

Duple Motor Bodies Ltd

A Brief History



1919 - 1989

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Cover Illustration: Photographed at Stokesley in 1974 is TPT115K a 1972 Bedford YRQ of Bond Brothers of Willington, with Duple 'Viceroy' C45F bodywork. (Donald Hudson).

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Born in Salisbury in 1877, Herbert White had moved into the manufacture of motor vehicles just after the end of the First World War. The name 'Duple' was supposed to convey the principle of a single vehicle being suitable for a dual role, an idea he had developed before the war in Fareham, Hampshire, where he had built the first vehicle of this type, which he called the Bifort. He offered the idea to other bodybuilding concerns, but no one was willing to put the principle into production, so, in 1919, he formed his own company, Duple Bodies & Motors Ltd.

Initially production was based at a small factory in Pembroke Road, Hornsey in London, where former military Ford T's were fitted with the newly designed dual-purpose bodywork. The bodies had the advantage of looking like a small touring car, yet, as the promotional material claimed, within three minutes could be transformed into a van, by removing the decking at the rear of the car and fitting a van top. This type of vehicle had enormous appeal to the owners of small businesses, who were able to obtain a working vehicle and private car for little extra, and soon bodywork of this type was being produced in substantial numbers.

With demand growing, the small Hornsey premises fast became inadequate and a move to larger premises at The Hyde in Hendon was put in hand. The new factory was opened for production in 1926.

Coachwork had been built on occasions since the inception of the Company, but in 1928 it was decided to make an effort to increase output of this body type substantially. As a result the order book began to grow and within ten years the number of people employed had grown to around 800.

Much of the early business was fairly local, although the expanding independent coach trade in the London area provided an increasing market. For a time Duple bodies appeared in numbers on Gilford chassis, even though that concern had its own bodybuilding subsidiary, and as Gilford chassis became more popular Duple bodywork appeared in more and more fleets.

In 1928, W. E. Brown, a former partner in the Strachan & Brown bodybuilding business, joined the firm, and he had a major influence on the Company's future expansion.

Duple numbered such illustrious names as the Great Western Railway, who ordered a number of bodies for its expanding bus fleet, which was later amalgamated with the National Omnibus & Transport Company to become the Western National Omnibus Company, and Elliot Brothers' Royal Blue fleet amongst some of its early customers. By 1930 the total number of coach and bus bodies produced was 250, establishing Duple as an emerging bodybuilder of some stature, whose distinctive design features were able to influence national trends.

The depression of the 1930's coupled with the introduction of the 1930 Road Traffic Act brought about changes in the bodybuilding sector. This led to a stabilising of the transport industry, with established operators feeling secure now that the threat of unregulated competition had been removed by the licensing system. Accordingly there was a trend towards vehicles with higher standards of finish and more comfortable interiors. In 1930 Duple's largest single order to date was received; an order for 50 bodies to be fitted to the AEC Regal chassis of Green Line Coaches, the newly established express service arm of the London General Omnibus Company.

Perhaps the best-known association of Duple with a chassis manufacturer in the early years was that which developed with Bedford. In August 1931, two Bedford passenger chassis (the 14-seat WHB and 20-seat WLB) were announced. Duple had built early bodies on the WLB chassis for the Vauxhall Company (the parent Company of Bedford), and was listed in publicity material as one of the four bodybuilders recommended for the WLB chassis. Duple's capability for production in quantity set them apart when demand rose and soon Duple-bodied Bedford WLB's were in service around the country. The Bedford-Duple association was subsequently to last over 50 years.

Although Duple did build a few double-deck bodies, single-deck bus and coach bodies became the core business and double-deck bodies disappeared from Duple production in the early 1930's.



Fingland's of Manchester ordered seven AEC Regal chassis in 1932-1933, five of which were bodied by Duple with a C26R coach body and later registered XJ3827-3828 and XJ6572-6574. This is one of those vehicles in a pre-delivery photo, although its exact identity is uncertain. (Duple Bodies & Motors Ltd).



New to Sutton's of Clacton-on-Sea was this AEC Q (CTW881) dating from 1935 and carrying a Duple C29C body. (Duple Bodies & Motors Ltd).



ATE690 was an AEC Renown new to Bracewell's of Colne in 3/1936 and carrying a Duple C39F body. (Duple Bodies & Motors Ltd).

In 1932 Duple acquired the business of London Lorries, who, despite the name, were heavily involved in the manufacture of coach bodies.

