

## SR SCENERY VAN S 4594

The Southern Railway authorised a batch of these vans during March 1937 in Lot number A975 and to design diagram 3182. As was usual at that time SR's Carriage & Wagon Works at Ashford built the underframes which were then transferred to the Carriage & Wagon Works at Eastleigh for completion into a running vehicle. Eastleigh installed the steel bodywork framing and roof as well as the wooden weather-boarding sides. A special feature was the unusually high arched roof which meant the vehicle height was 12 ft 8ins from rail to the top of the roof – 4ins taller than Maunsell coaches of this era.

Two SR passenger rated bogies were fitted along with vacuum brakes and steam heating pipework. Two sets of wooden double doors were installed on each side as well as (almost) full width double doors at each end. Glass windows, protected by steel bars, were installed along both sides.

It weighed 24 Tons empty, was 50 feet long by 8ft 7¼ ins wide and fitted into SR's Restriction 0 loading gauge. Flat sides ensured maximum route availability including (then restricted) tunnels on the Hastings to Tunbridge Wells line. Lot A975 vehicles were numbered 4587 to 4596 with S4594 entering service during October 1938.

The vehicle had a maximum carrying capacity of 24 Tons and was called a Scenery Van because, before the Second World War, it was quite usual for touring theatrical companies to use railways to move their costumes, props and 'scenery flats' around the country. One of the regular calling points would have been London Victoria station with its close proximity to West End theatres. Generally these special trains would unload/load scenery, etc at the buffer stops of the centre road between platforms 16 and 17.

Incidentally, a similar design, but with steel reinforced flooring and metal wall rings, was used to convey elephants for touring circuses such as those of Billy Smart and Chipperfields. When theatre and circus traffic dwindled, after WW2, these vans were relegated to bagged mail and parcels traffic because they were rated to run in passenger trains. In this service BR (S) reclassified them as General Utility Vans (GUV).

After 38 years of revenue earning service, 4594 was withdrawn from revenue-earning service in 1976 and moved to scrap sidings at Micheldever to await its fate. A group of Southern Steam Trust members purchased it and arranged for rail movement to Wareham sidings. From there it travelled to Swanage by road transport, in pouring rain, arriving around lunchtime on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> May 1977.

Its first location was on a short section of track laid beside the Swanage Coal Dock and restoration began straight away. Complete external repainting was started in 1978 and the final (gloss/varnish) top coat applied in 1979.

S4594 was first used to store parts for BR Class 4MT 2-6-4T steam locos 80078 and 80104 to ease the crowded stores in Swanage Goods Shed. Ultimately S4594 has become the Herston Halt base for Royal Signals Regiment troops when working on and around the halt. Currently, it carries a plaque: "*Scenery Van Refurbished by the Royal Signals for Exercise Topham Hatt September 1997*".