

H. V. Burlingham

A Flock of Seagulls

The Story of Burlingham's Seagull Coach Body



Neville Mercer

CONTENTS

H. V. Burlingham - A Flock of Seagulls The Story of Burlingham's 'Seagull' coach body.....	Page 3
Seagull Gallery.....	Page 15

Cover Illustration: 1956 AEC Reliance MU3RV with Burlingham Seagull Mk II coachwork of Flights Tours, now in preservation. (LTHL collection).

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The first underfloor-engined PSV chassis to be placed on the open market, the Sentinel design which evolved into the STC4 and SLC4 range, appeared at the Commercial Motor Show in October 1948 and started a revolution in single-deck bus and coach design. Despite the Sentinel's modest sales - the type was equipped with an outmoded indirect injection engine and also suffered from poorly designed engine mountings - an early order from the prestigious Ribble Motor Services ensured that much larger manufacturers were forced to follow the Shrewsbury company's lead by developing underfloor-engined chassis of their own.

By the time of the 1950 Commercial Motor Show Leyland was offering the Royal Tiger, AEC had developed the underfloor-engined Regal IV, and the list of manufacturers with similar designs soon grew to include Atkinson, Bristol (although their LS model was only available to nationalised BTC operators), Daimler, Dennis, and Guy. Within another two years the traditional front engined single-decker would have all but expired, its place on the various production lines taken by the new underfloor-engined designs.

Coach bodywork manufacturers were somewhat perplexed by these "bonnetless" chassis types and most of them seemed to be incapable of producing acceptably attractive models to suit the underfloor newcomers. Some of their efforts were downright ugly (the Sentinel/Beadle SLC4, visually similar designs by Roe, and the products of smaller bodybuilders such as Barnaby, Heaver, Lawson, and Thurgood).

Others were merely unimaginative (the first versions of Duple's Ambassador and Harrington's Wayfarer being little more than adaptations of their existing front engined designs and rather "droopy" in appearance without a redeeming bonnet-line at the prow).

A third group of bodywork manufacturers, in contrast, showed a surplus of imagination by producing a set of startlingly novel designs collectively referred to as the "avant-garde" school. Into this category fell the products of Bellhouse Hartwell (the bulbously nosed Landmaster), Metalcraft (which offered the choice of a European-style monstrosity with no fewer than ten windows on each side or a less offensive design exemplified by preserved Foden NTU 125), Plaxton (the "Mark 1 Venturer which was profoundly odd in its frontal styling), Whitson (which produced two designs, one resembling an American "transit bus", the other basically a single-deck version of their ultimately avant-garde Observation Coach and latterly known as the Grand Prix), and Windover (with the Kingsway which featured a reverse-rake to its lower front panels) among others. These designs were playful and frequently amusing but were never entirely successful from an aesthetic viewpoint.

Few would disagree that the most elegant of all the new offerings of 1950-51 came from H V Burlingham of Blackpool. The prototype of their classic underfloor-engined coach design was destined for Woods, a Blackpool operator which traded as "Seagull Coaches" and the design was soon being marketed as the Burlingham Seagull regardless of the customer involved.

The Seagull Takes Off

At the 1950 Commercial Motor Show Burlingham offered two versions of their new design. Both were of metal-framed construction and featured similar front-end assemblies with a stylised "winged sword" emblem beneath a twin windscreen, each half of which included a hinged top section for the ultimate in forced ventilation. In all other respects the two Show vehicles were fundamentally different. The vehicle for Westbury Coaches had a horizontal waist-rail and egg-shaped mouldings around each wheel arch. As far as can be ascertained no more of this type was built.

The Seagull Coaches example, on the other hand, with its slightly curved waist-rail and full-length "tank moulding" (so called because its shape resembled the side view of a First World War battle-tank, encompassing both wheel arches and most of the lower panels) was an immediate hit with operators large and small, and was fated to become one of the most successful motor-coach designs in the history of the British bus industry. Something about it looked "right" in a way that had eluded all of Burlingham's competitors, and the Blackpool firm would remain prosperous for the best part of a decade as a result.

If It Ain't Broke

With a long queue of operators knocking at their door demanding their own fleets of Seagulls, you might think that Burlingham would have been happy to leave the classic

design alone for a while. Sadly this was not the case and the elegant Seagull became less so with every passing year. A cynic might suspect that Burlingham executives felt the need to come up with annual re-designs merely to justify their own salaries.

