

Birmingham City Transport Guy Arab No 2548 Restoration Report 2011



2548 passing Aston Hall on Monday 30th May 2011 on its first public service journey since withdrawal from Hockley Garage in April 1972. Photo by Dave Sanders

Birmingham City Transport Guy Arab No 2548 Restoration Report 2011 – The Final Chapter

By Rob Handford

As another year started, the main jobs remaining in the epic restoration of 2548 involved paint. With the winter of 2010/11 still holding the museum in its icy grip, the initial full flat down of external paintwork was completed over the first weekend of the year. With paintshop temperatures just above freezing, it was initially too cold to proceed with painting of the outside of the bus, so Mick Evans and I turned our attention to the dreaded job of finishing the upper saloon ceiling. As this was the third attempt at applying a final coat of gloss, we did not want to repeat the pain and stress of having to flat it all back if we failed to get it right. Obtaining a good finish under a horizontal surface of such size is not easy, so careful preparation was required. With the use of a fan heater the upper saloon was warmed up to about 12c. Paint was mixed in the proportions required with varnish and conditioner before the tin was heated in a bucket of boiling water. The contents were then decanted into a paint tray. The ceiling, which I had flatted back in November 2010, was washed off with methylated spirit and then wiped over with a tack-cloth to get rid of any dust. With Mick applying paint by roller, I laid it all off with a good quality brush. Two hours of concentrated effort later and, at last, we got the result we wanted and finally 'put that job to bed'!

This was just in time for filming by the BBC for the 'Inside Out' programme and it enabled us to remove all the masking and dust covers and tidy out the interior of the bus ready for the arrival of the film crew. In the event, the upper saloon did not feature in the programme, but the rest of the bus was shown to good effect, if only briefly! 2548 and yours truly starred in a feature on the No. 11 Outer Circle route, screened on 31st January, the link being that 2548 would have been used on the route between 1950 and 1968 when allocated to Quinton, but in any case, our bus represented the many BCT Guys that were an every-day sight on the route between 1950 and 1977.

With the ceiling painted, the way was now clear to complete fitting out of the upper saloon after painting of the seat support blocks in brown gloss. Ceiling mounted stainless steel vent grilles were fitted followed by the re-fitting of the stanchion poles and the seats which gradually returned from Martin Wilkins, the upholsterer. Adjustments to seat height were made by using packing pieces under the feet which are bolted to the body-side seat rails. My brother John had carefully cut the packing pieces from lino off-cuts in readiness. The rearmost seat, a triple bench seat, gave us some problems when it was discovered that the backrest squab back-board was the wrong shape for the frame. This was the same squab that came out of the frame, which itself had been salvaged from scrapped sister vehicle 2607 (JOJ 607) because the one from 2548 had been removed during conversion to Travelcard promotions bus. However, at the time the seat was dismantled for restoration, we had not taken note of just what a poor fit it must have been, so Mick and I had to strip back some of the newly applied upholstery and file and sand the top corners of the wooden backboard to a radius that would fit into the frame. I then returned the seat to Martin for him to reshape the upholstery and fix it to the new profile.

By 7th February all the magnificently upholstered seats were in place in the upper saloon and over the next week all the stainless steel protector plates were fitted to the backs on the gangway-side top corners along with match strikers and the brackets that secure the stanchion rails to the seats. With the fitting of the small grab handle on the rear of the single seat at the top of the stairs, the upper saloon was complete at last, for the first time in nearly forty years!

Meanwhile the problem of low temperatures had been solved by getting a gas fitter to repair the long-defunct heater unit that feeds the paintshop. With this back in action, we could quickly warm the area enough for painting to proceed apace. With Mick and I once again adopting the roller and brush method on the larger panels, application of matt khaki green on the roof was completed by the end of January before cream or blue undercoat was applied as

required to the remainder of the exterior. The plywood panel on the underside of the canopy over the bonnet, although fitted new as part of the restoration, was in need of extra preparation, having been installed in a bit of a hurry many years ago when there were previous threats of eviction of the museum from the building. This panel was taken back down and two coats of oil filler applied and flatted to hide any signs of wood grain or rough planing marks before building up to gloss cream. Whilst off the bus, the opportunity was taken to improve protection of the exposed underside of the upper saloon floor boards. My brother Michael's friend and new recruit to the team, June Corney, set about sanding back the woodwork and wire brushing the metalwork before applying a coat of grey primer. Once this task was completed, the freshly restored panel was sealed back in place.



June Corney preparing the underside of the upper saloon floorboards for painting, March 2011

June has become a regular and welcome helper, making the journey from Portsmouth, sometimes bearing homemade cakes!

