

SR 14 Ton Container Flat S 39634

The first time flat wagons were mentioned in the 'Southern' area related to a batch for LBSCR in 1920. They were referred to as 'Machinery Wagons' although after the grouping the Southern Railway (SR) called them 'Cartrucks'. The first railway containers were introduced by SR around 1928/9 in various designs to carry, primarily, meat imports landed at SR's Southampton Docks to London's Smithfield Market.

It was found necessary in 1932 to build more wagons for this growing traffic and to a design coping specifically for the increasingly wide range of containers. 39634 formed part of SR's order in Lot No.A681, on 24th October 1931, to design diagram 1383. A total of 75 wagons, numbered 39576 to 39650, were constructed at Ashford Carriage & Wagon Works between December 1932 and May 1933.

39634 was originally outshopped, in early 1933, being 29 ft long overall and the 4 wheel chassis having an 18 ft 7 ins wheelbase. No vacuum brakes were fitted originally and so was classified as a 'Conflat C'. Four years later, SR ordered that all would have automatic vacuum brakes installed, including eight brake blocks (2 per wheel), and they were thereafter reclassified as 'Conflat D'.

It was fitted with screw-link couplings the design of which was patented by Henry Booth as far back as 1837. On screw-link couplings the centre link of the three link chain was replaced by a threaded bar with a lever on it. Stock was shunted together, so buffers were just touching, and the shunter would hook the free end loop over the hook on the next wagon as normal. He then turned the handle on the threaded bar, pulling the outer links together so that in transit the buffers remained touching.

This took time however and was only generally applied to passenger stock. A twelve coach train, for example, only had twelve couplings to adjust but a long goods train had perhaps a hundred! These had to be operated whenever a wagon was dropped off or collected en route. Screw-link couplings were standard fittings on 'non passenger coaching stock' such as fish vans, banana vans, horse boxes, milk churn vans and milk tank wagons which were routinely coupled to passenger coaches.

Also where the train had vacuum brakes, the screw-link coupling was usually specified to avoid the flexible vacuum pipes being disconnected as wagons jerked in transit. The London & North East Railway used screw-link couplings as standard on all its vacuum brake fitted wagons and vans. Other companies' goods vehicles, mainly longer wheel base vans likely to get marshalled into a passenger train, were also sometimes provided with screw-link couplings. On occasions where goods vehicles were coupled to passenger stock the Railway Clearing House required that screw-link couplings be used.

Use of 'Conflat D' wagons then changed to between Southampton Docks and Nine Elms Goods Depot workings with space for two insulated containers roped back to back. Lashing points were provided at various points on the underframe around the wagon. The only method of securing containers, at that time, was by heavy duty ropes and the art of roping was highly skilled.

An unusual feature of these wagons was the fitting of through steam heating pipes. This gave them the flexibility to be coupled to trains of bananas [heating helps ripen the fruit] or

even passenger trains in the winter. The reason why it was decided to install steam pipes on these container wagons has not been discovered.

A range of these 'Conflat D' wagons were sometimes used on the Dover – Dunkirk train ferries for use on Nord Railway in France by special arrangement. These included wagons in the ranges numbered 39001 – 39250 and also 39501 – 650. Generally they would only cross the English Channel and be hauled into sidings at Dunkirk for unloading/loading although, very occasionally, they did go further afield. Unfortunately, no specific mention of 39634 in France has yet been found.

During the Second World War, SR upgraded 'Conflat D' carrying capacity from 14 Tons up to 15 Tons. After Nationalisation, 39634's number had an 'S' prefix added and continued being used for many years. After withdrawal by British Rail at Gravesend, it was purchased by the Southern Catering Project Group in August 1999. S 39634 arrived on Swanage Railway metals during April 2001.

Currently it is loaded with some of the components relating to the former Old Oak Common Depot 70ft turntable.

Information compiled by Peter Sykes 17th October 2021

Checked by Jeremy Weller 13th June 2022