The first variation, the Seagull Mark 2, emerged at the 1952 Commercial Motor Show and differed only slightly from the original in featuring a double metal strip to enclose the "tank" design on its side panels and an internally sliding central entrance door. Nevertheless it was less attractive than the Mark 1, sales were less impressive than those of the original version, and in 1953 Burlingham was forced to acknowledge this by offering the Mark 3 which reverted to the single metal strip and an externally sliding central entrance door. It was visually indistinguishable from the Mark 1 but weighed considerably less and was intended for the correspondingly lighter second-generation underfloor chassis types such as the AEC Reliance and the Leyland Tiger Cub.

The standard version of the Mark 3 retained the front dome "eyebrow blinds" of the Marks 1 and 2, but a small batch built on Tiger Cub chassis for Ribble (and their subsidiary WC Standerwick) featured a "roof box" destination display which could carry the same roller blinds as the Ribble group's large fleet of Leyland-bodied Royal Tiger coaches. Leyland had decided to close its in-house bodybuilding works and Burlingham was more than willing to adapt its design to capture Ribble's order.

The move to lighter designs (by both bodywork and chassis manufacturers) had been occasioned by tumbling revenues as operators felt the pinch from increasing private

car ownership. Similar economic pressures led operators to demand a front entrance version of the Seagull which could be one-man operated on scheduled express routes if circumstances demanded. This need was met at the 1954 Commercial Motor Show by the Seagull Mark 4. Surprisingly the move from a central entrance to one at the front did little to upset the Seagull design as Burlingham decided to retain the short central window bay minus the indentation for the sliding entrance door. The Mark 4 also offered the "Ribble style" roof box destination display as a factory option to all purchasers of the new variant.

The centre entrance Mark 3 continued to be available alongside the Mark 4 and was also given the factory option of a roof box display although few if any were built with this beyond the original batch for Ribble. For certain chassis types (notably Sentinel) the Mark 2 remained in production until the end of 1955, mainly as a means of using up the left over stock of Mark 2 style body parts languishing at Burlingham's Blackpool factory.

All Seagull models up to this point had featured a two-piece rear windscreen similar to those which the bodybuilder had used on earlier front engined chassis types. At the 1956 Commercial Motor Show the Seagull Mark 5 introduced a new rear end design incorporating a single-piece window flanked by two glazed corner pillars which gave the appearance of a three-piece unit. It was, by most observers, considered less attractive than the original configuration.

The Mark 5 was intended to replace both the Mark 3 and Mark 4 (the remaining Mark 2 components had finally run out) and as a result could be ordered with either a front or central entrance and with an optional roof box display. The prototype, an AEC Reliance for North Western, featured the original style of slightly curved front windscreens with hinged top sections but production examples would carry flat glass windscreens, still held in place by a central pillar but without the horizontally hinged top halves. This further decreased the variants visual appeal.

Seagulls or Ugly Ducklings?

While the Mark 5 was considerably less elegant than the original design of 1950, far worse was about to come. In September 1957 Burlingham introduced the Seagull Mark 6 which abandoned the previous Marks' side window configuration (featuring slender metal pillars between windows and the narrower central bay) and utilised much thicker pillars and glazing fitted into "window pans". This was at the request of Ribble Motor Services and was intended to make the replacement of broken glazing an easier task.

It probably did, but it also made the Mark 6 look like some kind of unfortunate hybrid produced by a coach and a service bus which had surreptitiously mated in the depot in the dead of night. Apart from the Ribble order very few were sold with most operators preferring to stick with the Mark 5 which continued to be produced. As with the Mark 2, left over components were used in the production of bodies for rarer chassis, with Mark 6s being fitted to Guy Arab LUFs for Harper Brothers of Heath

Hayes. Total production of the Mark 6 was less than 60, a record low for any of the Seagull variants.

A record low until 1958, that is! In that year the sizeable coach holiday operator Sheffield United Tours asked Burlingham to come up with a coach design with panoramic windows which would offer their customers a better view of passing scenery. Burlingham turned them down. Plaxton said yes and the Mark 7 was a failed attempt by Burlingham to get SUT's custom back.

Despite this setback Burlingham's management decided to put the Mark 7 into large scale production, apparently in the belief that such vehicles would quickly monopolise the coach market and that a substantial chunk of this market could be claimed by the Mark 7.

