

PLAXTON

The Driving Force of Coach and Bus

HENLYS GROUP TODAY
1 BUS & COACH MANUFACTURE



Part of the new Plaxton line-up — Prima, Super Pointer Dart, and President.

Today Henlys Group plc is the leading manufacturer and distributor of coach and bus bodies to the UK market, with an expanding presence in North America. Henlys has four principal sites for bus and coach manufacture, employing more than 2,500 people.



Plaxton, based at Eastfield, on the outskirts of Scarborough, is Britain's largest bodybuilder, producing a leading range of coach and bus bodies. The new Cheetah midicoach is also built at Scarborough, on the Mercedes Vario chassis. The division employs 950 people on Scarborough's 500,000sq ft site.



The Northern Counties factory

in Wigan, purchased in 1995, has seen a period of committed investment, and is rapidly changing over from its traditional build system to an assembly line system similar to Scarborough. Around £1 million has been invested at Wigan in the last 18 months.

The 130,000sq ft factory employs 420 people and now concentrates on double-deck bus manufacture, primarily its Palatine and Palatine II models, though the factory is also to be home to the revolutionary new low-floor President double-decker, unveiled at Coach & Bus '97. At present feedback from its first public exposure is being analysed, and preparations made for an extended demonstration period with London operators.

Anston, near Sheffield, houses Plaxton's small bus manufacturing centre as well as the parts and service division and Kirkby Coach & Bus. The Beaver 2 minibus is built there in a 17,000sq ft factory employing 75 people. The first Beaver was originally a Reeve Burgess product and sold remarkably well as both a bus and a coach, primarily, though not exclusively, on Mercedes chassis. Beaver 2 is designed for the new Mercedes Vario minibus chassis and is substantially remodelled, using styling by Ogle to blend with the more curvaceous look of the Vario base. It meets the latest DiPTAC standards for accessibility and is available in 7m, 7.8m and 8m lengths to seat between 23 and 33.

Prevost Car Inc, owned jointly by Henlys and Volvo, is based in St Claire, Quebec, in Canada and has a modern 500,000sq ft factory employing more than 900 people. Prior to being acquired by Henlys and Volvo, it was owned by the Quebec state government and now has a turnover of £170 million a year and a 25% share of the North American market; 80% of its production goes to the USA. Henlys has found Prevost to have been a good investment; it's a very successful business with a full order book up to next August.



HENLYS GROUP TODAY 2 DISTRIBUTION & SALES

Many of the sales of Plaxton coaches today go through three dealerships, Kirkby, based at Anston, part of the Henlys Group, which deals with the full range, Yeates, owned by Volvo, which takes vehicles on Volvo chassis, and Arriva Bus & Coach, the newly-renamed Hughes-DAF. Arriva naturally takes the growing number of Plaxton coaches, Prestige single-deck buses and Palatine 2 double-deckers built on DAF chassis, but it also sells — and leases — the Dennis Dart with Plaxton Pointer bodywork. Arriva Bus & Coach also supplies a whole range of vehicles to its associated Arriva Passenger Services operating company.

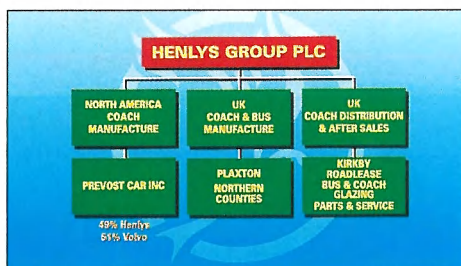
Despite the reliance on dealerships Plaxton also employs its own dedicated sales force which helps it keep close to its customers. Sales director David Quainton, a well-known figure in the industry who came to Plaxton with Reeve Burgess, is supported by two other well-known figures, sales manager Kevin Wood, and bus sales manager Kevin Taylor. They in turn are supported by their own field-based teams. On coach, Kevin Wood is clear on his team's sales function. 'Our goal is to maintain close contact with the family-run coach businesses which have long formed the core of our business — that's a key priority. But at the same time we have also been increasingly successful in winning orders from the large coach operators.'

There are three coach sales area managers, Steve Low who has recently come from Perkins to look after the north-west and Scotland, Bob Walmsley, who has 35 years' experience with Plaxton and looks after the north and north-east, and Barry McCrae, who covers the southern half of the country.

There is also considerable experience on the bus side. John Bell covers the south of England and has special responsibility for the Pointer. Nigel Gamble looks after the north and Scotland and Rick Betton covers Beaver and Cheetah sales from Anston and maintains liaison with Mercedes-Benz on those products. Frank McGhee, from Northern Counties, is the double-deck specialist.



