BR INSULATED FISH VAN E 87249

Great Britain is surrounded by sea and fish has always been an important part of the country's diet. Fresh fish begins to rot very quickly unless it is preserved by freezing, pickling, salting, or smoking. The creation of widespread railway companies in the 19th century permitted fish to be distributed quickly even to remote locations. By the late 1940's/early 1950's, around a million tons of fish were landed annually at British ports of which 75% was carried by rail. An average of over 2000 tons daily.

The most productive fishing grounds were in the North Sea and the bulk of fish was, as a result, landed at east coast ports. As a consequence, the LNER led the design of railway vehicles especially for fish traffic. Prior to WW2 they had produced a conventional 12-foot wheelbase, vacuum-braked fish van with wooden body and underframe. Some of these were either built, or retrospectively rebuilt, with additional insulation and recessed twin sliding doors.

The first examples of LNER Diagram 214 (later becoming BR Diagram 800) vans appeared as early as 1949. These vehicles had a 15-foot wheel-base and were fitted with vacuum brakes. The body was constructed from plywood sheets covered with smooth aluminium sheeting to make interiors much easier to clean. The plywood's exterior was painted white to reflect heat. The roof was made from double aluminium sheets filled with "Ozanote" rubber insulation.

Doors were draught proofed and interiors were kept cool by boxes of "dry ice" (solid carbon dioxide). As boxes of fish were packed with water ice on trawlers, two floor drains prevented melted ice flooding the van. These vans were numbered, not as wagons but, like milk tankers, in the non-passenger coaching stock series. BR's standard insulated fish van were all numbered with an 'E' prefix due to them being based extensively on the Eastern Region (ex-LNER) design.

After nationalisation almost 1,060 vans were built to the LNER design. After this, BR created it's 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 Oil filled plain bearing axle boxes were superseded by roller bearings enabling them to be used in faster express timed workings from North East and Scottish ports.

E87249 was built at British Railway's (ex-LNER) Faverdale Works in Darlington, County Durham to Design Diagram 800 as mentioned above. It formed part of Lot No. 30125 [500 Vans numbered E 87000 to E 87499] which was ordered in August 1953 and completed during February 1955. 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.

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 during the winter).

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 just prior to 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 87249 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. They worked from the major Eastern fishing ports to all parts of the BR network. Each morning, wagons of fish left smaller ports such as Fraserburgh. They were then formed into longer trains which left the ports of Aberdeen, Hull, Grimsby and New Clee each lunchtime for destinations including London (Kings Cross and Holloway), Banbury, Cambridge, Cardiff, Leeds and the West Riding, Leicester, Nottingham, Manchester and Plymouth. The fish travelled onwards, either by lorry or further by rail.

The south-east was served by two trains from Holloway every night. A number of these vans were painted with 'NOT TO WORK BETWEEN TONBRIDGE AND BATTLE VIA ROBERTSBRIDGE SOUTHERN REGION'. This was due to gauge-restricted tunnels on the route.

The primary flow ran between Aberdeen port and King's Cross Goods Depot which was scheduled to take roughly 14 hours. A pool of around 200 vans were maintained specially for this work. Even as late as 1963 some seventy-five vans of fish left Aberdeen daily. This amounted to over 40,000 tons of fish per year being sent by rail. Of this total the quantities from the much smaller ports at Buckie, Fraserburgh, Lossiemouth and Peterhead amounted to nearly 7,000 tons.

Following the 1962 Transport Act and Dr Beeching's drive bring the railways back into profitability there was an imperative to identify and develop profitable traffics with loss-making or only marginally profitable to either be reorganised with realistic pricing else withdrawn. Under the new scheme of 8th May 1964, BR wanted to reduce the number of fish trains that left the four main ports of Aberdeen, Fleetwood, Grimsby and Hull from twenty-five to about nine basic services. This was intended to rationalize the services into a limited number of railheads with onward distribution by road organized by the fish trade.

Most 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.

This led quite quickly to a significant reduction in the total volume of wet fish being moved by rail and, ultimately, the virtual demise in 1968 of the use of the 'blue spot vans' for the carriage of fish. All that appears to have remained was a single bulk train from Aberdeen to London in the early 1970's. This was supplemented by vans, from a number of Scotland's fishing ports, attached to passenger trains.

In 1970 this train (4E47) left Aberdeen weekdays at 13:55 arriving in King's Cross Goods at 01:11 the following morning. It's maximum loading was 957 tons including the locomotive. On Saturdays the train left Aberdeen at 16:45 but did not arrive at King's Cross Goods until 00:45 on Monday. Apparently it had a sixteen-hour layover at Doncaster during which arrangements for keeping the fish cold are unclear. The empties returned as 6S64 on the 'Scotch goods' leaving King's Cross at 14:30 for Millerhill yard.

During summer 1974 this fish train had become the 6E45 Aberdeen (16:40) to King's Cross. It is believed this single bulk fish train from Aberdeen to King's Cross ceased in 1976, just prior to the 1977 start of High Speed Trains on the East Coast Main Line. 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 87249 apparently entered Internal User Service, during 1980, gaining the new number 041312. It was spotted at Stratford Traction maintenance Depot on 22nd March 1980. It was used as a stores van for the became a Breakdown Train Unit Tool Van & M&EE Stores Van. It then was re-numbered DB 975961 before being moved back to IU service and gaining the new number 041969. For many years it was based at Bounds Green Depot in north London. Later it moved to nearby Ferme Park Carriage Sidings being noted there on both Monday 9th and Friday 27th February 1981.

Eventually it was withdrawn from stores van duties and, during September 1997, it was purchased for use on the Swanage Railway. It arrived in Dorset during December 1997. Due to it's condition it was low down the restoration list.

Eventually, it was sold and moved from Swanage Railway to Old Radnor during April 2006. The plywood bodywork had rotted through due to the vehicle's use as a storage vehicle for Bounds Green's supplies of 'Exmover' exterior carriage cleaning chemicals. 'Exmover' was a ready-to-use thickened acid cleaning solution containing 4.5% Oxalic acid. It was invented primarily for the removal of iron brake block dust from railway carriages. This need was largely overcome with BR's adoption of air operated disc brakes for it's modern trains.

The remains of the body was removed with the intention of the underframe being used under a GWR coach body. In November 2012 it was moved to The Old Post House, Blakemere, Herefordshire. On a subsequent visit to Blakemere E87249(041312/ADB 975961/041969) was seen to remain an underframe with wheels. Reportedly it was going to be used to carry one of the pre-grouping carriages stored at this location.

Information compiled by Peter Sykes 28th April 2023