

The History of Ensignbus

Ensignbus was formed in 1972, since which time it has been involved in many aspects of the bus industry. In the early days a number of small contracts were operated for people such as the Port of London Authority and Lesney the toy manufactures. These small operations however became secondary to the role which Ensign has today made its own, that of buying and selling high quality used buses and coaches.

Although well known for selling vehicles around the world it was not until London Transport's (LT) controversial decision to start phasing out the 'DMS' class double deck, that Ensign became perhaps the best known bus dealer in the country. With LT insistent that the full quota of some near 2,000 vehicles be sold to one bidder, the number of interested parties was of course somewhat limited. Whilst some operators were keen to take a few vehicles no one was prepared for, or required 2,000, such buses. At the deadline for tenders to be in, it became quite clear that Ensign was the only serious contender for this mammoth task. The vehicles soon started arriving and Ensign was forced to move to larger premises at Purfleet in Essex. Here the vehicles were brought immediately following their withdrawal from LT service. On arrival they were thoroughly checked over for any faults before being 'De-Londoned' which meant that certain features that had been insisted upon for London service, and had often been unpopular, were removed.

Ensign's 15 acre yard at Purfleet was a sea of red as the DMS's started to arrive. Nearly 2,000 would pass through here with most finding new homes either in the UK or overseas.



On top of this customers could now specify any of Ensign's own specifications which ensured the customer received a vehicle tailor-made for their needs. Such improvements included the highly popular one door conversion, open and half and half top buses for sightseeing work, coach seated and hospitality buses, high capacity vehicles (for overseas work in places such as Hong Kong), tropicalised vehicles (for work in extreme climates) and even left hand drive was available. With so many vehicles coming in it was essential that Ensign sold the DMS's at a fast rate.

While many people involved in the bus industry predicted that London's unloved DMS's would never sell, Ensign set about proving them wrong. Within days vehicles were leaving Purfleet bound for new owners both in the UK and overseas. West Midlands PTE based in Birmingham were one of the first big operators to take the plunge and were soon in possession of some 80 DMS's in the one door configuration. Other large orders soon followed, many of the National Bus Company subsidiaries placed orders as well as the China Motor Bus Company, who ran buses in Hong Kong and who eventually operated some 400. As the DMS's continued to pass through Ensign's hands it became obvious that selling the full compliment of DMS's was indeed possible. While some were scrapped, usually either those too old or in too poor condition for refurbishment, most found new homes. It was towards the end of the DMS 'run' that Ensign started to look at other areas to expand into. Having operated a number of converted open top DMS's on London sightseeing work (rather ironically for London Transport who had been so unable to get along with the DMS type) it was realised that a move into the sightseeing arena would be a good move. The chance did not come along immediately. When LT stopped hiring in operators to run its sightseeing operation this left Ensign somewhat out in the cold.



However, when the chance to purchase the small operator London Pride Sightseeing (LPS) came along, it was not missed. In 1984 when LPS was taken over it operated less than 10 vehicles, and operated from only one stop, it was now in for a time of massive expansion

In the early days of Ensign ownership London Pride's buses almost all carried adverts for various multi-national companies. -Here can be seen one of Ensign's own one door-open top conversions carrying the overall advertising colours for Burger King.

It was also in the mid 1980's that Ensign moved into London Regional Transport (LRT) tendered work. Many politicians and local people feared that the private operators would be unable to provide the service already operating on these existing routes. Whilst in a few cases this indeed was true, in the case of Ensign it was the opposite. Passengers could now rely more than ever on the smartly painted blue and silver buses, whilst drivers enjoyed better rates of pay and conditions than they had driving the same routes only months before.

Ensign's striking blue and silver livery on its service bus network made the vehicles very distinctive. -Here a newly purchased Metrobus II is seen working on Ensign's second route in East London the 62.

Having built the service bus network up it was decided in 1990 to sell the LRT tendered work and one of the depots off. It was eventually sold to Citybus of China who renamed the operation Capital Citybus and repainted the vehicles into yellow. With Ensign's departure from the local bus scene the way was clear to further expand its sightseeing interest.

