

The Rowe Hillmaster

PSV Chassis Production



1953 - 1958

TAF 587

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Cover Illustration: TAF587 was the first production PSV Hillmaster produced in 1954. It sported a Whitson 38-seat body that had been used for the prototype chassis the previous year. (LTHL collection).

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The Rowe Hillmaster History 1953-1958

The small East Cornwall firm of M. G. Rowe (Motors) Ltd., made an entry into the PSV chassis market in 1953, when the managing director, Mr. Maurice Rowe, who had visited the 1952 Earls Court Commercial Motor Show and taken an instant liking to the new Meadows 4DC engine, had one delivered and immediately set to work designing a chassis around it.

In 1952 work began on development of a chassis intended to be light and lively, comfortable and economical; the result weighed in at 2 tons 18cwt (2947kg) complete with spare wheel and full 33 gallon (150ltr) fuel tank. However its conventional leaf-sprung front engine-rear drive layout was hardly innovative, and a 17 ft (5.1m) wheelbase, whilst helping passenger comfort, didn't do much for manoeuvrability; the quoted turning circle was 65ft (19.8m) and the chassis featured a vertically arranged 5.4 litre Meadows 4DC330 diesel engine, offering 85 bhp at 2,200 rpm and 239 lb-ft of torque. Power was routed via a 14 inch Borg and Beck clutch to a 5 speed Meadows manual gearbox including an overdrive top gear, and driving a 6.661:1 ratio hypoid rear axle. With 8.25-20 inch tyres, a 56mph (90kph) maximum speed was claimed, with a super-low first gear specified to allow fully laden starts on 1 in 4 inclines - ensuring Cornish hills would present few problems!

The name Hillmaster was given to the prototype. The resulting chassis was road-tested in Cornwall in late 1953 and early in 1954 was delivered to Whitson's of London for bodying; its narrow 7ft 6inch (2.9m) width was chosen to cope with the west country's many narrow lanes. The chassis, however, never ran commercially, since Maurice Rowe had decided that an underfloor position for the engine was the way forward.

Rowe (and his lead engineer William Yeo) adapted the Meadows engine to run horizontally - despite the manufacturer's initial scepticism. The engine was turned over, relocating the sump and adopting an offset crankshaft and angled transmission. A modified chassis was rapidly developed to incorporate the engine and by September 1954 a chassis price of £1750 was announced. The Whitson body was now mounted on the revised chassis and registered TAF587, the vehicle entering service with Rowe's own coach company the same year. The vehicle in appearance resembled very much a Bedford SB, with very little front overhang and with a forward entrance behind the front wheel, although the next production chassis featured a forward extension of the chassis frame permitting an entrance ahead of the front wheel. Meadows subsequently incorporated the engine changes developed by Rowe and Yeo, and it became Meadows' first diesel unit specifically marketed for horizontal use in commercial vehicles.

Though Rowe's first vehicles were coaches to meet local needs, a goods vehicle with up to 8 tons payload evolved from the original vertical-engine chassis. Using the same Meadows engine and five-speed gearbox, it was equipped with heavier leaf springs,

and an updated Girling hydraulic braking system including a Clayton Dewandre servo, but - as with the coach - power steering was not installed.

The first prototype was equipped with a Jennings of Sandbach platform body, its cab featuring a wrap-around curved windscreen reminiscent of the famous ERF Klear-View design - designed by Jennings in 1952. The new underfloor-engined coach and the 8-tonner were both at the Earls Court commercial motor show in September 1954. Hillmaster trucks proved more successful, with around 115 units built from a range which eventually offered payloads from 6 to 14 tons, plus a 15 ton tractor unit for articulated applications.

Three PSV Hillmasters were built for Morlais Motor Services of Merthyr Tydfil in 1957 and 1958, before the company's bankers unexpectedly called in the receivers in 1960 with the company just £3000 in debt. Although only 5 Hillmasters were sold on the PSV market, 115 Hillmaster chassis were built as goods vehicles, making a grand total of 120.

The company continued operating in receivership and was able to complete an order (placed in October 1959 by Cheshire-based Andrew Foster Transport) for fifty 8-ton tipping vehicles. The last Hillmasters were produced in 1962.

In 1963 the business was wound up and the assets sold off.

PSV Production 1953-1958

This listing is in the format - Chassis No; Reg. No; Body; Seating; Operator; Fleet No.

1953

- ; - ; Whitson; C38F ; Prototype; -

The chassis number is unknown; it probably had none.
Operated on trade plates (521RL).

1954

- ; TAF587; Whitson; C38F; Rowes Garage; -

It is reported that this vehicle had no official chassis number.
Withdrawn in 1974; to Davidstow Riding School; scrapped by 1977.



1956

C/H100; WRL16; Reading; B44F; Millbrook Steamboat & Trading Company; -

Withdrawn 1968; to Selleck, Nichols & Williams, St. Austell, withdrawn 1970; to West of England Transport Collection, Winkleigh, 1972; to the Herefordshire Transport Collection by 1990. (Cliff Essex).



1957

RH-P-101M; HB9287; Metal Sections/Morlais; B44F; Morlais M.S.; 23
RH-P-102M; HB9486; Metal Sections/Morlais; B44F; Morlais M.S.; 24

Withdrawn 1964 (No. 24 broken up for spares by then). (Alan Farrow collection).



1958

RH-P-103M; HB9922; Metal Sections/Morlais; B44F; Morlais M.S.; 21

Withdrawn 1965 and to Moseley (dealer), presumed scrapped. (Elwyn Jones).

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Additional information, corrections and photographs are always welcome.
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