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TRANSPORT OF DELIGHTS by Paul Hardiman

A two-stroke? A three-cylinder two-stroke. With six pistons. Supercharged. Diesel. Huh? All true, and this oddball lump powers one of historic racing's most fabled machines, the Ecurie Ecosse transporter. It was thought lost but now, restored to its former glory, it's working for a living. Paul Hardiman gets a lift

In the '60s, a time when race teams used trailers or chopped-down buses to carry their cars, the Ecurie Ecosse transporter was something special - purpose-built, based on a Commer bus chassis and with that amazing TS3 flat-six engine to ensure a low floor, it could carry three D-types in one go. A clever system of hydraulic rams and cables lifted the ramp to put two cars up top (one over the driving cab) and one snuggled in the back of the 'bus' bodywork.

With its 60 gallon diesel tanks, the transporter could cover 1000 miles or more between fill-ups - invaluable for those long treks back from European races, carrying grimy, blackened, race-fatigued cars, worn-out mechanics and perhaps even junior drivers. In fact, John Hay, who oversaw Lynx's 1993 rebuild of the transporter, recently covered the 182 miles from Paris to Calais in just four hours: "It's not particularly powerful, about 90bhp, but its maximum torque is developed at about 1700rpm. It will do 60mph, but I cruise it at about 50:'

The transporter was built in 1959 and 1960, by Alexanders of Falkirk, to a design by aero- nautical engineer Selby Howgate, for the famous Scottish racing team Ecurie Ecosse, whose members included at various times Innes Ireland, and the young Scot, Jim Clark. After changing hands and livery several times, being owned by at least two racing personalities who intended to restore it (see Transporter History, p87) and for a time disappearing, it ended up in 1992 in the hands of collector Dick Skipworth, who has developed an interest in the Ecosse C-type, KSF 182, and the recently- surfaced XK120, LXO 126).

Lynx, best known for D-types and the XJ-S Eventer, started its restoration in earnest only six months before the transporter made its UK debut at the Coys Historic Festival at Silverstone this year. Lynx chairman John Mayston-Taylor (his family bought the company 18 months ago) reckons that about 3000 man-hours were expended on the project, often with five men working simultaneously, along with a £25,000 bill for parts. Work it out. That equates to somewhere in the region of £100,000 all told. Ulp. Skipworth paid for the purchase and restoration, up to a pre-agreed amount, and Lynx shared further expenses and benefits; it now operates the transporter in the racing season for Skipworth. How do they justify such a cost for an old lorry? "Well, it's of tremendous historical value," says Mayston-Taylor. "Priceless," says John Hay. "And of course, it's very good for our own publicity," concludes Mayston-Taylor.

But the rebuild is really John Hay's story, for he has been the common thread throughout the epic task. John, an ex-rallycrosser who builds Ford BDA engines in his spare time, has worked for the Mayston-Taylors' family timber business for 36 years. One of his duties has been to look after the company's own timber haulage fleet, some of which were Commers using similar running gear to the transporter.

"This gave him invaluable experience," says John Mayston-Taylor. "For example, new wheel bearings from Timken would have been £200 and nine months. John managed to get them off the shelf after a rummage around."

When Lynx first received the transporter, it was basically a body on a rolling chassis "We knew roughly what the outside should look like because it was all there, and we knew roughly what the inside should be like. Everything else was in pieces," John Hay explains.

"The vehicle had been partly dismantled, especially the brakes, and the components put in buckets - and we all know what happens to parts put in buckets... Luckily I was able to source some new parts through a friend.

"The engine needed very little work, apart from a few ancillaries and a clutch and pressure plate, and we were lucky enough to get a complete spare with the transporter, so if this one goes pop we're all right. It's fitted with a six-speed gearbox, which is quite unusual, but when we took it up to Silverstone we couldn't find them all. So eventually the top had to come off the box and we had a count up and, lo and behold, there were six gears. The plunger had seized solid, so out came the favourite tool for a good whack and it's worked perfectly ever since. When you've driven the 200 miles to Silverstone to get there at 2am, all in fifth gear, you realise that having sixth is quite beneficial."

Luckily, the original ramps still existed, and John kept these while improving the hydraulic lifting mechanism. The hydraulics themselves were quite a problem to work out, because everything was in pieces, but John managed to reassemble it all with some new seals.

A cab operated power take-off from the gearbox drives a pump, controlled by a regulator which is mounted with a reservoir and the associated pipework on the back of the rear bulkhead, inside the loading bay. A ram under the floor lifts the ramps through pulleys and cables, but originally the cables were only 1/8in (3mm) thick and there was nothing to lock the ram in place - the top car stayed up by hydraulic pressure and if the hydraulics burst, the top car would have fallen on the one below: "After a while they did put a couple of bolts in to secure it, but it wasn't very good and once when Campbell McLaren owned it one of the ramps came adrift and almost went through the side. The cars we carry are now very valuable, so we've modified it by putting in a couple of locking bars, and we had 4mm stainless steel cables made up with proper eyes and tested."