During the early 1930's the Dennis Lancet became popular amongst many of the independent operators, mainly because of its cost in relation to the Leyland Tiger and AEC Regal, which were the leading full-sized coach chassis of the period. Duple built an increasing number of bodies on the Dennis chassis from its introduction in November 1931. Another chassis introduced in 1932 was the AEC 'Q', the first coach-bodied example of which, delivered to Elliott Brothers Royal Blue fleet, was built by Duple.

By the middle of the thirties Duple was widely regarded as a coachbuilder, although bus bodies were still produced in quite large numbers, including those constructed for the Dennis Ace, which was introduced in 1934. This vehicle had a characteristic, projecting bonnet that gave it the nickname of the 'flying pig'; Duple built both coach and bus bodies on the chassis.

Export business had been developed early, based mainly on the travels of the Duple directors, including W. E. Brown, who had already been to America and Canada and now embarked on a Mediterranean tour, taking in Greece, Syria and Egypt. Export orders were also received in quantity from East Africa, Argentina and closer to home in Europe. This in part helped to compensate for the reduced demand for UK bodywork, which tended to be seasonal, with new coaches being required for the summer touring season. This meant that large numbers of employees were recruited early

in the year, but towards the middle of the year when all the orders had been satisfied, many had to be laid off. When it came to re-hiring the skilled workers needed, many had found alternative employment, a situation that was not conducive to Duple's business. Duple therefore looked at ways of making bodybuilding more of a year round activity.

The General Post Office had invited tenders for the provision of vans to its own specifications and Duple was fairly successful in obtaining large contracts for the supply of GPO van bodies based on the Morris Minor chassis and this went some way to maintaining a steady production in spite of the seasonal coachbuilding activities. By 1934, the original site had become inadequate and 3½ acres of adjoining land was purchased for expansion.

The late 1930's saw the era of the classic coach design, with operators becoming increasingly conscious of the appearance of their coaches. Many coach bodies were of individual design, but readily identifiable as by Duple. The introduction of sloping pillars, curving roof- and waistlines along with shaped mouldings on the side panels all contributed to a new 'aerodynamic' style that was increasing in popularity. Although coachwork continued to be Duple's main output, single-deck bus bodies formed a good part of the production from the mid-1930's, with one customer, Barton Transport, placing a bulk order for such bodies to be delivered over an extended period.



CDL792 was a Bedford WTB with Duple 'Hendonian' C26F bodywork that was new in June 1939 to Shotters. (Bob Passmore).



HTM20 was a 1950 Bedford OB with Duple 'Vista' C29F coachwork, which remained Duple's standard OB coachwork until production of the chassis ceased. (Richard Simons).



New to Jackson, Castle Bromwich was L0E300 a 1951 Leyland Royal Tiger with Duple 'Roadmaster' C41F coachwork. (LTHL collection).



Brewers LTX470 was an AEC Regal IV new in 5/1952 with Duple 'Ambassador' C41C coachwork. (Alan Snatt).



Seen here with Golden Valley Motors, 00U789 was a 1956 AEC Reliance with Duple 'Elizabethan' C43F coachwork. (Jeffrey Lloyd).

At the 1935 Commercial Motor Show, Bedford displayed the new WTB model, which was to remain its main passenger model up until the war, with Duple bodywork as standard. In 1936, Duple introduced the Vista design of bodywork, primarily for the Bedford WTB chassis. It had curved roof- and waistlines, and featured a sliding roof as standard. The Vista had an immediate appeal and by early 1937 had been produced for a number of operators. A revised design - the Vista II - was introduced in 1937, whilst a new design - the Hendonian - appeared at the 1937 Commercial Motor Show. Both of these remained in production (although the Vista II was revised to the Vista III later) until the end of the decade.

In 1939 Bedford introduced a new range of goods models, which included the 'O', with characteristic 'bullnose' grille. The passenger version was named the 'OB' and Duple modified their Hendonian body to fit the chassis, which at 14ft 6ins was longer than the WTB. With the advent of World War II, Bedford production was turned over to the war effort, with only 73 OB chassis produced, and it was not until after cessation of hostilities that the Bedford OB with Duple Vista bodywork was to become a familiar sight on British roads. At the outbreak of war much of Duple's work in hand had been for coach bodies, and these continued to be finished during the early war years. As the conflict progressed more of British industry became enveloped in war work and Duple was called upon, as a member of the London Aircraft Production Group, to build fuselages for the Halifax bomber, along with a variety of military products, which gave little

prominence to coach and bus body building. In 1941, however, it was realised that there was a need to supply buses in order to maintain adequate services, especially in areas vital to the war effort and Duple was called upon to build double-deck highbridge and lowbridge buses to utility specifications. Moreover, Duple was involved in the only new single-deck vehicle to be produced from 1942 to 1945, the Bedford OWB, which with its wooden slatted seating was very Spartan in appearance, although not in performance.

Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, the austere wartime lifestyle had, through necessity, to be continued for a while, although express coach services resumed operation in 1946. At about the same time permission was granted for the resumption of coach building activities and supplies of the necessary materials were made available, although still in limited quantities. The name of the business was changed to Duple Motor Bodies Limited in the spring of 1946.

The first postwar production model to appear was the Duple Vista body on the Bedford OB chassis. The standard seating capacity soon became 29-seat, although models with differing capacities were still available. The Vista coachwork remained Duple's standard OB body until production of the OB chassis ceased in the early 1950's. Deliveries of Duple bodywork on full-sized chassis (such as the AEC Regal) began in May 1946, and were known as the A-type, although its curved lines had their origin in the prewar period, so it was not strictly a new design. It was not long before

the order book was filled for several years ahead. Postwar rebodysing became common practice as new chassis were initially hard to obtain and Duple built many A-type bodies on different chassis that helped to make it, with its distinctive side 'flash', a familiar sight in postwar Britain. Alternative styles were available, all with alphabetic codes, such as the B- and C-types, which differed in detail only and were regarded as 'dual-purpose' bodies, whilst the D-type was Duple's own design of bus body.

After the War there was a move towards metal-framed bodies, partly because of their greater durability and partly because of a shortage of timber for traditional bodywork. Duple designed a metal-framed body (the Almet) for export models on the OB chassis, as well as producing a body design for the new SB chassis, then under development. By 1948, Duple had developed a metal-framed double-deck body, examples of which were delivered to the Red & White group in 1949 when they standardised on Guy chassis and Duple bodywork. Further deliveries were to SMT on AEC Regent III chassis, but the demand for Duple double-deck bodies was still limited. Duple's main business interest remained the coach building market.

In 1950 a range of full-fronted coach bodies named the 'Ambassador' was produced, but with the change in maximum permitted length for coaches to 30ft and the maximum width to 8ft, a series of new designs was prepared. Many were given names, such as the Roadmaster and Vega, all intended for use on specific chassis. The Roadmaster was particularly unlike anything

Duple had previously produced, with its high, straight waistline and small windows. It earned the nickname 'Iron Duke' and was intended for underfloor engined chassis, hence the higher waistline. The Vega was intended for the new production model of the Bedford SB, this time the bodywork featured a gentle curving waistline typical of Duple.

The 1950's also brought a difficult time for the bodybuilding industry, caused mainly by an end in the increased postwar demand that created a rapid drop in orders. Competition for the remaining orders now became intense, and many of Duple's former customers were now in the Tilling group that standardised on Bristol chassis and ECW bodywork. Disputes among union labour resulted in a 36-week strike that was catastrophic for Duple. It began to lose significant amounts of business to other companies and a move out of London, where labour activists were more militant, was considered.

In 1952 Duple acquired Nudd Brothers & Lockyer Limited, based in Kegworth in the Midlands, and the newly acquired firm was used to produce metal-framed bodies in the Duple standard range. Further premises were acquired in Loughborough in 1955, and in 1956 the combined factories were re-named Duple Motor Bodies (Midland) Limited. In 1958, the business of Willowbrook Limited, of Loughborough was acquired, although the business continued to operate under its own name for some time.



Introduced in 1956 was the Duple 'Donington' body, seen here on NRN167 a Leyland PSUC1/2 'Tiger Cub' dating from 1960. (Alan Snatt).



Premier Travel No. 212 (YBD79) was new in 4/1961 to York Bros, Northampton and was an AEC Reliance with Duple 'Britannia' C41C coachwork. (Alan Snatt)



New in 1961 was 3427MN a Bedford SB3 with Duple 'Super Vega' C41F coachwork. (Alan Snatt).

Throughout this period Duple continued to produce new body designs; the Elizabethan, for underfloor-engined chassis, was introduced in 1953; the Britannia, based on the Elizabethan but with vertical pillars, was introduced in 1955 and the Donington, for dual-purpose use, was added to the list in 1956. The designs for Bedford chassis had continued to be produced, by now known as Super Vista and Super Vega.

