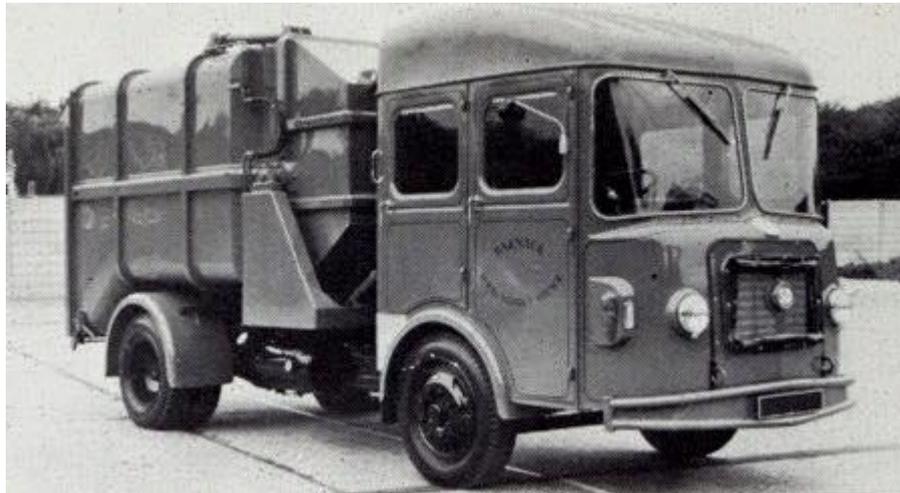


A DEMONSTRATOR DRIVER REMEMBERS HIS LIFE AT S&D 1966 to 1968.

OWEN WHITEHAND

Writes to your Editor.



A 'T' Type Fore & Aft Tipper from the 1960's. Photo sent in by Nick Davis.

Owen Whitehand was brought up on a farm and, after a few years in the Merchant Navy, worked for a company called Monks, as a Plant Mechanic/driver, helping to build the, then, new A1M that stretched from Hatfield to Stotfold junction.

In June 1966 he joined SD as a demonstrator driver after being interviewed by Basil Barber, the Assistant Sales Manager, and following a test drive in one of the largest vehicles, which he passed and he started on the following Monday.

On his first day he was assigned to go out with another driver from Baldock called John Pearson. "He would 'show me the ropes' and supervise my driving. We got on well and enjoyed one another's company. We stayed friends, along with his then fiancée, Eileen, until his death two years ago. After a week, I was sent out on a demonstration in a Fore and Aft tipper to Wales on my own. I still had a lot to learn but it went well. I had left Letchworth on the Monday and after 3 days demonstrating, returned on the Friday. This was normal for most demonstrations in England, but if demonstrating in Scotland, return would be on Saturday."

But on his return Owen was in for a shock! "On my return, I was summoned to Mr Barber's office where I was informed that, as I was not 21yrs old (5 weeks short) I was not allowed to drive the trucks. He then queried how had I been driving the trucks for Monks that I had told him about? Until then, it had not occurred to me, but I could drive the Monks trucks because the motorway wasn't on the public highway! He informed me that, until I was 21 I

would be riding 'shotgun' with the other demo drivers. These included John Pearson, and Gilbert Finch.

Gilbert specialised in the Gully Emptiers and smoked sweet smelling Clan tobacco in his pipe, probably helped with the smell on occasions! After my birthday, I was far more informed when they let me out on my own again!"



A 1969/70 'T' type Gully emptier.

Photo sent in by Mike Parrish.

"Being a Demonstrator Driver could be a very lonely, but interesting, life - although it was the '60's and I was 21! We had a very generous expense allowance but, as we demonstrated all over the UK we had no time back in Letchworth to start, or carry on, a serious relationship.

Whilst most of the vehicles were built on SD's own chassis, they would also build on others such as Bedfords etc. Sometimes when we were not demonstrating or delivering new ones, we had to take open chassis cabs to, I think, Chesterfield. If you ever saw, in the old days, someone, driving just a truck chassis and windscreen, it could have been me. They were treacherous, especially in wet or icy weather. If one braked too sharply, one could spin as most of the weight was in the front engine area. This was before the days of most motorways.

A lot of the vehicles had a Leyland engine, coupled to a David Brown crash gearbox. These boxes were so tight that one, literally, had to kick it between gears. One could tell other SD Demo Drivers by the fact that they always wore their wristwatches on their right arm. This was because, the shock of banging the gearstick into gear every so often, would break the watches. The crash box was also the test one had to perform well with on the job interview to be a Demo Driver!.