Throughout the 1980's and indeed into the 90's LPS under Ensign's ownership swallowed up a number of other London operators, Ebdon's, London Tour Co, London Hop on Hop off Ltd and Cityrama were the main acquisitions. Not only did this reduce competition in the already fiercely competitive and over-bussed market but it gave Ensign the use of other stops which had thus far been under-utilised. As LPS nosed its way towards being the market leader it introduced many new innovations that not only offered the customer more but firmly cemented its place as not only the biggest but also the most profitable of any of the London sightseeing operators.

Although today most of the tours in London offer a very similar deal it was Ensign through LPS that first offered people, a complete hop on hop off service, an unlimited travel 24 hour electronically timed ticket, different routes to explore more of the city, a free shuttle bus to and from hotels and stations, fast track entrance to many of London's top attractions, discounts on entrance fees, as well as being the only operator to run 24 hours a day allowing people to use their ticket to its maximum. Throughout this time Ensign continued to sell high quality used buses around the world. Although the scale of this operation was somewhat smaller than during the 'DMS period' up to 150 buses a year were sold from the new premises at Rainham in Essex. Many of these vehicles were sold to operators of sightseeing tours in other cities around the world, who had seen LPS's buses and were keen to find out more about the open top market from the then world leader.

This interest led to Ensign sending experienced staff from its London operation across the world to either help set up new operations or supply the knowledge to increase the revenue of existing tours. Some 40 countries have been visited by staff from Ensign over the past three years with regard to open top sightseeing tours.



Amongst the many new innovations Ensignbus bought into the London Sightseeing market through its London Pride operation few were more successful on the vehicle side than the introduction of Metroliner type vehicles. These former motorway coaches at 40 ft (12m) allowed nearly 70 people upstairs at any one time. Not only allowing maximum revenue per vehicle but also meaning less buses had to run on the already congested streets of London. With the London operation boasting over 100 stops, 110 buses and some 300 staff, and making a profit of more than £2 million per annum it was decided to sell the whole operation

in a huge deal which finally took place on 31st January 1998. At the time of sale LPS was the largest single city operator of sightseeing buses in the world, as well as boasting the largest fleet of open top buses anywhere on the planet. Following this Ensign was forced to find new premises, this time back to its 'spiritual' home at Purfleet, (less than a mile away from the depot which had seen nearly 2,000 DMS's pass through little more than 10 years ago). With no major operation now to run Ensign moved back into dealing in a big way. In its first year it sold over 300 buses and had a turnover of some £3 million. However, with the market being very up and down on the dealing side, and for contractual reasons unable to operate another sightseeing operation in London, it was decided to re-enter on a small scale the local bus service scene. The story had almost gone full circle with the acquisition of the route 324 and then 348 from First Capital, which in turn had taken over Capital Citybus in 1998, the purchasers of Ensign's LRT tendered work in 1990. Both these routes were extended and advertised and once again the smart blue and silver vehicles of Ensignbus took to the streets. With the increase in frequency, times, destinations and reliability people started to return to the bus as an easy way to get to work or go shopping.

When Ensign re-entered the service bus business it was decided once again to use the smart blue and silver livery. This time however vehicles all carried route branding on the side to help advertise the service. On its first day under Ensign ownership a little over 500 people were carried, some 10 months later on its last day just over 3,500 passengers were carried! At the same time the sightseeing operation has not been idle. Having already helped set up successful operations in both Denmark and Spain, the 'City Sightseeing' (as Ensign's new world-wide open top bus operation has been branded) team had moved into Australia where a number of cities were set up including the flagship operation in Sydney. Whilst Ensign owns some of the City Sightseeing operations others remain entirely owned independent of Ensign, choosing purely to operate in a franchise type arrangement where Ensign can provide vehicles, staff, the brand-name, world-wide advertising and perhaps most importantly of all, years of expertise in running tours in the most competitive cities in the world.



