

Stewart & sons

COACHES



In October this year the Stewart family celebrates 65 years of operation in Bundaberg - making them one of the longest consecutively owned bus companies in Australia. Although their business in Bundaberg commenced during October 1948, their family's involvement in buses extends back even earlier to Cairns in North Queensland, where Matthew and Evelyn Stewart purchased the 'Wattle Bus Service' circa 1937. Originally cane farmers, the Stewarts purchased the one-bus operation which operated a mixed town and schools run servicing Digger, Sheridan and Lake Streets in the city during the week with hourly services to the picture theatre on Saturday nights and church runs on Sunday nights. An International, which came with the business, was fleetingly used until the delivery of a 27-seat Watt Brothers bodied Maple Leaf during 1937.



The business was operated for approximately two years until it was sold to a Mr Watkins - as Matthew returned to contract building. The Stewarts remained in Cairns until relocating further south to Brisbane during March 1942, due to the imminent threat of a Japanese invasion during World War II. Upon their arrival in Brisbane, Matthew secured employment building railcars at Evan Deakin - while eldest son Ray undertook an apprenticeship watchmaking and youngest son Les remained in school. Around 1944, the Stewarts bought back into buses with the purchase of the Yeronga Fire Station to Oxley Meatworks run from a Mr E. Parker. The service provided pivotal access in the areas between the Ipswich and South Coast rail lines and was operated by

TOP: The Stewarts first new vehicle was this 1937 Maple Leaf during their time operating the Wattle Bus Service in Cairns. (Les Stewart)

MIDDLE: Inherited in the takeover from Frank Jorgensen was this Chevrolet with a body believed to have come from Ipswich. (Les Stewart)

BOTTOM: Supplied to C. Meredith of Cooroy in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland was this Austin dating from 1960. (Ian Lynas)





This bonneted Bedford JC was built new to Jim Gibbs of Brooweena, near Maryborough during 1962. (Ian Lynas)

a 1934 Dodge with unknown body. Akin to their former business in Cairns, the south-Brisbane based run was operated by the family for approximately two years when it was on-sold to a Mr M. Spence around 1946. Prior to selling out, Matthew had momentarily shown interest in the nearby run of Thomas Findlay from Tarragindi and Ekibin to City - but decided against the purchase due to the inevitable takeover by the Brisbane

City Council. Following this Matthew moved onto a job at boat builders Norman Wright while Les studied to be an accountant. While still residing in Brisbane the Stewarts were notified of a six-bus business for sale in Bundaberg - which they later purchased on 8 October 1948 from proprietor Frank Jorgensen.

The business from Jorgensen primarily conveyed workers from the town to nearby South Kolan and Elliot Heads,

with one bus operating a run each. Five vehicles ran to South Kolan for cane cutters, field workers, mill workers and shift workers - while the sixth bus operated a combined shoppers and workers service to Elliot Heads. The vehicles were regularly used after hours for services to the picture theatre and ferrying passengers to dances at night. The fleet inherited from Jorgensen typified the era and consisted of:



The sixth vehicle constructed for the Stewart fleet was this 49-seat AEC Reliance 470 during 1961. (Ian Lynas)

a 1946 Charles Hope bodied International KB5, two mid-40s Gardiner bodies on Ford V8 and International K5 chassis, a 1940 Watt Brothers bodied International D300 plus a Chevrolet and Austin with unknown bodies.

Almost immediately after taking over from Jorgensen, the Stewarts realised the need for a backup vehicle and consequently purchased a 1943 Chevrolet/Watt from the Western Toowoomba Bus Service - which brought the fleet to seven. This was soon followed by the acquisition of a 1944 International KS5 from the Brisbane City Council during December 1948. By 2 February 1949, the Stewarts officially registered the trading name 'Stewart and Sons Coaches'

which reflected equal ownership of the business by Matthew and Evelyn and their sons Ray and Les.

After inheriting a completely wooden-bodied fleet from Jorgensen, the Stewarts soon realised that full-metal bodies were more suitable and subsequently undertook their own rebodding of the ex-BCC International KS5 during 1951. The job which was single handedly accomplished by Ray at the local blacksmith, involved the removal of its former wooden body from the Watt Brothers. Following on from the success of this prototype, a second hand International truck chassis was purchased and retrofitted with another body by Ray during early 1952. These early bodies were badged 'R.E.L.M'

- an acronym for each member of family: Ray, Evelyn, Les and Matthew. Later that year Les was approached by a Mr Losche who admired how well his custom built vehicles held up on corrugated roads and wished to acquire one for his bus service in Kingaroy. Built upon a Ford chassis and delivered during January 1953, the first vehicle for another operator foreshadowed the beginning of a successful body building operation throughout the next three decades.