On the rest of the bus, following on from undercoat, paint was applied in accordance with BCT specification, the next application being a mix of undercoat and gloss. With this coat, the bus took on a lustre which revealed numerous small dips and dents that were either missed during the extensive preparation in the 1990's or had been acquired since. These I painted over with oil filler and flatted back to a smooth surface ready for the next coat made up of straight gloss. The stage was reached by 8th March that the all the blue and cream parts of the bus were uniformly coated in gleaming BCT colours.

A task not related to painting undertaken at this time was the installation of more powerful halogen head lamps into the original fittings. When on test runs during the hours of darkness in autumn 2010, the view of the road ahead was very poorly illuminated so Mick Evans skilfully produced mounting plates for the modern bulbs, thus giving a far more effective beam. The driver will now have a better chance of seeing where he is going in the face of today's dazzlingly bright car headlights.

Back on the painting front, with the bus in full gloss (except for the roof, of course) the arduous task of flatted back the exterior then started for a fourth time, ready for the next coat, a mix of gloss and varnish. At the end of March and beginning of April I took extended leave from work to push ahead with the subsequent sessions of flatted and painting required, each coat taking approximately eleven man-days to prepare for and apply. At this stage, after months of relentless effort, I was glad of additional assistance with flatted from Chris Ash, John Green, Matthew Parker, June Corney and my brother Michael. Even our Quarter Master and 'supervisor' Robert Day was seen to relinquish his usual role and set about a couple of panels with wet & dry paper!!

Once the mixed gloss & varnish coat was completed, I was ready to start applying transfers after the panels concerned had, once again, been flatted back. The fleet numbers, coats of arms, unladen weight and other general information signs were affixed, all in accordance with how the bus would have looked in the 1960's. With the transfers being over forty years old, great care was required to ensure they did not disintegrate, and some minor difficulties were encountered which were put right with judicious spots of paint which should not be visible without close examination.

Along with this task, one of the final steps in the finishing of 2548 was to have a dramatic affect on her appearance and identity – the signwriting of a full set of authentic advertisements.

We know from records and photographs that 2548 carried an advert for Haig Scotch Whisky on the nearside between 1964 and 1971 and that on the offside between 1966 and 1968 there was one for the Co-operative. For the sake of authenticity, it was decided to turn out the bus once again with these adverts. We have no record of what was carried on the rear, but a very common advert between 1962 and 1969 was one created as a result of a competition amongst BCT staff to find a catchy slogan to publicise Birmingham's bus services. The advert read: 'Avoid the race for car park space – *Take a Bus* – to any place'. This was chosen for the upper rear position and an amusing cartoon style Esso advert dating from 1963 was selected for the lower position.

In the last week of March, with the help of colour photos kindly supplied by Derek Potter and archive facsimile drawings from the museum's own collection, signwriter Steve Evans began his highly skilled work painting these period pieces on the background base colours which had been prepared for him. Steve completed his work on the adverts by mid-April before going on to apply the legal lettering in gold leaf below the coat of arms on the nearside, this being the only exterior transfer we did not have in our collection.



Steve Evans putting the finishing touches to the lower rear advertisement, 15th April 2011

The transfers and Steve's works of art brought 2548 to life in a way that exceeded expectations and gave impetus for the last push to complete the project. The final flattening back of paintwork was completed over Easter weekend in readiness for me to apply the varnish top coat. Meticulous preparation was required as dust had to be kept to an absolute minimum, so June Corney hoovered and wiped over the roof and cleaned down all the trestles that would be needed during the process. As an added precaution, when varnishing was in progress, the paintshop floor was kept wet.

Application of the finishing coat was not without its problems as any slight blemish or foreign paint spot was emphasised as soon as it was varnished and despite all the preparation, dust still managed to spoil the finish on a number of panels, so some areas had to be re-coated, sometimes twice.

I spent most of my visits during the month of May working alone in the paintshop, all other comers being 'banished' in order to reduce any risk of stirring up dust. Only when I reached the point of coating the large lower blue panels did I request the help of Mick Evans to apply varnish by roller, ready for me to 'lay off' as quickly as possible. The process was completed by the last week of the month and once again I was able to welcome our regular band of workers to join in the final stages of the restoration. Mick stripped down and overhauled the cab door latch so that it now closes with a satisfying clunk and the handle no longer has a tired sag. He, Keith Ball and I also overcame the reluctance of the vacuum brake light switch to work until the driver was almost standing on the pedal. After removing and dismantling the switch, a piece of tyre inner tube was used to form a new diaphragm, replacing the old and inflexible component previously in place. The light now illuminates as required, with only a slight application of the brakes. My long-suffering brother, Michael, took on the unenviable task of dealing with the numerous sections of leathercloth which were still trying to part company with the inside of both saloons, super-glue being the solution in most cases.

