

# W. L. Thurgood (Coachbuilders) Ltd.



1925 - 1967

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Cover Illustration: New to Dye's of Hertford in 1949 was this Albion Valkyrie LNK22, carrying a Thurgood 33-seat body. (Trevor Brookes).

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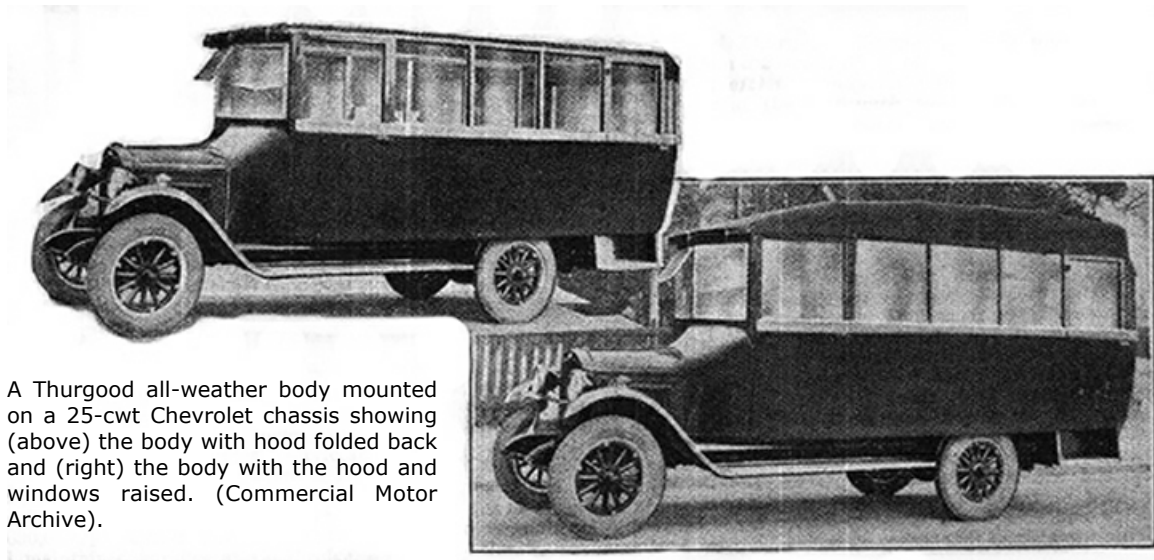
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W. L. Thurgood was founded in April 1925, using the former premises of the Phoenix Coach Works in Church Street, Ware, where Walter Thurgood had been employed as foreman.

The first Thurgood bus body, finished in 1926, was of panelled plywood construction, built on a Morris 25-cwt chassis, which was eventually sold to an operator in Warrington. A second bus body was built on a 14-seat Chevrolet chassis for a Northampton operator, the success of which prompted Thurgood to build a fleet of similar buses, which he began to operate himself under the fleet name of People's Motor Service. A controlling interest in the fleet was subsequently purchased by two former London independents (Overington and Randall) and eventually became part of the London Passenger Transport Board in 1933, when all the vehicles and services were acquired.

In 1927 Thurgood designed and patented an all-weather body suitable for 14-16, 20 and 26-seater vehicles. These were mounted on Chevrolet 20-25 cwt and similar chassis. The coach had fixed sides and cantrails, with two wide doors provided on its near side. The gangway was in the centre of the body and special springback seats were fitted. Drop-windows operated by patent winders were provided all round, and the front screen was of the V-pattern. The head was built of two or more steel tubes, situated lengthways and hinged at both ends; on these the cross-pieces that carried the hood were slid into place. The cross-pieces were specially shaped and allowed plenty of headroom when the coach was enclosed. When the hood was fully extended it was held in position by fasteners at the front and sides and the complete head could



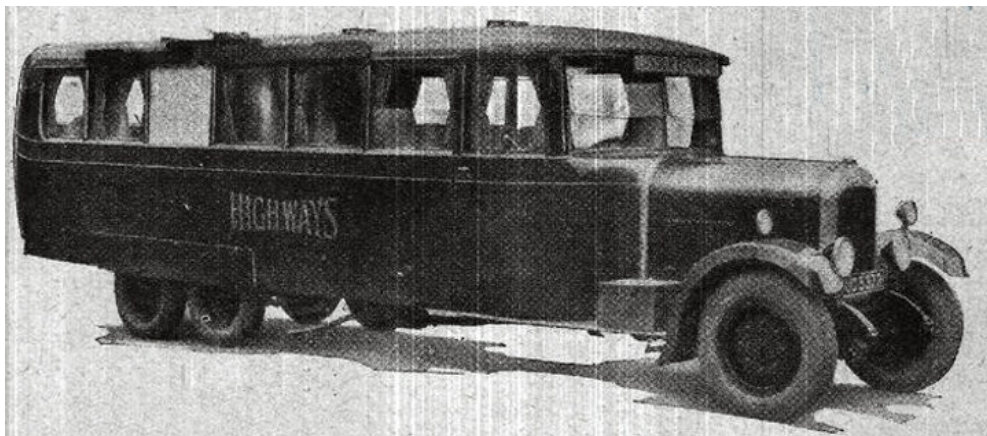
A Thurgood all-weather body mounted on a 25-cwt Chevrolet chassis showing (above) the body with hood folded back and (right) the body with the hood and windows raised. (Commercial Motor Archive).

be folded and stowed away in a box at the rear of the body when not required. The longitudinal members were then folded out of sight along the top of the cant rail and held in position by spring clips. It was claimed that the head could be raised by one man in 3 minutes and lowered just as easily. In order to meet the expected demand for these bodies further premises were acquired in Park Road, Ware.