Plaxton's sales team



EXPRESSLINER REFURBISHMENT

The Parts & Service Division is involved in a programme to refurbish National Expressliners as they come in at the end of their leases through Roadlease, and turn them into almost standard Paramount IIIs for resale through Kirkby. The Expressliners come in with high mileage, though the vast majority of this has been undertaken on long-distance motorway work, which is no problem to the Volvo B10M chassis, and maintenance standards for National Express work have to be good. Interiors are well worn, but customers are able to specify moquettes and interior layouts of their choice before the coach is completely refurbished. Destination gear is removed — though three-piece windscreens are kept — and toilets, galleys can be removed or retained.

HENLYS GROUP TODAY 3 PARTS & AFTER SALES

Plaxton has the UK's most extensive after-sales support, with its Parts & Service division based at Anston. However it also has service depots at Barrhead, near Glasgow, which was originally a Duple depot, and Ware in Hertfordshire, historically the home of Thurgood, the coachbuilder. Bodywork parts are stocked for all Plaxton products, including those of Northern Counties and Duple, as are mechanical parts for the Duple 425 while Anston stocks Dennis chassis spares.

All three depots can undertake major accident repairs, and all are proud of their ability to be able to deliver parts off the shelf, with a 95% first pick availability.

Full service facilities enable all makes of bus and coach to be repaired and items such as toilets, galleys, driver's bunks etc can be fitted to coaches, while tachographs and speed limiters can also be fitted and calibrated. Each depot also has its own dedicated paint facility.

Bus & Coach Glazing is a specialist offshoot of the parts and service division and provides a round the clock service 365 days a year. It operates out of Anston, though also has depots at Wigan, Ware and Barrhead. More recently the service has been extended to centres throughout Northern Europe, including amongst many others, France, Austria, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Northern Poland and Southern Spain.

Bus & Coach Glazing can supply manufacturers' original equipment glass to fit all makes and models; in 1996 out of 3,000 pieces of glass fitted some 35% were for non-Plaxton vehicles.

Quality control

These days Plaxton concentrates on concept, design and assembly of its vehicles; the days when it produced everything in house in common with other sectors of the automotive industry, are now gone. This enables it to concentrate on the things it does best, while specialist suppliers can do the same. Fabrications for framework etc come in, pre-drilled and formed, while manufacturers of fittings such as seats, toilet units etc are better placed to develop their own products than is a coachbuilder trying to do a bit of everything. Geoff Lee, plant director comments: 'Quality control is of the essence, to ensure suppliers meet the specified quality standards we expect'.

Computer-aided design

Design and development work on Britain's best-selling bus and coach range is carried out at the company's modern Scarborough factory by a skilled team using Catia state-of-the-art computer-aided design (CAD) techniques in an area where Plaxton was among the pioneers. The system uses IBM Unix work stations, giving three-dimensional modelling and finite element analysis. This removes much of the need for building three-dimensional styling models and also reduces the amount of trial and error involved in the early stages of product development. For example the system automatically calculates the unladen weight of the vehicle, its centre of gravity and axle weight, and it also has a feature called clash detection, which alerts designers to points at which components would foul each other.

Styling models show how a vehicle would look in three dimensions, without having first to commit it to plywood or clay, and as a result the time involved in getting from design brief to finished vehicle is reduced. Once production is ready to start Catia produces a complete bill of materials for the vehicle, right down to the last nut, bolt and washer.

The product range

Plaxton was at Coach & Bus '97 in force, with a complete product range and a confidence which would have seemed impossible for any British bus and coach manufacturer not too many years ago.

That this show of confidence was well-placed is evident in that Plaxton took orders worth £10.2 million at the Show, for 73 coaches, together with 16 Beaver 2s for Mainline. The coaches included 11 Cheetahs, while another new model, the full-size Prima on the Volvo B7R chassis, was sold off the stand. Additionally Shearings, which has not bought Plaxtons since 1991, increased its 1998-season order from 15 to 19.

Other customers include Wallace Arnold, which has placed its entire 1998 season order for 51 coaches with Plaxton, Go-Ahead and its City of Oxford subsidiary, which is having 11 Excaliburs and four Premieres for its London service, Flights and Excelsior, Compass Royston, Selwyn, Speedlink, Dodsworths, Classic, Harry Shaw and others.