I cannot remember ever washing the trucks down, was there someone else employed to do that???

On Monday mornings I was always in a hurry to leave the works because the trucks, especially the new ones, were governed down to about 40mph. This seemed slow, even in those days, but it taught me to keep a heavy vehicle moving. With a crash box, one has to follow the old adage about 'being in the right gear at the right time' so, if I could keep the truck moving at a constant speed by slowing slightly as I approached traffic lights, for example, and was still rolling when they went to green, it was far quicker than having to stop and go through all the gears again. If I could average 40mph for 10hrs I could be near Edinburgh by the end of the day.

When I was going to Scotland, I normally overnighed near Scotch Corner if I was going up the East side. If on the West side, it was over Brough (where I got snowbound in the transport cafe on a couple of occasions,) and overnighed in Penrith.

If anyone is wondering about the 10hr drive to Scotland, we were on Trade Plates and so didn't seem to have to comply with Drivers' Hours etc. Or at least I cannot remember ever filling in a log book? (It was before the days of the tachograph).

I took over driving the low-loader (pictured in the photo on the left from the late Bob Edlin's collection) from, I think, John Pearson when he left SD to get married.

The Commer 2 stroke low-loader truck had the exhaust running parallel with and under the front bumper in the same way tankers have them and, when fully loaded, the truck barked like hell. [The truck was coupled to a Hands 10 ton knock out axle trailer type USLMID] To load anything, I had to put two step jacks under the rear of the trailer, just in front of the rear wheels, and jack them up with a 6 foot bar. Then undo the 2 pins that held the rear wheel combination to the body, plus the air and electrical connections, and then roll the joined together 4 wheels out of the way. (This took a great deal of strength, doing this by yourself, especially if you were parked on anything less than level ground - and this was most of the time!) Then lower the body and connect the ramps. Drive the forklift on and then reverse the procedure. It kept me fit lifting, sometimes, nearly 20 tons! Thank goodness I was a big lad!

In the short time I drove the low-loader, I demonstrated Forklift trucks to the likes of Fort Dunlop and numerous other clients. But most memorable was taking, I believe, an experimental Defiant forklift truck between Letchworth and the test track at Chobham.

I was led to believe that it was for an aircraft carrier when containerisation was first appearing on the scene. The truck's fork jib had to be short enough to get between the decks but strong enough to lift a full container. I made the journey in the barking Commer, around the London North Circular a number of times. Containers were a new thing and the forklift had to carry heavy, full, containers between the decks, under the flight deck of, I think, the Ark Royal, in very confined spaces. This meant a very short powerful jib, wide wheels (for balance in rough seas) and a very heavy counter weight.

I must have made, at least, five journeys."

Editor's Note:- The Ministry of Defence were good customers for both Freightlifter and Defiant forklift trucks. An Ex- M.O.D Defiant in shown below. It is interesting that this has a non-telescopic mast.

A CHANGE OF DIRECTION.





THE ICKNIELD WAY WORKS.

Demonstrator Drivers spent very little time at SD's main works in Icknield Way, which is pictured above in an aerial photo with the new 1969 office block to the left of the main offices, and Owen and I have been unable to reconcile our memories. We both have memories of the high wall that fronted Icknield Way and which I photographed in November 2011 since some of it remains.



was in the Yard between the office block and the West Works further to the right in the photo.

I have also had to differ with Owen over the expression SPV in that so far as my information goes this term was first used in 1974 after forklift production ceased. Owen has written:- "All the Demo vehicles and the low loader were parked up the wide alleyway between the two works, behind two large steel gates, to the left of the offices. The small drivers' room was just inside these gates, built into the brick wall to the right of these gates. To the left of these gates was the SPV section. Here it was that the Defiant forklift truck for the Admiralty was modified after each trip to Chobham. I got the impression that WHATEVER the customer wanted, SD would build it!"

Owen remained a demonstrator driver until 1968 when he left to become a freelance driver and eventually formed his own transport company.

I was fascinated by Owen's recollections and I think my readers will be too.

Thank you Owen for sharing this with us.

Brian Carpenter – Editor.

I think the Demonstrator Drivers will have been based in the yard between the West Works and the part occupied by the Paint Shop and Joiners Shop (at the extreme left in the photo) at the time I worked at S&D. But Owen believes it