One of the first cities to enter the City Sightseeing family was Seville in Spain. Here can be seen one of the vehicles in the distinctive City Sightseeing livery, which varies slightly to include a local feel for each city. Ensign's staff were instrumental in setting this operation up using the lessons learnt from London. On the local bus route side other routes were added to the 324 and 348 which included the 325 and 509, which now meant the Ensign network penetrated as far as Stratford in the west to Gravesend, Bluewater and Lakeside in the east. However, in December 1999 in a surprise move the service work was taken over by Town and Country Buses. Once again the emphasis was to expand the sightseeing, dealer and rail replacement sides of the business. Ensign can now boast the largest stock of used double-deck buses in the world, with anywhere from 100-500 buses in stock.

During 2000 Ensign only operated two Metrobuses on rail replacement work and without the day to day needs of running a busy local service network efforts were made to build new and cement long standing relationships with train operating companies and provide vehicles to them on both preplanned rail shut downs and emergency situations. In March 2000 the franchise model was initiated, with the very first UK branded sightseeing service



starting in Glasgow in conjunction with Scotguide. Throughout the year other operations also joined the growing City Sightseeing network and in the UK, York and Bath were the next to join followed shortly afterwards by Scotlands capital Edinburgh.

In November City Sightseeing acquired its former London sightseeing operation, London Pride. However, due to its commitments in expanding the CS name globally

it was not possible to continue operating this vast undertaking and the business was sold to 'The Original London Sightseeing Tour' early in 2001. Part of this deal included the provision for a number of the 'Originals' fleet to carry the CS branding and thus on completion of this deal CS had a presence in the UK's capital.

The dealership side of the business also continued to expand with perhaps one of the larger deals in 2001 being the purchase of around 100 tri-axle double decks from Hong Kong. The majority of these vehicles would be returned to the UK, refurbished to meet UK regulations and sold onto the UK market. Another smaller batch went to Australia having been converted to open top sightseeing vehicles and join the ever growing CS fleet there.

Following the sale of London Pride CS had maintained ownership of the buses and as Original set about replacing the fleet with their own buses they were able to return most of the fleet back to CS fairly quickly. This influx of ready to run sightseeing buses allowed CS to plan an ambitious expansion of its UK operations, not through franchises but from directly owned operations. The first of these was in Cambridge, which started on May 5, 2001, this was followed a week later by Blackpool, a further week on Windsor started, six days later Stratford-upon-Avon, the following day Newcastle and a further week on Cardiff, so in less than a month over 30 buses and six new cities in the UK began operating. Many of these cities brought CS into direct head to head competition with its main competitor on such services - Guide Friday.

The spring of 2002 proved to be a very wet period and once in a generation flooding was seen throughout parts of Kent and Sussex. With the railways heavily affected by this Ensign's enlarged emergency fleet sprung into action. Vehicles operated throughout the south east helping to get stranded people home, others even partook in rescuing motorists from flooded vehicles and assisting the emergency services in getting people at risk away from dangerous situations. It was nearly a week before the flooding subsided and longer still before normal train services were fully restored.

Whilst the wet start to the year had proved busy for the rail fleet for CS the poor weather was not what was wanted. Fortunately the new operations for 2002 started a little later than the previous season to tie in with the double bank holiday of the Queens Golden Jubilee. In the period of a little over a week, CS started services in Manchester, (which was hosting the Commonwealth Games), Chester, Colchester, Coventry and Birmingham. Early



in 2003 saw one of the largest emergency rail replacements on record, when following the failure of a Central Line train, all trains on the line were pulled off service to have immediate modifications made. The Ensign fleet now totalled 12 but further vehicles were drafted in from sales stock to increase Ensigns capacity to over 20. This however still wasn't enough as the scale of the problem became known and the length of the likely shutdown became ever longer. In the end over 90 vehicles were required at the peak and Ensign was one of the main contractors for this taking care of a number of the routes directly and sub-contracting in other operators to assist in providing the vehicles required. The job eventually lasted nearly 3 months.

