

BR INSULATED FISH VAN E 87894

E 87894 was built at British Railway's Faverdale Wagon Works, Darlington, County Durham. It formed part of Lot No. 30384 [265 Vans numbered E87693 to E87957] which was completed during January 1961. BR's Insulated Fish Van (known as INSUL-FISH) was based on LNER design diagram 214. These vans were numbered in the non-passenger coaching stock series although, being an Eastern Region (ex-LNER) design, all the running numbers were given an "E" prefix.

After nationalisation over 1,050 vans were built to the LNER design. After this, BR created its own design (diagram number 800) with fairly minor changes. Later batches were built having a redesign of body framing, door handles and a vacuum pipe that was attached to the underside of the buffer beam. Oil filled plain bearing axle boxes were superseded by roller bearings enabling them to be used in faster express timed workings from North East and Scottish ports. This was BR diagram number 801 and E 87929 was constructed to the latter design.

In total, BR built 500 Insulated Fish Vans to diagram 800 and a further 558 to diagram 801. Running on two axles, with wheels of 3ft 1½in diameter, the body of the diagram 801 vans was 21ft 8in long on a 15ft 0in wheelbase. Being Express Passenger (XP) rated they were equipped with Oleo pneumatic buffers, vacuum brakes and a through steam-heat pipe (allowing them to travel in passenger trains).

The insulated body was constructed from plywood skinned with aluminium sheets making the interior easier to hose down and clean. The roof was made from two skins of aluminium filled with a patented "Ozanote" rubber insulation. Normally, the cargo of fish was kept cool using boxes of 'dry ice' - solid state carbon dioxide with the trade name Drikold™. Incidentally, the trade name Drikold™ is currently owned by Nippon Gases. Dry ice has a temperature of -78.6 °C (-109.5 °F) and Drikold™ is produced by compressing and cooling gaseous CO₂ into a liquid, then allowing it to expand to produce CO₂ 'snow'. This 'snow' is then compressed into conveniently sized Blocks, Pellets or Slices. The boxes of wet fish themselves were packed with water ice, on the trawlers or during the dock side auctions, so two floor drains were provided to prevent melted ice from flooding the van.

These vans were originally painted in White, the livery of insulated/refrigerated vehicles, to help reflect heat and a pastel Blue circle was also painted on each side to ease shunters' identification duties. Unfortunately, this livery quickly became dirty causing complaints regarding their possibly insanitary condition. In 1964 some were repainted into an Ice Blue livery but it has not been ascertained when E 87894 went "Express Parcels" Blue. Solebars, and vehicle lettering, were always painted black.

These vans were built for long distance relatively high-speed (up to 70 m.p.h.) running. This was primarily between King's Cross Goods Depot and Aberdeen port which was scheduled to take roughly 14 hours. A pool of around 200 vans were maintained specially for this work. Bulk fish trains to King's Cross ceased in 1976 prior to the start of High Speed Trains on the East Coast Main Line during 1977.

All wet fish traffic by rail effectively ceased in 1968 with remaining 'blue spot' vans rostered, without renumbering, for other uses such as parcels traffic. They were then designated as Special Parcels Vehicle (SPV) followed by NRV under TOPS for use as engineering vehicles or barrier wagons.

E 87894 was pictured in Aylesbury Yard on 25th January 1981 and the last INSUL-FISH saw revenue earning service in the Buckinghamshire area sometime later that year. Some were retained after this date for use as 'internal user' vans on depots and elsewhere. E 87894 apparently entered Departmental Service, during 1981, gaining the new number ADB977064.

It was used as a stores van for the Regional Mechanical & Electrical Engineers Department. It has always been reported as being based at Ferme Park Carriage sidings, Hornsey but it ended up on Wood Green Sand Sidings (adjacent to the site of the former Coronation Shed). ADB977064 remained there for many years and was transferred to the Internal User section due to it not having moved for a long period. Under this change it was re-numbered 041970.

E 87894 was purchased, in a run down Blue livery, in September 1997 for use on the Swanage Railway and arrived there in December 1997. Having been refurbished, including being painted White, it is usually stabled at Corfe Castle acting as a stores vehicle for the Railway Museum.

In 2023, the owners decided to offer E 87894 to the Swanage Railway Trust who purchased it.

Information compiled by Peter Sykes 11th October 2021
Updated by Pete Short 19th March 2022 and Jeremy Weller 17th April 2022
Further updated 24th August 2024