The final painting-related jobs were completed, such as scraping over-painting from windows, preparing and coating wheel rims and guard rails with gloss black and sprucing up the tyres with tyre paint, before the bus emerged from the paintshop on the last Thursday in May in order to go on the pit. With materials kindly supplied by Paul Hodgkins, we replaced all fuel hoses. All the prop shaft bolts were checked for security and body mounting bolts, which required further pulling down after the initial test running in autumn 2010, were tightened.

With that, a successful test run to Erdington and back signalled that the epic task of turning our BCT Guy from a tatty and battered WMPTE cast-off into a pristine and fully overhauled machine was at an end.

May 30th marked the culmination of over 20,000 hours of dedication and hard work, when the Deputy Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Len Gregory, helped us unveil the finished product to the public at large when he cut the ribbon strung across the paintshop door allowing 2548 to emerge into the daylight (and rain!) and the start of a whole new chapter in her life.

I would like to conclude this very last restoration report by acknowledging the sterling efforts and support given by so many people. A total of 34 have got their hands dirty working on 2548 since the initial stages of restoration back in 1982. Their contributions have varied from a few hours to many hundreds of hours, but each one has played a part. Others have generously donated parts or documents which have contributed to the quality and accuracy of the restoration. Many have assisted with technical advice or information on the correct specification for the 1960's livery and condition. The Kithead Trust at Droitwich has been an absolute goldmine of information on the detailed history of 2548 and her sister vehicles, including original specification and construction details, modifications and tests carried out, livery changes, garage allocations and visits to works. Thank goodness for the likes of Peter Jaques and Derek Potter who rescued and conserved much of BCT's incredibly thorough records when they were being discarded. As a result I have had the pleasure of spending many hours at Droitwich researching the life of those illustrious buses.

The financial means to continue the work throughout has been provided by the monthly contributions of the 2548 Group shareholders and income from the sales stand, most of our stock being generously donated by supporters, to whom we are extremely grateful.

It should not be forgotten that there is far more to the restoration than the work carried out at the museum. Many hours have been spent obtaining and storing the many spares required (its a good job my house has a sturdy, boarded loft!), tracing materials or finding manufacturers for items we did not have. In the latter tasks, the efforts of Robert Day must be acknowledged. He has spent many hours trawling the internet for suppliers or finding

reputable firms through the extensive network of contacts we have built up. Before the days of the internet, it was also often a case of us going through the Yellow Pages and making numerous phone calls.

Owners of other Birmingham Standards have assisted by selling or donating items to us. In some cases it has been necessary to club together with these owners to allow more economical bulk production of materials such as moquette and moulded rubber for radiator seals, shock absorber mountings and wheel arch panel fixings.

Once producers have been chosen, much chasing up has usually been required, followed by journeys to various parts of the country to check on manufacturing or deal with problems that needed face-to-face contact.

Many of the parts restored covered far more miles than their parent bus did in the two decades up to its return to the road, going back and forth between our various homes and the museum or Tower Farm where the facilities or machines not available at Witton could be used. In the years before 2003, when access to the museum was limited, reasonable progress was only possible by transporting many items away for repair and restoration.

We have been very fortunate to have the use of such good facilities at Witton and the assistance of the museum and its Directors in enabling this project to come to a successful conclusion must be recognised. Long may the museum continue providing the means to bring our transport heritage to life.

Unfortunately, we have lost some dear friends and contributors along the way. How sad it is that former BCT coach painter Don Green is no longer with us to see the finish that his advice and encouragement helped us to achieve. I would have loved to show ardent BCT enthusiast and former BCT driver Stan Palmer the seating, lovingly restored to the standard he doubtless achieved, when, as an upholsterer, he made up 2548's cab seat at the Metro-Cammell factory in 1950. My ambition had always been to take the completed bus to show to Phil Taylor at his home and business in Quinton, where I once worked. He made a generous financial contribution towards purchase of the bus in 1979, so without his help I may not have been writing this way about 2548 now.

I hope they are all looking down approvingly!



Some of the restoration team with the Deputy Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Len Gregory on 30th May 2011: Steve Draper, Justin Price, John Green, Mick Evans, Keith Ball, June Corney, Matthew Parker, Michael Handford, Rob Handford, Robert Day, Steve Evans and John Handford. Photo by John Everill