This 1927 Leyland Lioness PLC1 YT3738 with Thurgood body (showing the patent all-weather roof) was formerly owned by King George V. (LTHL collection).

Another Thurgood-bodied coach was employed by Highway Services on a newly inaugurated route between Nottingham and London in 1928. Once again individually tailored to the clients requirements it provided luxury travel for customers. The body was mounted on a six-wheel Buda-engined Laffly chassis and seated 20 in two compartments. The forward compartment seated 12 with seats arranged in pairs on both sides of a central gangway, whilst the rear compartment accommodated eight persons, three in armchair seats and five in a wide seat across the rear. Over the wheel-arches and separating the forward and rear sections of the coach were a compact lavatory on the off-side and a roomy luggage compartment on the near-side, these being separated by a short gangway, at the rear end of which was a glass-panelled door giving access to the rear saloon. Luggage lockers were provided under the panels at the sides of the vehicle.



Thurgood-bodied Laffly of Highway Services. (Commercial Motor Archive).



Thurgood's reputation for individually-designed bodies stood them in good stead for the next few years, although output remained low.

In 1930 Thurgood provisionally patented a new type of folding, all-weather head for coaches and buses which was designed for quick and easy operation, inexpensive manufacture, and to eliminate the use of folded and crumpled weatherproof materials.

In the case of a 20-seater body, the section of the roof which could be opened was 10 ft. long and 4 ft. wide. The section was divided longitudinally, each half being hinged centrally and hinged to the fixed portion of the roof. Five hinges were used along each of the four joints.

By means of arching the central portion of the roof slightly, a pleasing contour was obtained, which allowed extra headroom above the central gangway. The convex sections of the two innermost quarters of the head were made to fold onto the concave sections of the outer quarters—these exactly fitting onto the curved outer surface of the fixed portions.

The roof was opened and closed by a pair of handles, which, in the closed position, lay against the lining of the fixed portion. One man could easily open and close the 10-ft. head. The folding halves were supported, when half-open, by 1-inch rollers at each end, and, when the roof was opened, the two folded parts were held by spring clips, these preventing any vibration.

For 32-seaters the roof would be made in two portions, each 8 ft. long, with a central bridge about 21. ins, wide on which the rollers would run.

The folding head was framed in timber and panelled with canvas-covered plywood. The lining could be of any suitable finish, such as moquette, leathercloth or enamel and would not be exposed to the weather when the halves were folded back.

In 1932 a separate company, with the name Comfort-Travel Patents Co. Ltd., also of Park Road, Ware, was formed to manufacture the all-weather roof for supply complete to other coachbuilders throughout the country, ready for incorporation in their own bodywork, the design of which was continually improved and the same company handled the Non-Chafe seat, another of Thurgood's products, which had been exhibited at the Olympia Show in 1931.

Known as the Easiway, the roof was suitable for bodies of 6 ft. 2 ins. to 7 ft. inside width, and was supplied ready to drop straight on to the cant rails, no previous preparations and no shaped quarters being necessary. The fitting operation took approximately one hour. The roof was guaranteed for five years not to leak. The standard section gave an opening of 8 ft. by 4 ft., suitable for vehicles of 20 to 26 seats and for 32-seaters or double-deckers, two such sections, with a strong centrepiece, were supplied. Consisting of four rigid panels of shaped section longitudinally hinged, it was quickly opened and closed by means of two handles and, when open, fitted into recesses, giving an unbroken line from front to rear.

The Non-Chafe seat was an improved version of that exhibited, with each passenger having a separate cushion and seat back, the latter being hinged to an outer rail of the upper frame of the seat case, so that, with the vertical movement of the seat cushion, the back rest rose and fell, giving a most welcome relief from the customary chafing



of the passenger's back. The improvements relate in particular to the guide for the back rest, it being thought desirable to avoid all need for lubrication. A very hard fibre of square section provided the solution, this was screwed to each side of the back-rest frame, so that it rode up and down in a light steel channel boxed into the fixed portion of the seat back.