NEW MODELS FOR 1998

Prima

Visually very similar to the Premiere, the Prima has been launched on the new rear-engined Volvo B7R, though is also available on other chassis. Again structurally it is identical to the Premiere, complete with the recent incorporation of stainless steel, but is a lower-cost vehicle with rubber floor covering, needle cord interior trim and luggage racks from the earlier Paramount range. The Prima is intended for commuter work and the day excursion market, and offers a particularly cost-effective specification for shorter-distance operations.

Super Pointer Dart

The latest version of the Dennis Dart was launched on Plaxton's stand at Coach & Bus '97. The SPD — short for Super Pointer Dart — has been developed as a joint project between Plaxton and Dennis to create a full-size low-floor bus out of what was originally a midibus. It is now 11.3m long, giving a seating capacity of 41, while retaining DiPTAC seat spacing, with 24 seats reached without encountering a step. Width stays at 2.4m and styling is identical to the Pointer 2. Green-tinted bonded glazing is standard, with double-glazing as an option, though gasket glazing will follow in early-1998.

Meanwhile the interior specification includes a sophisticated ceiling-mounted heating and ventilation system from Sutrak with full-length Invertec lighting.

As a joint venture with Dennis, the chassis is available exclusively in conjunction with Plaxton. It has a higher-powered version of the vertical in-line Cummins B-series engine, rated at 160bhp, with the Allison World Series B300R gearbox, which features an in-built retarder and electronic control. This is a larger unit than the Allison AT545 gearbox standard in the Dart SLF, and so the rear overhang is increased. Within the wheelbase Dennis fits a floor understructure, on to which Plaxton can fit the floor directly, and this is slightly ramped to reduce the internal step towards the rear of the bus.

The bus is designed for a 15-year life and is two to three tonnes lighter than 12m low-floor buses, as well as costing a good £10,000 less, while the small wheels give improved access and more seats than on bigger vehicles.

Cheetah

Whereas the original Beaver was available as a bus or a coach, Plaxton is now building two quite separate models to suit the different requirements of each market.

The Cheetah was launched at Coach & Bus. It is based on the Vario chassis, in 8.5m coach form, with ZF five-speed manual gearbox and air suspension on the rear axle. It is a fully coach-built model, with the front cowl integrated into the curved front end, an in-swinging front door and 33 MTB 900mm-wide seats, all fitted with three-point belts. A 29-seat option gives increased luggage capacity in the rear boot, and both models also have an underfloor luggage locker.



Above left:
The new Prima coach body on Volvo B7R chassis.

Left:
The 11.3m Super Pointer Dart, an exclusive collaboration between Plaxton and Dennis.

Above:
The Cheetah is a fully coach-built small coach on Mercedes Vario chassis.

Like the 1998-model Premiere it has stretched stainless steel side panels and bonded, bronze-tinted windows, while the moquette-trimmed interior is based on the Premiere too. It overcomes one of the problems of smaller coaches, that of wheelarch intrusion, with a completely flat floor fitted above wheelarch height.

The Cheetah is likely to appeal to the operator of full-size Plaxton coaches who needs a proper small coach; the Cheetah is very much a scaled down full-size coach rather than an upgraded minibus, even if it does share the basic frame of the Beaver 2.

President

The star of Coach & Bus '97 was the new Northern Counties-built President low-floor double-deck bus. Three more prototypes are in build for evaluation and the first will be entering trial service in London soon.

The President, which will be built on Volvo, DAF and Dennis chassis, sets new standards in double-decker design, with imaginative styling and a brand new interior making use of laminates to create a style which flows through the bus. Handrails curving gracefully up into the ceiling contribute to the theme, while internal headroom in the lower deck is the best ever achieved on a double-decker.

London Transport's concept's for a new-generation double-decker have been incorporated, with features such as a straight staircase and centre door moved further back than usual to eliminate the claustrophobic effect often encountered on the lower-deck of double-deckers, while wheelchair access, in London fashion, is through the centre doors.

PLAXTON'S ESTABLISHED RANGE

Premiere

The Premiere is Plaxton's best-selling — indeed Britain's best-selling — full-size coach model. It was introduced in 1991 and has undergone

progressive development and improvement ever since. It is an all-steel product, with wax injection in all sections below window level. An improvement on all 1998 coaches is that side panelling is now in stretched stainless steel and under the floor all panelling for luggage locker walls etc is in Cromwell stainless steel.

The Premiere is available in two heights, 3.2m or 3.5m and in 12m or 10m lengths.