There were two tragic flaws to this strategy. Firstly the Seagull Mark 7 was an unattractive creature, featuring a "chopped off at the back end" version of the famous tank moulding and relatively tiny roof windows in the front dome area which looked like money-box slots compared to other contemporary designs. It lacked any of the elegance of earlier Seagulls. Secondly the coaching industry proved to be more conservative than Burlingham's management had believed and didn't move to "larger window" designs with any great enthusiasm until 1961-62. The Mark 7 was a financial disaster and it became an indisputable fact that Burlingham had lost its way. For the first time in the company's existence Burlingham found itself selling more double-

decker buses than coaches. Less than ten years after the all-conquering triumph of the original Seagull the company was facing insolvency.

Not Really Seagulls

The unpopularity of the Mark 6 and 7 Seagulls was not entirely responsible for the declining sales of coach bodywork at Burlingham. From 1951 onwards the company had offered a 36-41 seat design on Bedford SB and other front engined chassis types. Although visually very similar to the original Seagull, this design was never given an official name by Burlingham. There was also a shorter variant of this body style suitable for the modernisation of Bedford OB and OWBs, and this soon became known among its (mainly Scottish) customers as the "Baby Seagull". Once again, this appellation was never an official one as far as Burlingham were concerned, although its use undoubtedly spread to some of the company's rank and file workers.

Production of the so-called "Baby Seagull" came to an end in the mid 1950s but sales of the Bedford SB body (which gradually evolved to incorporate some of the features of the contemporary Seagull designs) continued throughout the decade. By 1958 sales of the SB body had outdistanced those of the Twilight Zone versions of the Seagull, so naturally Burlingham's management thought that it would be a good idea to drastically redesign their offering for the SB. Note the element of sarcasm in that statement.

The gargoylish result of this "redesign" emerged in early 1959 and was an insult to the

Bedford and Thames chassis which bore it. The front end of this abomination defied description (space helmet for a very fat sheep?) while its rear end shared the unpleasant "chopped off" look of the Seagull Mark 7. Less than 50 were sold, presumably to operators who didn't care what their coaches looked like, and the type soon picked up a variety of unofficial names including "The Pig", "The Sea-Cow", and the "Burlingham Dodo".

Sales figures for 1959 were astonishingly low in both the heavyweight and lightweight categories and at the end of the year Burlingham's managers announced an entirely new range in a desperate attempt to save the company. For lightweight chassis (Bedford/Thames) the new design was to be known as the Seagull 60, the first time that the Seagull name had been officially applied to a design for front-engined vehicles. The "60" part referred to the year in which it would be delivered. The bodywork was a vast improvement over the grotesque 1959 design but still no beauty queen if compared to the offerings on similar chassis by Duple and Plaxton. On the positive side it was better looking than Harrington's Crusader, but that was an easy target to reach.

Sales of the Seagull 60 were good, especially when compared to those of the 1959 body, but the type had its own fatal flaw. The design featured a raised Perspex section in the centre of the roof which ran all the way from front to rear. The idea was to increase the amount of natural light in the interior. It soon became evident that the Perspex part admitted rainwater as well as light due to inadequate rubber sealing around its edges and joints. The fault could be corrected, but at considerable expense

to Burlingham both in terms of money and reputation.

For heavyweight underfloor-engined chassis of AEC and Leyland manufacture the Seagull Mark 7 was replaced by the Seagull 70. As this too was introduced for delivery in 1960, the "70" part of the name was entirely meaningless. Like the Seagull 60, the Seagull 70 wasn't an ugly vehicle, merely not that attractive when compared to its contemporaries - which in this case included the stunning Harrington Cavalier, an Esmeralda to the Crusader's Quasimodo. Many observers found the Seagull 70's front end particularly objectionable, but it wasn't really that bad until you parked one next to a Cavalier. To the disappointment of Burlingham's managers Ribble chose not to order the Seagull 70 and eventually bought the Harrington alternative. Most operators followed suit and sales of the Burlingham heavyweight design barely passed the 30 mark.

At this point it became obvious that Burlingham could no longer continue as an independent bodywork manufacturer, and in August 1960 the company was acquired by its London-based competitor Duple. Ten years earlier, as Burlingham had proudly displayed its original Seagull at Earls Court, the Duple stand at the same Commercial Motor Show had introduced the Vega design for the Bedford SB. Both the Seagull and the Vega had been enormous successes for their respective manufacturers, but while Duple had consistently offered improved versions of the Vega and slightly longer Super Vega, Burlingham had squandered all of its own goodwill by producing designs which became less attractive as the decade progressed. It was a dog-eat-dog industry and

by 1960 Duple was still a healthy Rottweiler while Burlingham had become an incontinent old pug.