The business of H. V. Burlingham Limited, of Blackpool, best known for the 'Seagull' body of the 1950's, was taken over in August 1960, adding a Northern arm to Duple's production. The Burlingham name was retained until 1962, when it became Duple Motor Bodies (Northern) Limited. Towards the end of 1961 Bedford introduced the VAS chassis and Duple produced a completely new design - the Bella Vista - for it. That year the maximum permitted length for coaches was increased to 36ft and the maximum width to 8ft 2½ins and Duple (Northern) designed and produced the Continental, with seats for up to 51 passengers. When Bedford announced the six-wheeled VAL in 1962, Duple introduced the Vega Major. For 1964 Duple introduced the Commander, initially built at Hendon but switched to Blackpool later, and in 1966 the Viceroy range replaced the Bella series on most Bedford or Ford chassis.

Plans to close the Hendon factory were announced in 1968, with all Duple coach production being concentrated at Blackpool, which was to be re-named Duple Coachbuilders Limited. At this time the Willowbrook subsidiary was still continuing in business under its own name. Around

this time competition from Plaxton was becoming greater, and by 1969 the two were neck and neck in production rates. In 1970 the Hendon plant was finally closed and all production moved northwards. Duple's output had fallen to just over 400 bodies due to the uncertainty in the period covering the Hendon plants closure; at the same time rival Plaxton had seen its production rise to over 1000 bodies in the same year. In 1971 Willowbrook was separated from the rest of the Duple group and sold.

At the 1972 Commercial Motor Show, Duple introduced a new range of bodies called the Dominant, which were similar in appearance to the Plaxton Panorama Elite, already in production since 1968.

The sale of Willowbrook had left Duple without a foot in the bus body market and it was not until 1975 that Duple re-introduced bus bodywork to their Dominant range. In 1976 the Dominant II was introduced. By the end of the 1970's Duple production had risen to around the 1000 per annum mark again.

The election of a Conservative Government in the summer of 1979 was welcomed by many in the transport industry, not least because of the new policies on transport including 'de-regulation'. In 1980 Duple produced just over 800 bodies for the UK market despite the encouraging rise in the previous year, although new versions of the Dominant body were planned for 1981. Rising unemployment due to a recession that started in the early part of the decade meant that the numbers travelling on coach trips was

rapidly diminishing, which had a knock on effect on the ordering of new coaches. A growing trend towards heavier duty chassis that had been found to be more reliable for the high mileage and fast speeds of the motorway caused the market for light coach chassis to collapse suddenly in 1981. Duple's 1981 output crashed to just over 500 bodies, which resulted in a reduction in the workforce. The following year it dropped to under 500, with the imports of foreign makes, such as Bova, Van Hool and Jonckheere beginning to make inroads into the UK market, although two more new body designs - the Laser and the Caribbean were introduced. This did little to halt the slide in production and by 1983 Duple output was down to just 340 bodies. In June 1983 Duple was sold to the Hestair group, which had already acquired the long established business of Dennis Brothers of Guildford. Duple was re-named Hestair Duple. The business struggled along for another few years, but the deregulation of bus services in 1986 caused uncertainty amongst bus operators and as a result little investment in new vehicles was made. By 1988 Duple's output was just 250 bodies and in November Hestair announced that they were selling the Duple business to a management buyout team. It was stated that Hestair had put £14 million into Duple over a period of five years, of which £10 million was to cover accrued losses. The new owners operated under the name Trinity Holdings, but, in July 1989, it was announced that they had decided to close down the Duple bodybuilding operation, selling the manufacturing rights to rivals Plaxton and the Duple body designs to the Carlyle Group, thus ending 70 years of Duple Motor Bodies Limited.



United Services BMX597B was a Leyland PSU3/3R 'Leopard' with Duple 'Continental' C51F coachwork, new in 6/1964. (Richard Simons).



Introduced in 1964 was the Duple 'Commander' coachwork, seen here on XVB466G, a 1969 Leyland PSU3/3R 'Leopard' chassis of Black & White. (Richard Simons).



GPH2V was a 1980 Volvo B58-61 with Duple 'Dominant' C49F coachwork new to London Country as their No. DV2. (Alan Snatt).

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Additional information, corrections and photographs are always welcome.
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