In the summer of 2003 the start of the withdrawal of perhaps London's most famous bus, the Routemaster commenced. With Ensign's close association with onward sales of surplus London buses it was perhaps inevitable that the majority of these last 500 stalwarts would pass through Ensignbus on their way to new homes. The first of the Routemasters coming off were met with sadness from many. Obviously the conductors would lose their jobs,



Above: Two of Ensign's vintage vehicles together on the last day of RM's on London's bus route 36.. Photographer: Stuart Brown

and a small part of 'Old London' would be lost forever, whilst on the other hand the buses replacing them would allow easy access for all. Whatever your standpoint on the pros and cons the last days for each route became significant events, with transport enthusiasts travelling from all over the world to take part and see off one of London's great servants and an icon in its own right. Ensign with its small number of heritage vehicles was asked to provide vehicles for these events

to add interest and showcase some of London's older buses. Of course with

the additional amount of people wanting to travel on these days and the rarity of the vehicles supplied most of these heritage specials ran with full loads all day at what was a cross between a wake and a celebration! The buses were provided free of charge and our crews all worked as volunteers, all the fares that were collected were donated to local charities nominated by the operator of each route, in this way many thousands of pounds were raised for good causes. The withdrawal programme would last for over two years with the final route, the 159 coming off in December 2005, of which more later.

The Autumn of 2003 had seen a tender be sent out by South Eastern Trains for provision of a service for a long term tunnel closure. The need was for a reliable, smart and well run operation to provide a frequent service between the stations affected by the tunnel closure. Ensign tendered for and won the service which was due to last for a year starting from January 2004. As required by the tender single decks were acquired. To improve their appearance they were all reupholstered, re-glazed and repainted. A smart green and cream livery based on the old 'Southdown' livery was chosen in conjunction with the rail company to ensure the vehicles stood out and were clearly identifiable as being 'Strood Flyer' buses. With the buses having considerable dead mileage to cover to get to their starting point and with much of it being over Ensign's old route 324 that had been sold to Town & Country in 1999 (and which they had in turn sold on to Arriva who now did not operate it) the ideal opportunity had presented itself to build on the previous success of the route. As such the X80 route was born linking up two of Europe's largest shopping centres, Lakeside and Bluewater and providing the only direct link between the two. The service then continued on to Gravesend and Strood where it would take up its rail duties. The need to provide

more buses at the peak and the length of the 'rail day' from first train to last, meant that a frequent service could be maintained from early morning until late evening. Ensign was again back in the local service bus business!



Above: The green and cream livery was a break from Ensign's normal but was introduced for the long term rail shut down of Strood Tunnel.

For CS following its rationalisation of services following the takeover of GF the image of open top buses was about to take a significant step forwards with the delivery of the first new, purpose built open tops for an English operator since before the Second World War. Four Spanish built open top Ayats bodied Volvos arrived in the UK in early summer 2004 and were spread between operations for the widest spread of operational feedback. One was based with Ensign at Purfleet, undertaking Private Hire work in the London area, one went to Stratford-upon-Avon, one to Cambridge, and the fourth one to Bath where CS had recently taken over Bath Bus Co. its franchisee for the city of Bath.



The first of the new Ayats open tops were the first purpose built all year round open tops purchased by an English operator since before the Second World War.

2004 was completed with what became known as the Ensign Routemaster Raffle on Sunday December 5, 2004. The idea had been to ensure that with so many of London's famous buses going overseas or for non bus use, to ensure a large number survived in preservation. As such 32 buses were made available for preservation for the massively reduced figure of £2000 per bus. Hopeful candidates had to write in and meet certain requirements, including undercover storage and non commercial use. From the 100's of applications received 32 were selected based on a geographical spread as well as a mixture of existing preservationists and those new to the hobby. The event took place in Ensigns recently purchased but not yet operational depot and one by one the applicants were called up to drawn the number of their bus from a hat. Such an event had not been seen before in bus preservation and is exceptionally unlikely to ever happen again.



A line up of Routemasters from the RM Raffle in December 2004: Photo Matt Wharmby

As the Christmas and New Year holiday season came to an end, Ensign moved into its new premises. Less than half a mile from its previous site, the new facility having been a huge paper storage site with little infrastructure had allowed Ensign 'a blank canvas' to achieve a facility tailor made to its needs. As such the new site offered, 8 engineering bays, a full MOT facility, and storage for around 250 buses undercover and a further 70 in the open. A 24 hour traffic office was built and new offices for all staff. The extra undercover storage also allowed Ensign to enlarge its collection of heritage vehicles and form the Ensign Museum. The finished item was a very impressive bus depot for an independent operator.