The Duple Years

In the short term the Burlingham name remained in use for products made at the Blackpool factory. The Seagull 70 continued to be produced in penny numbers and the Seagull 60 metamorphosed into the Seagull 61 (with a revised roof design and lots of chrome work at the front end). For the 1962 season the Seagull 70 was still in the catalogue (although none were sold), the Seagull 61 magically became the Seagull 62 (the only change being its name), and an alternative body style for Bedford/Thames chassis (with the unfortunate name of the Burlingham Gannet) was offered for those who found the final Seagull range visually unacceptable. The Gannet sold in modest numbers (dozens rather than hundreds), but not as modestly as the Seagull 62 which didn't even reach double figures.

By the start of the 1963 season the Burlingham name had disappeared and products made at the Blackpool premises were being marketed under the name of Duple (Northern). Burlingham's final design, the Kestrel (a 41-seater intended to replace the Seagull 70 on heavyweight chassis) had never gone beyond the drawing-board stage, but two variations on the Kestrel theme with very similar styling did achieve production status.

The Duple (Northern) Dragonfly, a 49-seat 36-footer for AEC Reliance and Leyland Leopard chassis, was basically a lengthened Burlingham Kestrel and suffered from the same inexplicable handicap of a compulsory central entrance. Only six were sold and two of those went to Fishwick of Leyland at bargain basement prices. The Burlingham Seagull 62 and Gannet were replaced by the Kestrel-style Duple (Northern) Firefly on Albion, Bedford, and Thames chassis. It fared better than any Burlingham coach design had since 1958 but was still hardly a best-seller, moving less than 200 units in its four years of production. With the termination of Firefly production in 1966 the last link with genuine Burlingham designs was severed and from then on the Blackpool factory would produce purely Duple models such as the Viscount and Viceroy.

In 1950, when the original Seagull was built, there had been more than 50 companies producing coach bodywork in significant numbers for the British market. By the start of 1960 this figure had been reduced to five; Burlingham, Duple, Harrington, Plaxton, and Yeates. The Burlingham name disappeared at the end of 1962, Yeates at the beginning of 1964, and Harrington in 1966. These figures represented a terrible history of missed opportunities and the chapter covering Burlingham was possibly the saddest section of the entire book. Fortunately a dozen or so "real" Seagulls survive in preservation to remind us of happier times when a company based in Blackpool led the way in British coach design.

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Seagull Gallery



The original Mark 1 Seagull was a beautiful machine and is represented here by PSU1/15 Royal Tiger HAW 579. Delivered to Whittle of Highley in 1951, and painted in their stylish dark blue and red livery, it was a 39 seater. It was later sold to Buckminster of Leighton Buzzard. (R F Mack via G R Mills).

This Mark 2 was also on Royal Tiger chassis but only seated 37. An uncommon PSU1/16 variant, it was one of the last Royal Tigers produced for the domestic market and had been new to Gittins of Crickheath in 1954. When the famous Gittins brothers retired at the end of 1966 it was sold to neighbouring independent Vagg of Knockin Heath (as seen here) and painted in their unusual dark green and red colour scheme. Some years later it passed to Boulton of Cardington who still operate it as a "heritage" vehicle. (G R Mills).



A Flock of Seagulls - The Story of Burlingham's 'Seagull' coach body



The Mark 3 reverted to the single metal strip around the "tank" moulding. This is PSUC1/2 Tiger Cub HFR 603, new to W C Standerwick in 1954 and shown here with its second operator, Butter of Childs Ercall. Standerwick's parent company, Ribble, had a similar batch. (G Lumb via E A Wain).

The Mark 5 introduced a new rear end and was available from 1956 to 1958. Most of the breed also featured flat glass front windscreens but Whittle of Highley was an important customer and preferred the older style of front end. PSUC1/2 Tiger Cub PUJ 780 was delivered to them in 1958, passing to Stanier of Newchapel in 1961 as seen in this shot. The livery was cream and red. After Stanier sold out to PMT in 1965 the "flying sword" emblem was removed and it was fitted with bus seats for stage carriage work. (Bill Jackson Collection).