Excalibur

The Excalibur is Plaxton's flagship model. It is available at 3.5m height, and all the improvements on the Premiere have been carried through to it. It has a distinctive swept-back front end and is available in 12m form on the Volvo B10M and also on the Dennis Javelin and DAF SB3000. The range of specifications now ensures that traditional Premiere customers who prefer the style of the Excalibur can specify it at a small premium over the Premiere.

The Excalibur has also been built as a three-axle coach on the rear-engined Volvo B12T.

Pointer 2

Whereas the Premiere is Britain's best-selling coach, the Pointer is Britain's best-selling bus. Originally developed by Reeve Burgess for the Dennis Dart in 1991, the Pointer has sold around 3,000, and is available additionally on the Volvo B6.

When the new generation of low-floor midibuses came on stream in 1995 the Pointer was adapted to suit, with a particularly successful interior layout and a slight increase in width from 2.3 to 2.4m. While the original version of the Pointer is still available, it is built now only in small numbers as the vast majority of demand is for the low-floor model.

Towards the end of 1997 FirstBus started to take delivery of a restyled Pointer, the Pointer 2, with a slightly rounded look to the front end, with the windscreen rather better integrated into the frontal styling, and a restyled rear end. The interior too has been upgraded and bonded glazing is now an option to the standard rubber gasket glazing. Bonded glazing is still not a structural requirement on the Pointer, but FirstBus for one has chosen it for its smarter appearance. The Pointer 2 went on general sale in January 1998.

Beaver 2

While Plaxton is the leader in both coach and smaller single-deck bus markets, its Beaver minibus, built latterly exclusively on Mercedes-Benz chassis cowl, has also been the market leader in its class. Originally a Reeve Burgess product the Beaver is built at Anston, which produces around five per week.

Now that the Mercedes T2 has been replaced by a new generation of Mercedes chassis, the Vario, the Beaver has now become the Beaver 2 with new styling by Ogle, giving it more of the flavour of a full-size bus on a small scale. The Vario bus is a proper bus derivative of the van range, with a lower chassis frame to improve access and air suspension. It has a three-valves-per-cylinder Euro 2 diesel engine, a choice of five-speed manual or Allison automatic transmission and disc brakes.

PREVOST CAR INC

Prevost Car Inc builds more than 900 integral coaches a year, some 300 of which are converted by specialists into super luxury motorhomes. Its main models are Le Mirage XL, available in 40ft and 45ft lengths either as a complete coach or as a shell, while the H-series is a high-floor (12ft) coach, the H3-41 a 41-footer seating up to 48 or the recently-introduced H3-45, which is actually new model rather than a lengthened H3-41, seating up to 58.

Both ranges come as standard with Detroit Diesel 325 or 400hp engines and Spicer manual or Allison World Series automatic transmission, though Volvo engines will be offered soon, while plans are for Prevost to distribute Plaxton coaches in North America.



The main assembly plant for Prevost in Quebec.

Prestige

What is now the Prestige, Plaxton's full-size low-floor single-decker, was first launched by Northern Counties on a low-floor version of the DAF SB220 at Coach & Bus '95. Since Henlys took over Northern Counties the body has been further developed, and has been supplied to Stagecoach on the Volvo B10BLE, while the DAF is available with LPG power.

Palatine

Northern Counties continues to build its well-established all-aluminium, jig-built Palatine double-deck range. It comes in two lengths, 9.8m or 10.2m, though longer, three-axle versions have been built for Citybus, Hong Kong. Single or dual door versions are built, in two styles, the conventional Palatine I, which can be full height (14ft 2in) or low-height (13ft 8in) on Volvo Olympian or Scania N113 (full-height only), or the rather more stylish Palatine II, which is also available on the Dennis Arrow and DAF DB250. Though traditionally sold under the Northern Counties name, all Palatines are now badged Plaxton.

HENLYS GROUP 1998

Having sold the car dealership arm of the group Henlys is poised for 1998 to concentrate its efforts on bus and coach operations and related acquisition opportunities in the UK and overseas.

Consistent with this strategy is Henlys' involvement in the growing North American bus and coach market which has recently been expanded with Prevost's announcement of the purchase of Nova Bus Corporation. Nova Bus is the largest manufacturer of urban transit buses in Canada and the United States and has a market share of over 30%.

With four new products for the 1998 season and a strong order book the new year promises continued growth for Plaxton, both in its home market and increasingly abroad.

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*Above:
The President double-decker, star of Coach & Bus '97.*

*Right:
New for 1998, the Premiere and Excalibur, as well as the Prima, have stretched stainless steel side panels and Cromwell steel lower panels.*

