

SD – SHELVOKE & DREWRY

“I REALLY WAS THERE ALSO”

In recent issues of Vintage Roadscene Malcolm Bates Shelvoke & Drewry's former Publicity Manager has given a personal account of the years he spent with the company. Here **Brian Carpenter** gives a different perspective on the Letchworth Garden City based manufacturer.



Above: It's June 1953 and nobody could doubt Harry Shelvoke's patriotism as SD's Icknield Way works are decorated for the Coronation. Signwriters more used to deploying their craft on refuse collection vehicles have created a row of crests in celebration of the 2nd June event in the capital.

My first encounter with Shelvoke & Drewry was when my father, a Chartered Accountant who although not employed by the company was SD's Auditor, in the 1952 school Easter holiday took me by train with him on a business visit to the company. When we arrived at Letchworth station we were met by Walter Bunyan, SD's chauffeur in Mr. Shelvoke's pride and joy a Daimler Double Six which still carried small coats of arms on its bodywork of the former owner - The Prince of Wales. After going through reception my father left to conduct his business and someone was found to give me a tour of the works.

I'd known the name 'Shelvoke & Drewry' since as a young boy I'd seen the SD roundel on a somewhat strange looking dustcart. Those I was accustomed to seeing on their weekly collection from our home were side loaders on Karrier chassis - the SD Freighter was very different with an open sided cab and it seemed to have lost its steering wheel. "Your Uncle George worked for the company that made that," my father explained. In fact George had joined SD as an apprentice in 1924 making him one of the first apprentices trained at S&D.



Above:- Brian in 1959 on a College trip to Germany.

From the relative quiet of the reception area a door opened straight into the machine shop, my senses were assaulted by the sounds, smells and noise of lathes, drills, milling machines and so on. On the far side of this part of the factory I was shown engines, gearboxes and axles being assembled, and beyond that the chassis line where about ten 'W' type chassis were in various stages of build.

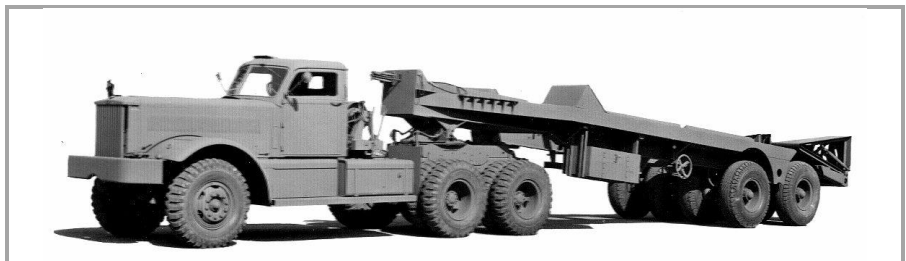
A doorway led into a veritable witches den – the heat treatment room where clever things were done to harden steel components. At the far end four Freightlifter forklift trucks were being assembled. After crossing a wide yard I was into the West Works, having been given a warning to never look at the welders which would damage my eyesight. On an enormous rotating fixture the bodies for the Fore & Aft tipper were being welded, whilst the sheet metal department opposite were busy shaping large sheets of steel. Crossing a further covered yard I was in a very different world where the air was filled with the smells of ash wood being prepared to form the basis of vehicle cabs. The joiners were just one part of the many specialised skilled workers employed by S&D.

In the next department vehicles were being painted, and a sign writer was lettering a fully painted vehicle with the customer's details which could include painting the relevant council's crest. Finally out in the yard I was shown some finished vehicles ready for delivery. By then I'd fallen in love with all I'd seen and knew that this was where I hoped my future lay.

I re-joined my father for lunch which was served in the Board Room. In contrast to all the activity I'd seen in the works the room, which was in the style of a wood panelled baronial hall, made a strong impression on my teenage self. Before we left for the train journey home we were given a demonstration of the capabilities of the new Freightlifter forklift truck in the lower yard. Wooden timbers had been laid across the yard to demonstrate the stability of the truck when driven over these obstacles whilst carrying a load of timber. I'd had no idea that manufacturing carried such wonders and that day changed my life. In the autumn my father took me to the Mechanical Handling Exhibition at Olympia where two Freightlifter Model 82 forklift trucks were on display and I was allowed to operate the controls. Incidentally my Uncle George was also at the exhibition as by now he was the Service Manager at Coventry Climax forklift trucks.



