of Nottingham and transported to and from Peterborough on a low-loader. Few Viceroy's survive in preservation, but what makes this one so remarkable is that it has never been registered or operated.

It had just 202 miles on the clock at Peterborough and about 30 of those have been accumulated since Sharpe's bought it last year. It was driven new from the coachbuilder's in Blackpool to the Jack Hughes dealership in Cleckheaton and then went into storage in Todmorden.

Forty years later, it offers an immaculate and untouched snapshot of an earlier age of coach travel. The upholstery, linoleum flooring and chrome exterior brightwork hark back to the 1960s even more than the 1970s. As indeed does its composite structure devoid of current rollover strength requirements that were driven, in no small part, by the deadly consequences of a few coaches like the Viceroy being involved in horrific accidents.

Duple answered that weakness by introducing the steel-framed Dominant in 1972 and one of the messages today's coach industry could impart to the wider public at future rallies is just how many active and passive safety features are built into modern vehicles.

Perhaps it will at the 2013 rally, to be back at Peterborough on 13/14 April. ■



Tata Hispano Intea-bodied MAN for Impact of London.