Operationally the start of 2005 saw the end of the rail job that had led to the birth of the X80 but with passenger numbers increasing every month the view was to continue with the service on a commercial basis. Initially the green and cream single deck livery was kept and to help with loadings on busy weekends a double deck in the green and cream livery was acquired. As the year progressed though a concerted effort was made to finish with the green livery and have the route back in Ensign's more familiar blue and silver.



On the dealership side 2005 would see a large number of imports that the new facilities would assist in converting to UK specs in quicker time than had been possible in the previous smaller site. High specification Olympians from Hong Kong and a large batch of Olympians from Dublin Bus would prove to be popular with UK operators.

Following the success of the first four new CS open tops, a larger order for an additional ten was made and these started arriving for the summer of 2005, these included some vehicles that had the front two bays covered providing some cover in inclement weather. These ten would be spread around between Cardiff, Windsor and Bath. The majority went into service in Bath making the fleet there 80% low floor and at least Euro 3 emissions. This exceeded the requirement a year before the proposed Traffic Regulation Condition legislating open top tour buses in this World Heritage Site.

Continued growth on the X80 throughout the spring and it was decided to further improve the service offered by converting the route to all wheelchair and buggy friendly low floor buses. This was carried out with the purchase of single decks Darts that had formerly been operating on airport services. The vehicles were reupholstered and made to single door specification before being painted in Ensigns blue and silver livery.

2005 also proved to be an interesting year for Ensigns growing collection of heritage buses. With it clearly being the last year of the Routemaster in service and this bringing to an end nearly 180 years of a conductor on London's buses and with less and less routes remaining, Ensign made a concerted effort to celebrate these last routes in style and set about trying to provide a 'surprise' guest bus for each last day. The second of these (following gold RML2405 on the Route 12 in November 2004) was on 28 January when route 36 was converted. Ensign bought out newly restored Cravens RT1431, one of only two survivors from this small batch of 120 RT's delivered in 1949-50. This was followed on 1 April by newly repainted RMA 58, joining in the conversion of Route 19. Next was July 22, when combined routes 14 and 22 were converted. For this Ensign bought out a real rarity in the form of RLH61, a low height London Bus that had been sold and exported to Canada in 1971 after it became the last ever of its class in London service. That it made its post restoration debut three decades later back in central London following nearly 18 months being restored from a wreck was a proud moment for the Ensign team, its full story can be read on the Ensign Museum part of this website. The penultimate route (38) was converted on October 28 and for this Ensign provided another surprise, this time in the form of a 1948 Bristol that had been on hire to London Transport following the war and a type that operated on the 38's in those austere times.



Such was the interest now in the very last Routemasters that the last day on Route 159 was spread over two days. Thursday 8 December was given over to special extra buses and for this last of last days Ensign managed to put 10 specials out. Of these the surprise was RT624 which was the very last RT in service back in 1979. Having been acquired immediately afterwards it had spent many years at a museum in Birmingham where she had gradually become quite run down. In a race against time culminating in her passing her MOT the evening before she performed faultlessly in service and took part in the final cavalcade bringing to an end this period of London's transport history



It wasn't the end though for Ensigns vehicles in regular service though as a dedicated 'annual running day' was set up to take place on the X80 utilising both Ensigns own heritage vehicles and those of other operators. Equally on the dealership side such events came by as various vehicles left the capital, London last Leyland built bus an Olympian passed through Ensign whilst some of the last AEC's also came through in this period.



January 2006 brought Ensign its first council service that complemented the X80 in terms of geography. The route 64 (later renumber 44) was won which operated from Purfleet through to Grays. A planned expansion to the bus services was also put in place that started in July. Routes 77 (later 73) and 83 were introduced competing directly with Arriva plc on the local corridors. Ensigns services however started earlier in the morning, finished later in the evening and were priced competitively and instantly proved to be popular with locals who were familiar with Ensigns blue and silver livery and it being a local company. With this expansion Ensign acquired further low floor single deck buses as it required eight in service on any given day as well as a number of spares to ensure reliability for either mechanical or traffic related problems.