After the Second World War the SD Freighter emerged as the Mk II Freighter one concession to modernity was that it was now provided with a handbrake. This example with a Chelsea type side-loading body was in service in Margate.



War production included converting American Diamond T ballast tractor units to accommodate SD designed semi-trailers for tank transportation. SD developed spring counter balanced loading ramps that could be handled by one man. James Drewry now joint Managing Director at Hands Trailers assisted in the design.



In 1947 the new 'W' type was launched, with conventional steering wheel and gearbox.

So in the autumn of 1953, Coronation year, I arrived at SD's Icknield Way works with my Raleigh bicycle, a brand new boiler suit and a small suitcase to present myself to Mr. Nason of the Inspection Department, and commence my five year apprenticeship as a Mechanical Engineer. This was a route many former and future SD employees took into the company. My indentures were duly signed and in Inspection I learned about measuring tools and how to read drawings as well as learning a lot about factory life. I still consider a good apprenticeship is a sound basis for a career in engineering.

As a young man you soon learn that basically you know nothing. You learn that when every drawing carries a note reading : "If in doubt ask" it really means it. You learn that if you make a mistake you own up to it. The consequences are so much better than trying to hide the error.



Above:- Around 1948 the 'W' type became available with a Fore & Aft tipping body. This is a later version fitted with a Perkins diesel engine which could be specified from 1954.

It hardly seems believable that in 1953 it was only just over thirty years since S&D was founded, that the Second World War had only been over seven years ago and food rationing still existed, that the 'W' type which replaced the SD Freighter had only been in production for five years whilst the Freightlifter heavy duty forklift truck was in its second year of production. But to a teenager time has a different perspective. The Freighter emerged from the War as the Mk II Freighter where one of the claims to modernity was that it had a handbrake. Still tiller controlled and the last one (for St. Helens) was made in 1955. That's over thirty years production of an ingenious new concept for a light lorry. During the war all SD's output was towards the war effort. One interesting contract was to convert American Diamond T ballast tractor units to pull a tank transporter semi-trailer, since Scammell were unable to increase their production to suit the needs of the Army. The first modified Diamond T and semi-trailer were tested in December 1942 and after a successful trial SD received an order for 100 trailers and conversions. SD received a further order for 100 and later a further 20. SD designed a spring balanced loading ramp that amazed the military when it was demonstrated requiring just one man to raise and lower the ramps. James Drewry was involved in the design of the trailer despite having in 1936 moved to Hands Trailers, whose factory was opposite SD's, as Joint Managing Director,

The war enabled the factory to expand into what became the West Works and on my arrival many of the machine tools bore the

message "war finish". The company gained wide knowledge of welding techniques and of hydraulics used in landing gear and undercarriages for aircraft of which over 8,000 were produced.

The 'W' type arrived in 1946/47 and was in most ways a conventional vehicle but built to a very high standard. Grease lubrication for example was centralised with the grease fed through copper pipes so that crawling under the vehicle was eliminated. On delivery the petrol engine had been run on a test bed for many hours so that "running in" was not required. The paint specification for the cab and exterior of the body read:- "One coat lead, four coats filler, one undercoat, one coat enamel, one finishing enamel, one hard varnish, and one coat finishing varnish after lettering and lining had been completed." The three year guarantee covered all parts except tyres and electrics and included free labour and travel, free replacement parts and after three years a free full inspection with any faults rectified. And it is understood that in some instances that guarantee was extended to ten years!

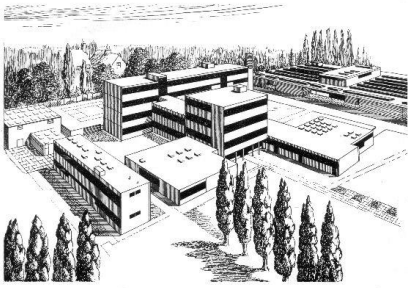
In the early years of production of the 'W' type the Fore & Aft tipping body was introduced. This type of body, a Faun design, had been tried out on the post-war SD Freighter, but now a much larger version was produced under licence from Faun. Other manufacturers produced their own version such as the Dennis Tippax and the Glover, Webb & Liversidge Dual Tip. But SD obtained a substantial part of the market for this type of vehicle. In 1953

around five new chassis were being produced per week.

The standard working week was 44 hours. This meant a daily start at 8.00 am and finishing at 6.00 pm except on Fridays where we finished at 5.00 pm. The Friday finishing time coincided with most of the other factories in Icknield Way where cycling home became rather like the peleton in a cycling race with bicycles four or five abreast across the road.