The early-50s also witnessed an expansion of their operation to Moore Park, when a combined shoppers service and school run began operating to the town north of Bundaberg. The service unavoidably ceased c1955, when significant



flooding prevented the service from operating. Concurrent fleet development occurred with three Stewart bodied vehicles on Commer and International chassis as Les swiftly learned from his brother Ray before taking over all bodying henceforth. Around 1957, the brother of Mr Losche in Kingaroy revived the former run to Moore Park until he went broke about three years later which prompted the Transport Department to tender. The Stewarts were ultimately successful in acquiring the service which recommenced operation during the early 1960s. As patronage on their workers services to South Kolan and Elliot Heads slowly dispersed due to the evolution of car transport, the Queensland Government timely invited the Stewarts to commence school services to these

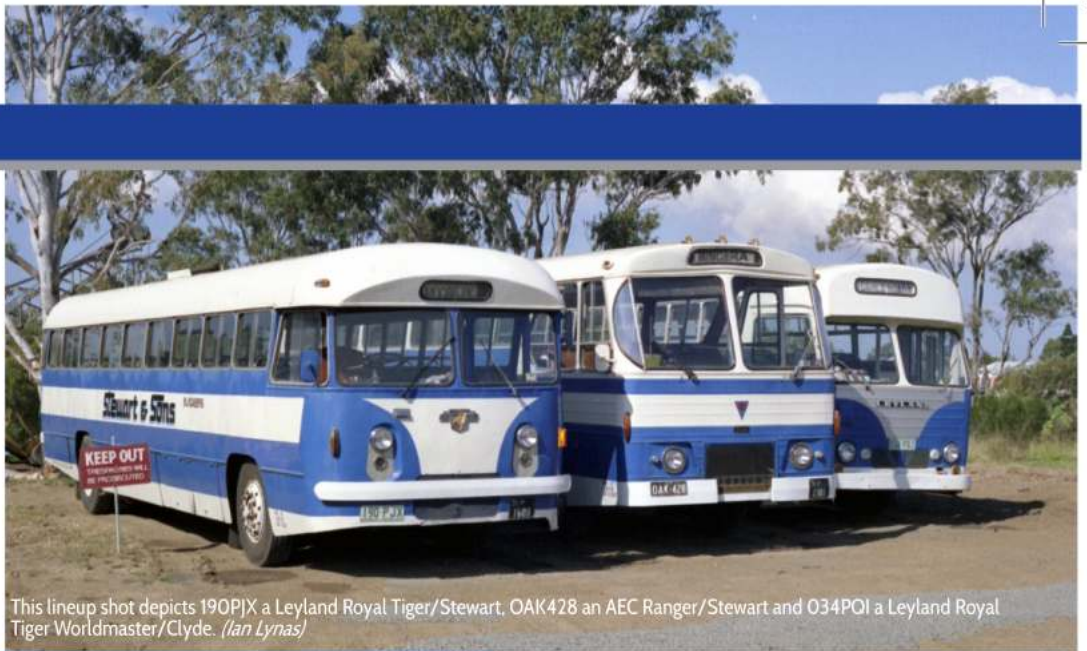


MAIN: One of five vehicles purchased from the Brisbane City Council to date is this Charles Hope bodied AEC Regal III, ex BCC (94) (Ian Lynas)

TOP RIGHT: NXN229 was one of three second hand chassis purchased from Lancashire in England during 1964. (Ian Lynas)

towns with free travel afforded to primary students who lived more than two miles and secondary students who lived more than three miles from their nearest schools. Passenger services from South Kolan and Elliot Heads to Bundaberg still operated in between the school services where patronage accordingly justified.

From the late-50s through to the early-60s, the Stewarts began receiving regular orders for buses on a variety of chassis including AEC, Austin, Bedford and Ford from operators at Gayndah, Hervey Bay and Kingaroy and even as far south as Strathpine. These were shortly followed by their first government order from



This lineup shot depicts 190PJX a Leyland Royal Tiger/Stewart, OAK428 an AEC Ranger/Stewart and 034PQI a Leyland Royal Tiger Worldmaster/Clyde. (Ian Lynas)



AEC chassis were particularly favoured by the Stewarts with two such units pictured here during 1989. (Ian Lynas)

the Rockhampton City Council for three 29-seaters on Albion Nimbus NS3AN chassis during 1964. In the same year Les imported three second hand chassis from Lancashire in England for bodying into his own fleet. These vehicles on AEC and Leyland chassis remained stalwarts of the fleet across the next twenty years. The Stewart bodies up to this period carried a distinctive bulbous design before they were remoulded with front headers sourced from a Brisbane business who supplied numerous builders, including Denning. This change in design was the result of an order from Redline Coaches in Brisbane during 1964 to construct four Denning look-a-like coaches due to high demand at the Brisbane body builder.