A Flock of Seagulls - The Story of Burlingham's 'Seagull' coach body



Wallace Arnold's PSUC1/2 Tiger Cub 8339 U was also delivered in 1958 but featured the standard flat glass front windscreen of the Mark 5. After a couple of seasons on extended coach holiday work it was demoted to local private hires and excursions from the Leeds base. Sister vehicle 8338 U was transferred to the Hardwicks subsidiary in Scarborough for similar work. (Paul Haywood Collection).

Ribble was another important customer which got what it wanted. Unfortunately this was the result, and many saw the Mark 6 as the beginning of the end for the Seagull. PSUC1/2 Tiger Cub LCK 712, Ribble's fleet number 998, is seen in Blackpool's Coliseum coach station parked next to one of the company's "White Lady" Atlantean coaches. It had just arrived on express service J1 from Leeds via Keighley. Delivered in July 1958, it was sold to contractor George Wimpey in August 1969.



A Flock of Seagulls - The Story of Burlingham's 'Seagull' coach body



Burlingham's bodywork for front engined chassis evolved from the "full fronted" Sun Saloon model of the late 1940's (some later versions of which carried the Seagull "tank" moulding on their sides) into this nameless "Seagull lookalike". The 1953 body on this example – 1946 vintage AEC 0662 Regal DUK 752 – was ordered by Don Everall of Wolverhampton. The rejuvenated vehicle passed to W Smith & Sons of Donnington Wood in 1957 and is seen here on one of their local stage carriage services. (R Marshall via B M Gough).

Most of this style of "Seagull lookalike" bodywork was fitted to Bedford SB chassis such as SBG 36 seater WEH 870, delivered to Percy Stoddard of Cheadle in 1955. Stoddard used it on his market day stage carriage services to Cheadle and Uttoxeter from the villages between the two Staffordshire towns. (Neville Mercer Collection).



A Flock of Seagulls - The Story of Burlingham's 'Seagull' coach body



Another Bedford SBG, but with slightly different front end styling and 41 seats. NNT 588 was delivered to TG Smith (Smiths Eagle) of Trench in 1956 and gave them 15 years of its life before passing to an operator in Willenhall for further use. (Neville Mercer Collection).

For 1959 Burlingham came up with this new design for front engined chassis. If you look at it for too long it will turn you into stone. Bedford SB3 37 seater 3117 AC was new to De Luxe of Mancetter, passing to Price (Excelsior Coaches) of Wrockwardine Wood in September 1964. Price used it on their "Telford Rota" services (where it is seen here) for just one year before sending it off into the hills along the Welsh border. (B M Gough Collection).



A Flock of Seagulls - The Story of Burlingham's 'Seagull' coach body



After the "controversial" styling of the 1959 model, its successor's appearance could only be an improvement. The Seagull 60 design is represented here by a Thames 570E, UAW 983, delivered to Whittle of Highley in January 1960 as fleet number 14, and seen in this shot on a private hire somewhere in London. In March 1961 it was sold to a Scottish operator. (Chris Elmes Collection).

Burlingham had hoped that the Seagull 70 would recover some of the sales on heavyweight chassis which had been lost by the unpopular Seagull Marks 6 and 7, but the largest orders came from Scottish Omnibuses Ltd (for eleven) and Yorkshire Traction (for six) and less than 50 were built. The SOL machines were luxurious 34-seat touring coaches on AEC Reliance chassis and were delivered in 1961. This one is YSF 242 fleet no B11. (Chris Hough Collection).



A Flock of Seagulls - The Story of Burlingham's 'Seagull' coach body



The rarest of all Burlingham designs, the Dragonfly, was marketed as a Duple (Northern) product. Samuelsons fleet of four 49-seaters on AEC 4U3RA Reliance chassis was delivered in 1963 and accounted for two-thirds of the type's production. A major stage-carriage operator until the creation of London Transport in 1933, Samuelsons had later become a subsidiary of London Coastal Coaches (the BET/BTC joint venture which owned Victoria Coach Station). By the 1960s it was specialising in sightseeing tours and airport transfer work, most of the latter for Gatwick-based British United Airways. The majority of Samuelsons' fleet, including Dragonfly 450 FXX, were painted in the BUA livery of black, grey, and white. (Photographer unknown).

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Additional information, corrections and photographs are always welcome.
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