In January 1954 I was moved into the Machine Shop where I spent two years learning to operate various types of lathes and a grinding machine under production conditions, this was followed by eight months in the Sheet Metal Department, four months on engine test then six months on axle assembly. All the while I was given day release one day per week to attend the North Herts Technical College plus one evening class per week. Then the opportunity to transfer to the newly starting Higher National Diploma course arose and I served a further three years on a "sandwich" course basis with alternate six months periods at college and at the works. The two works periods were spent in the Drawing Office. On completion of the HND course in March 1960 I was employed firstly as a jig & tool draughtsman and then as a production planning engineer deciding how each and every new component was to be produced.

I owe a great debt to Foremen, chargehands, draughtsmen and the many skilled craftsmen who helped to train me.



Above:- An artist's impression of the North Herts Technical College in the Broadway, Letchworth Garden City, with the new buildings opened in 1958.

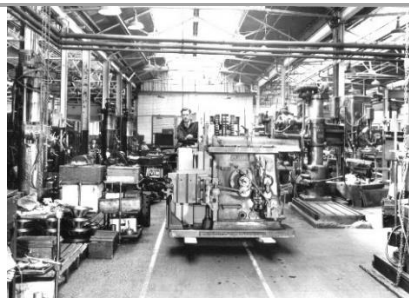
Several new developments took place over the years 1953 to 1960. In 1954 Perkins Diesel engines were offered on the 'W' type in addition to SD's own petrol engine. The Fore & Aft tipper received two further options. The ability to empty bulk bins became available in 1953 and in 1957 the Power Press compression plate gave an additional 50% capacity to the body.

The fork lift truck range was extended with the Model 100 (8 ft. 4 ins. wheelbase compared to the Model 82's 7ft 10 ins.) which permitted an additional 3,000 lbs. to be lifted. In the summer of 1954 the smaller Model 72 appeared and I well remember it being driven through the

Machine Shop for the benefit of the publicity photographer.



Above :- A Freightlifter Model 100 lifts car bodies for British Road Services.

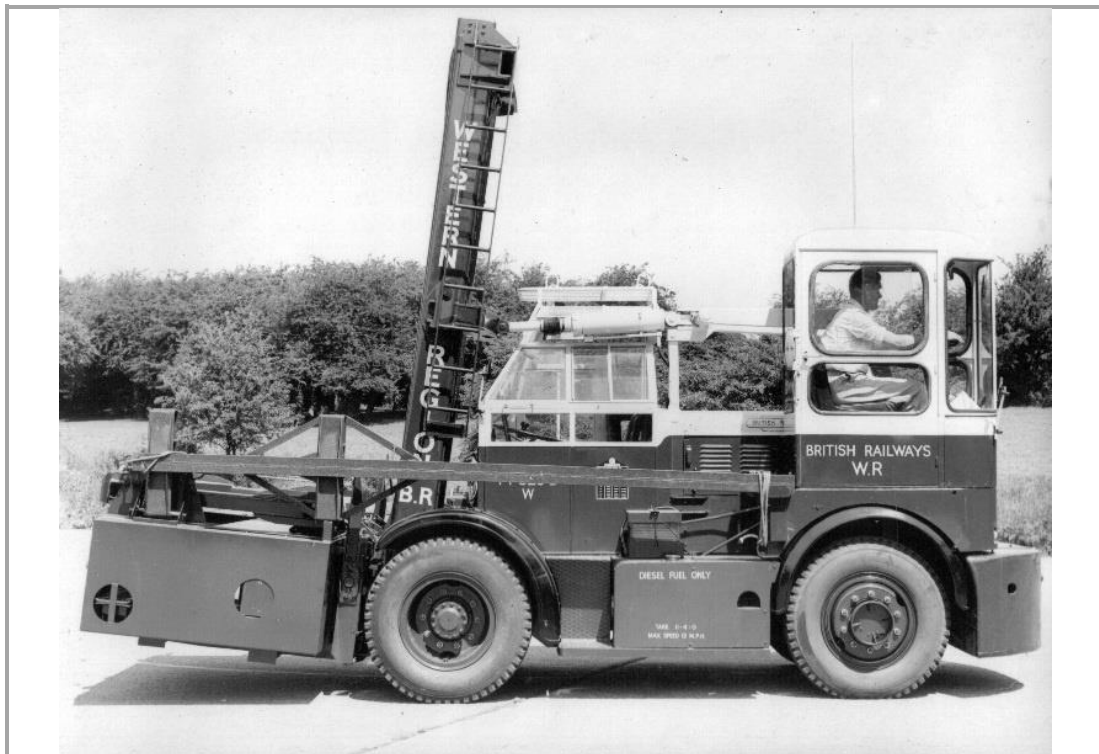


Below left:- The first Model 72 Freightlifter carries a shaping machine through SD's Machine Shop in the summer of 1954

Then in 1957 came the remarkable Model 100 Dualdrive as a result of British Railways Western Region being convicted of driving a vehicle with inadequate visibility for the driver.