Also in 1932 a 20-seater demonstration coach was completed to the order of Thornycroft and Co Ltd. The coach body was carried on a Thornycroft Speedy six-cylinder chassis, and Thurgood were of the opinion that this was the first occasion on which a chassis of this type was used for coach purposes. The Thurgood patent 'Easiway' opening roof was incorporated in the design, whilst the four-panelled windscreen embodied top and bottom sections made to open. The coach was equipped in a lavish manner and created a good impression with operators, to whom it was demonstrated

By 1937 no fewer than 43 chassis were bodied at the company's works, but the outbreak of war in 1939 severely affected the company's trading position. Relying as it did on the orders from small operators, it soon became obvious that such companies would be in no position to purchase new or even reconditioned bodywork. As a result contracts for the supply of woodwork were obtained to tide the company through. The biggest wartime setback was still to come, however, for in October 1940 a high explosive bomb hit the factory, completely demolishing it. Five months later, due to the dedication of the employees, the factory was back at work, although the manufacture of bus bodies ceased in favour of the production of aircraft components. It was to be 1945 before Thurgood bodywork was again produced for the bus market.



The Thurgood-bodied Thornycroft Speedy of 1932. (Commercial Motor Archive).

Following the cessation of hostilities and the postwar lack of materials with which to construct new bus chassis, many smaller operators were forced to have elderly vehicles re-bodied as a stopgap measure. In December 1945, the first postwar Thurgood body was constructed for Beeston, of Hadleigh in Suffolk, on a 1932 Thornycroft BC, just one of a substantial number of prewar chassis that had arrived for re-bodying. The popular Bedford OB was a regular visitor to the works and over 100 examples of this model received Thurgood bodies.

The postwar surge in coach travel brought with it an increase in orders for the company. In 1947, 85 chassis were bodied by Thurgood, rising to a record 90 bodies in 1948. By 1951, however, body production had declined and just 28 were produced.

In 1953 a new coach works at Widbury Hill was opened, giving the company additional facilities, although an additional spray shop had to be built to accommodate highbridge double-deckers, which would not fit into the main premises. As a sideline, Thurgood commenced dealing in PSV's and purchased a number of ex-municipal and company vehicles.

During the same period the company developed a 28-seat body, named the Forerunner, which was fitted onto a Thames Trader goods chassis (manufactured by Ford in the UK between 1957 and 1965) and was available with either bus or coach seats.

Many small operators facing the problem of replacing early post-war vehicles of the 27 to 29-seat class, which were well suited to their needs, found there were relatively few,



ACF181 was a 1946 Bedford OB with Thurgood 29-seat coachwork in the fleet of Norfolk's of Nayland. (John Kaye).

if any, modern equivalents. P.S.V. operators had to be cost conscious, especially with limited traffic receipts, and many concerns required relatively small vehicles to operate within slender profit margins. A small coach could not be too expensive nor the standards of comfort be inferior if it was to be acceptable to passengers. In an effort to reconcile these requirements Thurgood introduced the Forerunner 28-seater coach based on the Thames Trader 4-ton 152-inch wheelbase low-frame chassis, which had to be modified to meet P.S.V. regulations. Not intended to be the last word in elaborate styling, it was, nonetheless, attractively finished both inside and out. The side pillars and wheel arches were formed from steel sections but the remainder of the framework was largely of ash. The use of curved glass was hitherto avoided on Thurgood bodies to facilitate replacement in case of damage. On the Forerunner, however, a one-piece curved glass windscreen already in largescale production was incorporated, so that replacements could be found in stock at the local dealership in every large town!

The prototype vehicle was geared to give a maximum speed of 45 m.p.h. The modest dimensions of the vehicle, which was primarily a goods model, were 22 ft. 7 in. long and 7 ft. 3 in. wide making it suitable for use on narrow roads.

In 1959, a successor to the Forerunner, previously available only on the modified Thames Trader goods chassis, was produced on the Bedford VAS1 passenger chassis and unimaginatively named the Successor.

The body differed from the Forerunner in that the rather dull front with singlepiece



YWC986 was a 1963 Ford 530E new to Super Coaches of Upminster in 1963 and sporting a Thurgood 'Forerunner' 28-seat coach body. (John Boylett courtesy John Kaye).

windscreen gave way to a more attractive, raked profile and a divided, curved windscreen. All previous Forerunners had Ford four-cylinder diesel engines, but the new model had the 300-cubic inch Bedford six-cylinder diesel. The chassis differed from the standard VAS in that Thurgood fitted larger tyres all round and a rearward main-frame extension was built to carry the luggage locker. The first example was delivered to Central Coaches of Leamington Spa, in January 1959, whilst the final example went to Elms of Kenton, Middlesex in August 1967.

Early in 1967, negotiations were started with Plaxtons (Scarborough) Ltd., for the purchase of the business, which culminated on 27th June 1967, when W. L. Thurgood (Coachbuilders) Ltd was taken over, forming the Southern area depot.





The last Thurgood body delivered was OUC658F - a 'Successor' style 28-seat coach body on Bedford VAS5 chassis that was delivered to Elms Coaches of Kenton in July 1967. (John Boylett courtesy John Kaye).

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