

A SHORT HISTORY OF EASTERN NATIONAL

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Eastern National, as such, came into existence in 1929, but the history of the company really started with the setting up of the National Steam Car Company Ltd. in 1909. This company was founded by Thomas Clarkson, the steam bus manufacturer, when he decided to become an operator, and services were started in London towards the end of 1909. The Clarkson works were at Chelmsford and this led to an expansion of activities in that area in 1913, when the Great Eastern Railway road services, commenced in 1905, were taken over. The GER had assembled its own buses at its Stratford railway works, and these were soon replaced by Clarkson steamers. Services in London were expanded, until some 170 buses were operated in the peak year of 1913. Thereafter, this figure declined and in 1919 National withdrew from London consequent upon reaching an agreement with the LGOC/Underground organisation, which allowed National a free hand outside what is usually known nowadays as the London Transport area, although National agreed to operate certain "country" routes on behalf of General. Watford was chosen as the base for this venture. General turned over its Bedford area outpost to National as part of the same agreement, thus providing the foundation of the Midland Area of Eastern National.

The National Steam Car Company now found itself the operator of services based on three widely separate towns - Bedford, Chelmsford and Watford. Expansion of the undertaking was put in hand and in 1920 the National Omnibus and Transport Company Ltd. was formed with the objects of consolidating the projects already in being and the commencement of new ventures in both passenger and goods transport. The West Country was chosen as an area likely to prove remunerative and National buses were to be found in Somerset, Gloucestershire, Devon and Cornwall during the early 'twenties. These activities eventually led to the formation of the Western and Southern National Omnibus Companies, of which further details may be obtained from British Bus Fleets 8. Essex was not neglected and the company spread its network to Colchester, Grays, Clacton and Brentwood, whilst services in Bedfordshire were augmented by the purchase of independent operators in the Bedford and Luton areas. Many Essex independents were acquired, too, particularly in the area south and west of Chelmsford.

Operation of certain services on behalf of the LGOC continued until 1932, when London General Country Services took over the routes worked by Bishops Stortford, Hatfield, Luton (South), Ware and Watford garages. The routes based on Romford garage went to the LGOC three years earlier.

When the four large railway companies (GWR, LMS, LNER and Southern) obtained road passenger transport powers in 1928, they obtained a share of the National company. However, as the company was the only one to be spread over the territory of all four railways, it was decided that the National Omnibus and Transport Company would become a holding company, with four new subsidiary companies, to be called Eastern, Midland, Southern and Western National. The four companies were registered in February, 1929, but the Midland National never used any of its powers. This was because the LMS and LNER lines in several places were so placed as to frustrate all attempts at demarcation of boundaries between Eastern and Midland National companies. Eastern National was chosen to cover the Midland area and the two railways companies involved had an equal holding therein.

Eastern National began its existence, as far as the travelling public was concerned, in 1930 with a fleet of some 275 buses operating in Essex and Bedfordshire. Its head office was established in Chelmsford, thus returning to the home of Clarkson steamers. An event of 1931, which was to shape the policy of the company until the present day, was the purchase by Thomas Tilling Ltd. of a controlling interest in the National holding company, which gave Tilling control of three operating companies, as from February 17, 1931. More independent operators were acquired, among them being Silver Queen (Clacton and District) and Enterprise Bus Company (Clacton) Ltd., which gave Eastern National more or less exclusive rights to the Clacton holiday traffic.

Silver Queen also operated in Lincolnshire and this part of the business eventually came into the hands of the Lincolnshire Road Car Company Ltd.

An important development took place in 1933 when control of Borough Services Ltd., Southend-on-Sea, was obtained, although the company was not absorbed finally until 1947. When the London Passenger Transport Board was formed in 1933, various routes in the Grays area were transferred to the new board whilst some services acquired from small independents by London Transport were passed to Eastern National as they were outside the LPTB area. In the Midland area, Eastern National was able to extend to Aylesbury at the same time, when the Aylesbury company was shared between City of Oxford, Eastern National, Thames Valley and United Counties.

The acquisition of independents continued apace in Essex and Bedfordshire until their numbers had been reduced considerably by the beginning of the 1939-45 war.