Above:- The first Freightlifter Model 82 in production. The photo is captioned :- "First Time Up" March 3rd 1952.



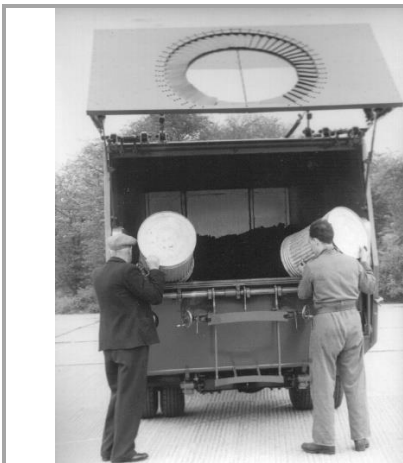
Above:- The Model 100 Freightlifter Dualdrive for British Railways Western Region came with a full complement of lifting devices. All the connections from the driving cab were mechanically operated.



Above :- In 1953 a modified rear door and bin lifting equipment allowed the Fore & Aft tipper to handle bulk waste.



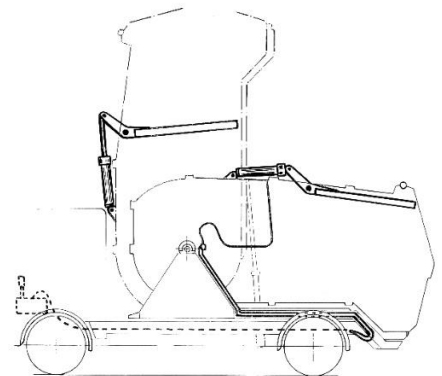
Above :- The Palladin container was popular for commercial premises, flats and apartments. The revision to the SD 'W' type Fore & Aft tipper permitted waste from bulk containers to be collected by the vehicle.



Above:- This photo demonstrates that the Fore & Aft tipper remained suitable for normal waste collection.



Above :- The Power Press plate in the lowered position.



Above :- Diagram showing the operation of the Power Press. With the body in the raised position the plate is lowered to compress the refuse.

In 1955 C.K. Edwards, SD's Chief Engineer since 1937 retired. He was succeeded by John Huggins, who I believe came to SD in the 1950's as part of the design team for the Freightlifter forklift truck. It was well known in the works that the 'W' type was by now showing its age. In 1955 the permitted GVW on two axles had been

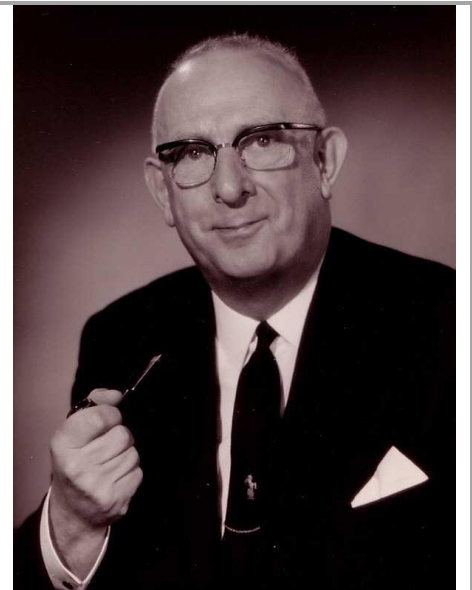
raised from 12 tons to 14 tons the 'W' had a GVW of 9 tons 18 cwt.

Unfortunately John Huggins design for a replacement which was ready for demonstration in 1958 was a disaster and in 1959 Tom Tillson from Dennis came in as Chief Engineer along with Frank Dean as his assistant and who ten years later was to succeed Tom Tillson.

There was a palpable sense of renewed optimism at the Company. The somewhat traditional approach to manufacturing at S&D suited Tom Tillson and he rapidly became popular with his staff. A committed pipe smoker it was said that if you ever wanted to find Tom you could follow the trail of matches until you found him.



