

The Myth of the Bedford Towing Lorries

By Clive Greedus

In the magnificent book, “London Transport Service Vehicles” by Kim Rennie and Bill Aldridge, the chapter on “Breakdown and Towing” includes references to three Bedford OLBD 5 ton towing lorries, 659B, 826B and 827B as being used for recovery work (Pages 44/5). However, I believe the truth is that these were not used for recovering broken down buses, but were ordinary dropside lorries provided with extra equipment to pull drawbar trailers, in the way that many goods vehicles of that time would do.

The legislation regarding this called for an additional person to travel in the lorry cab and control the hand operated brakes of the trailer by means of a special lever fitted there. This extra equipment was not needed in the towing lorries used for bus recovery as they simply used a driver in the bus cab to control it. I think the confusion has occurred because London Transport itself was a bit sloppy with how such vehicles were described in the official records from which enthusiasts have been working. Road haulage people refer to a lorry equipped to tow a trailer as a “trailer puller”, but the records from Chiswick never used this term and instead, when buying two new dropside lorries (659B and 826B) readily equipped for the purpose, they recorded them as towing lorries. Confirmation of the confusion over how to describe such vehicles is clear with Bedfords 666B and 667B each being described as “lorry and trailer”! No mention of the nature of the trailers is indicated and I suspect no permanent pairings ever existed.

Most drawbar trailers used in the London Transport era belonged to the trams and trolleybuses section and were pulled by their specialist vehicles such as rail carriers, pole carriers and tower wagons. The fact that none of these were noted as being “fitted to tow” may be due to it being just part of their normal specification, or because, as in other vehicle matters, the Trams and Trolleybus section administered at Charlton managed its affairs in its own way.

Confirmation that the three Bedfords in question were in fact trailer pullers can be gleaned from a study of the allocation records so kindly supplied by Brian Bunker. The first one, 659B commenced work for the Rolling Stock Inspector at Chiswick Works in September 1946. A list of drawbar trailers from three years earlier shows nos 67-70 being allocated between Chiswick and Aldenham Works for wartime aircraft production, and they could still have been in use for other purposes at this time. Three years later, 659B briefly joined the newly formed Central Distribution Services fleet based then at Wood Lane, before being unlicensed in July 1950 for 4 months, firstly at Aldenham Works and then Potters Bar bus garage. Around this time many Bedford and Austin lorries were spending periods of time unlicensed at Potters Bar for whatever reason so this was not unusual. After that it was put into service at the Parsons Green Building Department Works. The 1943 trailer list tells us they had nos 1-3, flat trailers, and No.4, low loading trailer at that time, so its likely some still existed. A photograph in the book “London Transport bus garages since 1948”, shows Regal lorry 421W* from Parsons

Green visiting Stonebridge Park trolleybus depot with a low loading trailer, so we know that at least remained in use for a while. Also there were a number of mobile compressors mounted on 4 wheel drawbar chassis that had originated with the war damage repair depot at Hammersmith. I recall seeing one or two of them or their successors on my visits to Parsons Green from late 1959 onwards.

When 659B became time expired in November 1959, it spent 3 months unlicensed at Chiswick before going to Aldenham for disposal. At this time a slightly younger vehicle of the same type, 827B is noted as being fitted for towing. I would imagine the parts were transferred between the two vehicles by Chiswick Works, though the records show 827B still allocated to Lillie Bridge until transferred to Parsons Green in March 1960. Whatever the need for a trailer puller at Parsons Green (I suspect just the mobile compressors) it was obviously not frequent. In November 1961 after the delivery of many new Thames Traders, it was finally returned to Lillie Bridge. I suspect that by then any mobile compressors could more easily be moved on one of Parson Green's four new low loading semi-trailers (YT13-16) coupled to a Thames Trader prime mover.

The remaining lorry of the three, 826B was an open dropside lorry originally allocated to Bowles Road, the tram permanent way depot, which had a number of drawbar trailers in use. The 1943 list shows more than twenty in the area back then, and a number of these were still in use when 826B arrived there in November 1949. In February 1952 it was one of several made redundant by the imminent closure of the tramway, that were sent to Reigate for conversion to other purposes. In April 1952 it was licensed at Reigate for 7 months, and then stored until fitted at Chiswick works with the distilled water tank it was to carry for the rest of its life.

This was the only occasion that any of the three Bedfords described as towing lorries ever worked from a bus garage, so could it have been used for recovery work at Reigate? Without any evidence I would consider this extremely unlikely. Reigate had its own Regal lorries, 403W and 448W for stores and towing duties so there is no reason to suspect that 826B was not used simply as an open lorry. Indeed, there is a possible explanation for its use, as a stand in for 658B, which was the Bedford 5 ton quarter tilt lorry used as the "garage runabout" to visit neighbouring garages. Although this was never shown as being unlicensed during its entire life at Reigate it never the less acquired a full metal tilt some time, as that was how it was later observed. The fact that the tramway welding vans being dealt with at Reigate at the time had this type of body, and that one, 660B was later to leave with a dropside body, makes it tempting to think that 658B was modified during this period whilst 826B was active there.

Footnotes

*421W and 422W are shown as "towing lorries" in the original LOTs SUP 15 but were actually dropside lorries equipped as trailer pullers and based at Parsons Green Building Dept Works their entire lives. Other Regal and Regent lorries known as towing lorries

would not have the cab mounted trailer handbrake to operate as trailer pullers with drawbar trailers.

In LOTs SUP15 and SUP15B, 990AS and 991AS are noted as originally being towing lorries, but at 30 cwt they were far too light to tow the trolleybuses they were bought to assist, and photographs of the rear show nothing but a mounting for a spare wheel to be carried across the tailboard. I suggest their original role was solely for roadside repairs.

A handful of Bedford KD 30cwt half tilts were equipped as trailer pullers for the remaining prewar canteen drawbar trailers, and at Dalston bus garage for pulling a fire tender trailer, probably for servicing the Spurling canteen semi-trailer parked at Aldgate bus station.

Clive Greedus 30th August 2011