The Transport Act of 1947 provided the government with powers to acquire various transport undertakings ("nationalisation"), but the Tilling organisation decided to negotiate a voluntary sale of its interests rather than to wait for, and possibly fight, a compulsory acquisition by some means. A large interest in the Tilling companies passed to the State automatically with the nationalisation of the railways, and the sale of the remainder of the business probably seemed good policy at the time. Thus Eastern National became a State-owned undertaking, controlled by the British Transport Commission, in 1948. No outward changes could be discerned for a year or two, but thereafter the shape of the company underwent some drastic changes. Firstly, the business of Hicks Bros., Braintree, was acquired by the B.T.C. on January 1, 1950, and was operated by Eastern National until 1955, when it was finally wound up. Hicks' vehicles retained their original fleetname but were repainted green and cream, although many old buses were withdrawn and replaced by Eastern National vehicles on hire to Hicks. As from February, 1955, the Hicks business was integrated completely with that of Eastern National. On September 30, 1951, further changes occurred in the Grays area when all local routes were transferred to London Transport, together with the garage and 28 buses. These retained Eastern National and fleet numbers but were given the London Transport fleetname. However, all were handed back to Eastern National in the following year. There was a major upheaval on May 1, 1952, with the transfer of the Midland area to United Counties, together with 245 vehicles. Later in the same year this loss was partly made up by taking control of Westcliff-on-Sea Motor Services Ltd., a Tilling company since 1935 which had been kept quite apart from Eastern National. It was not a very large undertaking until some famous independents were taken over in 1951/52. These were Benfleet and District (and also Canvey and District), and the City Coach Company Ltd. The latter, a direct descendent of the City Motor Omnibus Co. Ltd., one of the largest London independents, is renowned for its six Leyland Gnus (twin steering six-wheelers) and 36 six-wheeled Leyland Tigers, which were the mainstay of its frequent Southend - London service. During the 1952-53 period a confusing variety of livery/fleetname/number combinations could be seen. For example, Eastern National double-deckers were given City fleetname, City vehicles had Eastern National fleet numbers, whilst retaining City livery, and other City vehicles remained unchanged. Eastern National and Westcliff-on-Sea entered into a co-ordination agreement with Southend Corporation in 1954, which came into effect in January, 1955. This has been perpetuated by Eastern National, which completely absorbed Westcliff-on-Sea in February 1955.

Recent years have seen the end of more independents, the most important being Moore Bros. of Kelvedon. Moore's, the oldest established operators in the world, were purchased in February, 1963. The Kelvedon garage was retained and all vehicles taken into stock. Of these, most of the Guy Arab double-deckers are still in service, as well as a Yeates-bodied Commer Avenger coach.

Y type AECs formed the mainstay of the National fleet after the 1914-1918 war and many of these lasted into Eastern National days. The 1920s saw the introduction of some small Guys and one six-wheeled Guy. Leylands appeared in 1927 and Lions, Titans and Tigers were delivered in the following years, together with AEC Regents and Reliances. Other manufacturers to supply new vehicles were Tilling-Stevens and Dennis, the latter providing a fleet of Aces and Lancets.

Experimental batches included AEC Renown (six wheel) double-deckers and Thornycroft double-deckers. Various vehicles were taken over from acquired operators, but many of these did not last long.

Like many other Tilling fleets, post war vehicle shortages caused Eastern National to purchase other than Bristols; Leyland PD1s, Bedford OB/Duple coaches and Beadle-Bedford integral buses were taken into stock. New deliveries for many years have been of standard types, but the 1964 coaches were Bedford SB13s with Duple (Northern) Firefly bodies. It is possible that the company was influenced by the results of Bedford/Duple coaches operated by Tillings Transport, which has been under the care of Eastern National for several years, and is now more closely linked.

An acute shortage of double-deckers in 1963 resulted in the hiring of surplus buses from Southern Vectis and the purchase of others from Wilts and Dorset, all of which have now gone.