Built in 1975 for their school services was this 53-seat AEC Mandator which operated for over twenty years. (Ian Lynas)

Without any assistance or components whatsoever from Denning, Les successfully constructed four almost identical coaches for Redline owner Rex Law between 1964 and 1965. By far the greatest order received in their tenure as body builders was from Austin around September 1967 who required seven school buses delivered by Christmas that year. Despite this mammoth task which involved countless long days and nights within a three-month period, the vehicles were delivered on time and ready for the following school year. The following decade was even busier with a variety of vehicles built for operators in Gin Gin, Maleny and as far north as Millaa Millaa in the Atherton Tablelands. British-sourced chassis was



again the choice for these builds which comprised of Albion Vikings, Bedford VAMs and Leyland Terriers. In between orders the Stewarts would build anything that came their way which included boats from the expertise Matthew gained at Norman Wright in Brisbane. The Stewarts also completed several refurbishments which included work on an Ansair Flexible Clipper during the mid-70s for Capricorn Coach Lines of Mount Morgan. As the Clipper was of monocoque construction (body and chassis fabricated together) only half of the vehicle was able to be repainted before being fitted with a new front. The family business welcomed its third generation during 1974 as Les was joined by his son Graham who commenced a body building apprenticeship at the age of 16. In 1975, Les received an order from Peter West to

TOP: Built in June 1979 was this AEC Reliance with 49 coach seats. *(Vic Hayes)*

MIDDLE: The last vehicle constructed by Stewart & Sons was a rebody on this three-axle RFW chassis which previously carried a Custom Coaches body. *(Tony Winstone)*

BOTTOM: The second last vehicle built was this MAN SR280 coach which had front and back moulds supplied by MAN. *(Nick Wilson)*





Purchased from the Brisbane City Council was this Denning bodied MAN SL200 which had its rear door removed to increase seating capacity to 44 passengers. (Leon Sharpe)



This Mercedes Benz LO815 low floor was bought from Custom Coaches during 2006 to operate the Moore Park to Elliot Heads service. (Matt Browne)

build a replica Superior body on Bedford YRT3 chassis for his Kangaroo Line business near Caboolture. As West wanted a particular body style Superior had ceased producing, Superior sent up front and rear header moulds to Bundaberg as a flawless replica was constructed during 1975.

Population growth during this period saw the Elliot Heads school run split into three services with new runs servicing nearby Coral Cove and Innes Park. Equal ownership of the business transferred over to Ray and Les after the loss of their father Matthew in 1986 and their mother Evelyn a decade earlier. The Stewarts manufacturing division suffered a significant decline in orders during the 1980s, primarily because of recently imposed age restrictions in New South Wales which flooded the market with inexpensive second hand vehicles. This resulted in only a handful of vehicles being constructed during this period for customers in Gladstone, Wondai and Julattan – with their last complete body built on a three-axle RFW chassis for their coach fleet during January 1988. Later that year Graham's wife Julie became the first female Stewart to work in the business as she assumed an administration role in day-to-day operations.

During the 1990s another school run began as Bundaberg North High School requested a run to Tantitha Lagoon servicing the northside of the river. Second hand vehicles were more commonly acquired as the charter fleet expanded with the addition of an Austral Tourmaster and another new MAN coach – this time with Coach Design body. This affinity with MAN componentry continued with the purchase of three CAC bodied MAN SL200s from the Haidleys in Warwick during December 1995. Articulated buses were operated for the first time during 1999, as a Volvo B10ML and MAN SG192 with Fuji and Goppell bodies were purchased for their populated school services.

By the end of that year the family business was split into two – as Ray moved to his own facility where he continued his successful steel fabrication and crane hire business which had



Delivered in 2005 was (11) 0311SI a MAN 18.280 with NCBC "Protege" body. (Leon Sharpe)

been operating under the name of 'Stewart and Sons Steel'. The Stewarts welcomed their fourth generation during 2002 as Graham and Julie's son Ryan commenced a body building apprenticeship. Urban services were fleetingly operated between school times up to this period before Queensland Transport introduced a permanent service from Moore Park to Elliot Heads during August 2005.

A Mercedes Benz LO815 low floor was soon purchased in 2006 from Custom Coaches to work the 'Village to Town' service which has grown in patronage ever since the introduction of Qconnect in June 2008. Frequent vehicle replacement has since taken place as a total of nine new MAN 18.280/290 school buses have entered the fleet to date, with Northcoast bodies particularly favoured.

On 16 July 2012, the Stewarts purchased the Childers to Bundaberg private school service from Gary Griffith with his Nambucca bodied Leyland Tiger, which has brought their fleet to a total of 19 vehicles. The family-business is now in safe hands with Graham as Engineering Manager and Julie as Operations Manager, as the Stewarts celebrate 65 years of operation in Bundaberg.



(10) 077GNR is one of two Fuji artics on Volvo B10ML chassis that were purchased to operate highly-populated school services. (Leon Sharpe)

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