John has used aluminium chequer plate for the floor, which was lined in timber originally and reinforced the original ramps with the same material, which at first had thin alloy plate as the running surfaces, riveted in place: "The problem was, as soon as the ramps flexed, the rivets popped and the ramps bent more. When we got them, one of the ramps was like a banana - don't know what they'd been doing with it." There are 600 countersunk stainless steel setscrews in the ramps and floor alone. And all the slotted heads line up, as do the chrome screws elsewhere on the body, securing the panelling and window frames.

At the sides, there are lockers for tools, and spare engines: "See that RSJ in the top - they used to dangle a complete spare engine from that, so they could swing it out in a hurry," chuckles John.

Although the body was complete and all in place, 80 per cent of the rivets had to be replaced, as they were of a high magnesium content and had gone brittle. Much of the ash frame had to be replaced, as it had rotted, and some new panels had to be fabricated – notably the rear valance and around the doors.

Once the body was sound and all the running gear was working, it was off by low-loader to Jempsons of Rye: "We wanted a proper commercial-like finish, well applied but not too fantastically shiny". And, of course, being a commercial finisher, they have an oven big enough to take the transporter, which is nearly 30ft long.

Up front, the team has retained and restored as many of the original spartan cab fittings as possible, save for adding a carpet to try to kill some of the noise inside. Two-stroke diesels do get quite noisy when extended. The wiring has been completely remade by Lucas, with proper fuse-boxes ("It was shocking before," –John Hay) and a cigarette lighter added. "There's the original boost gauge, so you can see if you're overdoing it." The 1960 Ministry of Transport chassis plate is still screwed to the rear bulk head, which bears its original grey paint.

Behind the cab, in the passenger compartment, things are a little different from when the transporter was new. There's now a cooker and fridge, a rack of glasses on the wall, a couple of framed black and white pictures of the transporter on its handover to Jaguar - and the mounted D-type hub spinner presented to Bill Lyons by Ecurie boss David Murray after Flockhart and Sanderson's Le Mans win in 1956. John Hay: "We've slept in it - it's not too bad. We don't like to leave it - it's a question of security."

The finished result is all beautifully done, as you would expect from craftsmen of Lynx calibre and the lifting and winching system, with its sensible modifications, works perfectly. But this is no pure exhibition piece; despite its venerable age, the transporter works for a living. It has covered about 3000 miles since rebuild, and Dick Skipworth says he is happy for Lynx to go on operating it next year, and the year after. On the move, even empty, the ride is astonishingly good - at least as good as a modern 12-tonner, with which the Commer shares most weights and dimensions. Performance isn't exactly brisk, but it keeps up with modem traffic well enough. The brakes work better than a '50s commercial's have a right to, and only the non-synchro (and tricky) gearbox and unpowered steering give away that this transporter is from another era.

And then you remember: Jim dark probably sat here.

THE TRANSPORTER'S HISTORY

The Ecurie Ecosse transporter, based on a lengthened Commer bus chassis and with that amazing three cylinder engine which has six horizontally-opposed pistons driving the crankshaft through rockers, was built for the famous Scottish racing team in 1959 by bodybuilder Alexanders of Falkirk, to a design by aeronautical engineer Selby Howgate. Construction was completed in 1960. The team used it for about six years, carrying D-types and, later, the Tojeiro-Climaxes that were raced after the D-types became uncompetitive, before it was sold off to Neil Corner. "People saw it a lot in the late '60s in Corner's colours, but I don't think anybody realised what it was."

It then passed through the hands of Neil Corner's one-time mechanic, Tony Merrick, who sold it to Ecurie Ecosse nut Campbell McLaren. McLaren completed a cosmetic restoration of the transporter to its original livery, but mechanically the Commer was quite rough. Then, in 1978, McLaren asked Lynx to sell it for him and it went to Roger Ludgate, who took it to pieces and started to restore it properly, but couldn't complete it. But his action in dismantling and keeping hold of it probably saved it from being modified or restored

unsympathetically. Ludgate had managed to retain everything except the Commer-Ecurie Ecosse radiator badge, for which all parties are still searching.

The transporter came into the hands of Ecurie Ecosse collector Dick Skipworth, in 1992 when, as Dick was drying out in his kitchen after a very wet 96 Club Circuit day at Donington. He said 'wouldn't it be nice to have a transporter' and Lynx knew where there was one that needed rescuing. He was on the point of buying the Campbell McLaren Ecurie Ecosse C-type, KSF 182, so it made sense to have the transporter too.

The transporter was complete but in a fairly poor state when it arrived at Lynx and, as Dick Skipworth explains: "We had to put it all together to see how complete it was."

Part of the reason it hadn't lasted well is that perhaps it had never been meant to. Stories of accidents with it through mechanical failure and fatigue are legion, some hilarious: Disasters including the propshaft falling off when Dick Crosthwaite was driving it, it was a one-piece which has since been modified to a two-piece. Tony Merrick had some of the cast tie-downs snap, so the cars broke loose, and a ramp cable failed on Campbell McLaren so that a ramp dropped and nearly went through the side. Since we could be carrying three-million pounds' worth of cars, we can't afford for that to happen now.