Above :- An early TY Pakamatic. Normally the bodies were supplied in un-painted aluminium alloy whilst the cab front and roof demonstrated SD's fibreglass capabilities.



Above :- Thomas Wilson Tillson ("Tom")
A.M.I. Mech E. 1908 - 1982.
Shelvoke & Drewry Chief Engineer
1959 - 1979.

At Christmas 1959 one of the secretaries presented him with a knotted matchbox cover and a large parcel was delivered to his home. On opening the parcel it was found to contain a large log with instructions on how to make your own matchsticks. But on the serious side a new vehicle was soon at the prototype stage - the TY Pakamatic which was announced in 1960.

The wooden framed cab now had a fibreglass front and roof, the SD petrol engine was consigned to history and the body was in shining aluminium alloy. The Pakamatic featured a compression mechanism designed by the remarkable French Fernand Rey who when in charge of

refuse collection for Paris designed his own system for compressing the refuse and founded SITA to produce the bodies for existing vehicles. Built under licence the Pakamatic was an immediate success and the life of the 'W' type was extended in the form of the 'TW' with an improved version of the Fore & Aft tipper body unusually designed by the Head of Jig & Tool design, Bob Edlin and his assistant Arthur (Curly) Warren. Such was the urgency of the new TY that 100 sets were ordered straight away. My own part in all this was to design some of the jigs required to manufacture the new vehicle.

The anticipated demand for the new series of vehicles led the management to have a new building constructed roughly half a mile away from the main works in Black Horse Road Letchworth which became known as No. 2 Factory.

The Pakamatic and the 'T' series of chassis were highly successful and enabled S&D to greatly increase its share of the home market as well as obtaining valuable export orders. The range included a narrow version - the 'TN'.

In 1962 a new range of heavy duty fork lift trucks to replace the Freightlifter was starting to be produced. This eventually became a full range of sizes and capacities.

Right:- The Black Horse Road factory was initially used for the construction of Pakamatic bodies which was a new venture for S&D involving riveting of aluminium alloy sheets and sections. The bodies were then fitted to completed chassis.

A later extension provided a modern paint facility.



Sadly by 1961 unreasonable demands were asked of me and I felt it was time to look for 'pastures new' and in October 1962 I left the company that had played such a significant part in preparing me for an engineering career. Over 40 years later, as a retirement project I started the SD Enthusiasts' Club which has a website www.shelvoke-drewry.co.uk and a Facebook Group.

But we can not leave this account without further photos of some of the vehicles produced during my nine happy years with the Company, nor of some of the people I met in those years.

Right :- A narrow bodied TN Pakamatic just 6 ft. wide.



Above :- A 'TW' Fore & Aft tipper



Above :- A 'T' series Gully Emptier demonstration vehicle.



Above :- The first Model 72 Freightlifter



Above :- The London Brick Company purchased 170 SD fork lift trucks. Here a Freightlifter is pictured in 1972 with a Defiant alongside.



Above:- This delightful photo was taken by his son of Kenneth Boyer Smith who was a joiner at S&D from 1931 to 1974 becoming Superintendent of the Joiners' Shop.



Above :- The first year HND students 1958.
 Back row l. to r.-: B.Easton, D.Firth, D.Aldridge, A.Tyler, D.Chambers, Mr.R.Page (Tutor), P.Reilly, P.Davidson, J.Rathge, P.Ware, B.Carpenter.
 Front row l. to r.-: G.Hutchin, A.Newberry, O.Smith, B.Gunton, R.Chalkey.



Above:- Another photo by Bill Smith shows a fibreglass radiator cover under construction.



Above:- Although from 1970 this photo shows some of the Service Department posing for the camera.



Left :- Visitors to the Company were greeted by this Medals Board displayed in the Reception Area. As a former Army Officer, who served in the Boer War, Harry Shelvocke was always keen to employ ex-servicemen and the account of medals awarded was kept up to date.

This account has been deliberately designed to mirror Malcolm Bates' article published in the August 2020 issue of Vintage Roadscene Magazine under the title SD - Shelvocke & Drewry - "I really was there!" I have tried to describe a more normal route into Shelvocke & Drewry for a young man. I am grateful to the many people who over the years have supplied the photos used here. I offer my apologies for any cases where my memories of over sixty years may have failed me.

*Brian Carpenter.
 Riddlesden
 August 2020.*