One of the last Darts to enter service before the arrival of the new double deckers was 714 seen here leaving Lakeside. Photo: Russell Young

In August 2006 Ensign Museum started its most ambitious project, the restoration of a war-time London RT. The bus itself had been acquired from the USA following years of negotiations and had returned home in March 2006. The bus was completely stripped down to the chassis, such was the derelict state in which it returned. Gradually it is coming back to life and its hoped to be on the road in 2009, again a full monthly blog of its restoration is kept on the museum part of the Ensignbus web site.



Following over 40 years in the USA 1940 vintage, RT8 eventually returned home in March 2006. Despite its derelict state it is being returned to the road by Ensign and is hoped to debut in 2009.

In September 2006, local operator Town & Country went out of business leaving a number of bus routes uncovered. Ensign amongst other operators stepped in to ensure these services ran and was awarded on a temporary basis the routes 40, 98, 100, 374, 380 and the C2C shuttle. A number of these routes were council subsidised services and were put through the tendering system and duly awarded, others had commercial possibilities alongside Ensigns existing network and these were added to the growing network of Ensignbus in Thurrock.



On the sightseeing side 2006 had proven to be successful in many locations although the difficulty in having so many remote locations so far away from the main facility were proving troublesome so the decision was made to sell off certain locations. Blackpool and Manchester were taken over by CS's partner there and Liverpool was passed onto the operator who already supplied engineering and driver support for the operation. In December 2006 Cambridge was passed on to Stagecoach followed by the same operator taking over Stratford-upon-Avon and Newcastle early in 2007. This left CS with direct operations in the UK in Bath, Cardiff, Eastbourne and Windsor.

Further route extensions, new routes and later running saw the vehicle requirements for the local bus routes increase to just over 20, whilst on the rail replacement fleet 13 double decks were required.

On the sightseeing side CS as the largest shareholder became actively involved in the new start operation in the US capital Washington DC. The service started initially with only two buses but by the Autumn eight vehicles were running with further expansions and developments planned for 2008.

Throughout 2007 additional batches of Dublin Olympians came through Ensignbus, whilst smaller batches for onward sale were purchased from all the big groups.

Early in 2008 a further 1.2 acres were acquired alongside the existing depot. This has been graded and concreted and following the fitting of wash bay and fuelling facilities will become the main area for the local service buses, which have now crept up to a requirement for 25 vehicles so a fleet size of 33. In addition to these a further 20 double decks are used on the private hire/rail replacement fleet.

In June a large rail job was undertaken for a Dockland Light Railway closure. The closure lasted for approx 8 weeks and utilised over 30 buses per day on various routes to minimise the disruption to commuters. September has been a busy month with the delivery of 10 new double decks to Ensignbus for use on the local routes 73, 83 and X80. This follows the continued passenger growth that has been achieved over the past three years that now means many peak time journeys are overloaded. As passenger comfort has always been a key concern having people standing is not considered consistent with the view that people will use the bus if its reliable, clean and comfortable. The extra seats provided by the 82 seat Volvo Olympuses it is hoped will further enhance the passenger journey and will provide further growth on the routes that will in 2008 carry over 2.1 million passengers.



The rail replacement fleet has continually grown and had improved vehicles, seen here in 2008 is 132 awaiting to leave to take up duties on DLR replacement.

For CS an acquisition of a new depot in Washington DC is the big news. A purpose built transport yard close to the city centre that allows the growing fleet of open top sightseeing buses there to be stored undercover, will help in both reliability and presentation.

Ensignbus is a diverse bus operator and dealer and always in stock are large numbers of both double and single deck vehicles. Why not check out our 'Vehicles for Sale' page, for the latest buses in stock. For 25 years now Ensign has been the market leader in supplying specific vehicles for specific jobs. If you have a query please don't hesitate to contact us. If it can be done with a bus....we've probably already done it! For 25 years now Ensign has specialised in providing vehicles for both the UK and overseas.

Ensign can now boast the largest stock of used double-deck buses in the world, with anywhere from 100-500 buses in stock.



To be continued...