The first Bristols were purchased in 1936 and for the last 30 years most vehicles have been of this make, but Dennis Lancets and Leyland Tigers and Titans continued to be taken into stock for a few more years. An interesting event in 1938 was the purchase of 10 Tilling-Stevens from the North Western Road Car Co. but they did not last long. Bristols were added to the fleet at intervals between 1936 and 1942, in which year utility Guy Arabs made their appearance. The notable event of 1944 was the construction of 3885 (JWV 430), the prototype of the postwar K type with lowbridge bodywork, which, happily, has been acquired for preservation by enthusiasts and appears to be earning a reputation as a wedding conveyance in place of the more usual Princess or Rolls-Royce! In 1945, another prototype was placed in service. This was 3923 (HKK 26), the first of many Beadle chassisless vehicles. 3923 had Commer running units and is thought to have been unique, although later a Gardner 4LK engine replaced the original Commer engine.

Postwar Bristol deliveries started with K5Gs and L5Gs, which were followed by a few equivalent Bristol powered chassis, and large orders for Gardner 5LW engined vehicles of the K, L, LL, LWL and KSW types. All L, LL and LWL type vehicles have now been withdrawn, together with many of the Ks. The first underfloor-engined Bristol came in 1952 and already many such vehicles, with both bus and coach bodywork, have been sold out of service. Several LS5G buses have gone to the neighbouring Eastern Counties fleet, where they continue to give good service. Surplus LS coaches have been sold to United Counties, West Yorkshire and Western National (all THC operators).

Also now withdrawn are the Bristol SC4LK 35 seat buses which went in 1964 after fairly short lives with Eastern National. Since 1961, many coaches have been taken into stock from Tillings Transport, although quite a number has been withdrawn since, and several Eastern National vehicles have made the reverse journey and are now in the Tilling fleet. Sea front operations using open-top double-deckers have been a feature since 1950, when four ex-Brighton, Hove and District AEC Regents of the famous GW registered batch were placed in service. These were supplemented by three Bristol G05Gs from the same source in 1952 and another one a year later. Further AEC Regents were taken into stock with the Westcliff-on-Sea business in 1952, whilst yet another three came from Brighton, Hove and District in 1954. The same fleet provided a solitary 1940 Bristol K5G in 1960. However, between 1956 and 1960 the company converted 10 ex. City Coach Co. Leyland PD1s and two similar Hicks Bros buses to open-top and these continued to serve until 1965. For the 1966 season, several KSW5Gs were converted and these replaced the Titans.

Appendix (by G. W. Watts)

The last ten years have seen the continued modernisation of the fleet and, in order to meet changes in public demand, the revision of services at frequent intervals. More buses than ever are being worked by one man and all new vehicles are suitable for such operation. Since 1968 all double-deckers placed in service have been of the rear-engined Bristol VRT type, a number of which had been operated in Scotland for some time before being acquired by Eastern National in exchange for a number of Bristol FLF double-deckers.

On 1 January 1969, as a result of the 1968 Transport Act, the National Bus Company came into being and Eastern National, together with virtually every major bus company in England and Wales (i.e. the companies of the Transport Holding Company and the British Electric Traction empires), found itself a member of the NBC. Stemming from this move were the introduction of the present livery style (dictated by National) and the purchase of the Leyland National single-deck bus.

A further development, after involved inter-company transfers between Eastern National and Tillings Travel, was the transfer of all Eastern National's coach operations to one of the NBC's specialised coach-operating subsidiaries, National Travel (South East) Ltd., on a piecemeal basis, the final transfer taking place on 19 May 1974.

The Leyland National bus, to which reference is made above, is the result of co-operation between British Leyland and the NBC and is built in a new factory near Workington. Eastern National's first examples entered service in 1973 and more have entered service since and the type is destined to form the bulk of the company's single deck purchases for years to come.

Many of the old double-deck buses with an open platform at the back have been withdrawn from service and now only a few remain. Not all old buses are sold for scrap. Some find new users but, fortunately, a number has been bought by keen vintage vehicle enthusiasts for preservation and may be seen on display at rallies during the summer months. Finally, it may be noted that the garages at Dovercourt, Kelvedon, and West Mersea are no longer used by Eastern National. A new garage has been opened at Harwich whilst Silver End, near Witham, has been re-opened to replace Kelvedon.
