



Night Trip Report

September 2022

This article gives details of a recent night trip hunting service vehicles, plus some views on the post-COVID situation.

With over 800 in its current fleet, London Underground is by far the biggest user of service vehicles. However, the majority of these vehicles are nocturnal, only coming out for the few hours each night when trains are not running. If you want to see them, you have to stay up late. Steve Howard was an expert at night SV hunting trips, and he used to go out a couple of times every month. Over the years he supplied information on thousands of vehicles, which was incredibly useful in setting up and refining the database on this website. I joined Steve for a few of these trips, where we would normally stake out one of the four major locations (Acton, Lillie Bridge, Griffith House or Stratford Market) then drive around central London stations, trying to find where vehicles were working. I wrote a report of one such trip that we did almost exactly 11 years ago, when we managed to see over 200 vehicles in one night. Things have changed a lot since then. The COVID-19 pandemic had various impacts, all of which seem to have resulted in a reduction in service vehicle activity. During the lockdowns, deliveries of new vehicles were delayed, while social distancing measures no doubt impacted how much work could actually be done each night. Although contact with others was not really an issue when driving around by himself, Steve followed the guidance to not go out during the worst phases of the pandemic. And when he did get out he reported that far few vehicles were in evidence than previously. Tragically Steve died in spring 2021.

Even though COVID is no longer such a major issue, its effects are still being felt on the service vehicle fleet. With the collapse in demand during the lockdown, Transport for London lost a large part of its revenue and was doing everything it could to save money. It would appear that this has included the renewal of the service vehicle fleet. Normally, we would expect between 200 and 300 new vehicles to be delivered each year, most of them leased. For 2020 we know of 148 additions, most of them in the first few

months of the year. But 2021 saw only 13 deliveries and a mere 5 in the first 9 months of 2022. It should be mentioned that these figures are based solely on observations. We had a contact at Acton Works who used to supply an updated fleetlist every year or so. This was very useful for capturing the details of the (few) vehicles that nobody had seen, as well as for adding information that might have been missed (such as registration to fleetnumber tie-ups). This contact has evidently moved on and we have had no lists since autumn 2019. As a result, it is possible that a few more vehicles were delivered since then but which have not yet been seen by anyone on LTSV. I should also add that we are making enquiries about reinstating the supply of official information.

Fortunately, there are several other contributors to LTSV who undertake the occasional night hunt. Among them is Dave Wolstencroft, who only recently returned to this hobby after a long absence. Although he does not live in London, he has recently made a number of visits and has explored many of the huge number of locations where service vehicles can usually be seen. In mid-September he invited me to join him and a friend on a night trip. Given that it has been so long since I wrote-up one of these trips, I thought it might be interesting to report how we got on.

I suggested that we start at Lillie Bridge, the main reason being that several vehicles had been seen there for which we still needed fleetnumbers. The continuing allocation of fleetnumbers in a series that started way back in 1939 is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the central fleet. Even though the numbers are not operationally needed (most departments using vehicles do not actually refer to them), they give a sense of continuity and make it easier to keep tabs on the size of the fleet. The fleetnumbers are applied on the sides of the vehicles using quite small transfers. There are many times when you will be able to see the registration of a vehicle but not its fleetnumber. For example, when passing one while driving, or when peering into locations such as Lillie Bridge with binoculars/zoom. Dave had actually paid a night visit to Lillie Bridge already that week, and had only seen a dozen vehicles. I was hoping we would do better tonight.

We arrived rather earlier than needed, shortly before 11pm. There is a common pattern of activity at the main depots. Between about 11pm and midnight, a number of vehicles will be seen arriving. Then between midnight and 1pm, vehicles will depart to their various worksites, comprising a mixture of the earlier arrivals and vehicles that are based there. Since the redevelopment of the Earls Court exhibition centre, the only road access to Lillie Bridge is the rather narrow Beaumont Avenue, which is essentially a residential cul-de-sac. We were luckily able to park near the junction of this road and North End Road, quite close to West Kensington Station. This is perhaps a better (and safer) location for night stake-outs than say Acton or Stratford. There is a pub nearby (for facilities!) and some food and convenience stores that seem to stay open very late.

The first hour was relatively quiet. Just as we arrived, one of the three Citroen Berlingo electric vans went in (it didn't come out again), followed by a handful of small vehicles (Renault Kangoo and VW Caddy vans, plus two of the ten Peugeot Partner cars based here). There was also a steady stream of contractor's

vehicles both inward and outward. Names such as Cleshar and 1st-in-rail predominated, along with a few vans and trucks that were completely anonymous. A change I noticed since my last time here was that none of the full-sized lorries were seen. In the past, it would not be unusual to see one or two of the lorries from Acton arrive, get loaded up then head out. Possibly in their place were a number of midi-sized trucks operated by contractors. These were smaller than a full-size lorry, but bigger than a Transit dropside. Isuzus of 1st-in-rail seemed to be the most numerous.

From about midnight, things picked up a little with a number of the home-based Transit dropside trucks coming out. Fortunately these included the two that we wanted fleetnumbers for, plus a van in the same situation. In fact with 9 seen, Transit dropsides were the most common type noted. We stayed until 1am, by which point it seemed to be getting quiet, and saw a total of 33 different LUL vehicles. Renault Kangoo and VW Caddy vans were also common, but there were just 3 Transit vans seen. Not immediately apparent was that some of the 'boring' vans were quite rare. For example, Renault Kangoo 8942R was new in 2019 but had only been reported once before. Other types seen included a couple of VW Transporter minibuses and Toyota Prius cars and single examples of the Transit Courier and Transit Custom. I didn't count the number of contractor/anonymous vehicles but I reckon it would add at least another 30.

We then returned to Dave's car to start the hunt proper. There are various things to consider when deciding where to go, but with time to visit only a small fraction of the number of stations on the network, it seemed logical to stay in central London. Here it is not unusual for vehicles to have to park up some distance from the station where the actual work is being done. Steve had become very familiar with lots of little back streets and hidden parking places where vehicles could be left, though checking all of them of course increased the amount of time that each visit would take, with no guarantee that there would be any vehicles present. Another factor is the nature of the station. Those with junctions and points (such as Camden Town and Kennington) were often host to vehicles from the various track departments, while stations with lots of interchanges between lines (such as King's Cross) were good places to find Lifts and Escalators (L&E) vehicles. We found a single Transit van near Gloucester Road then headed up to Edgware Road and Griffith House. The yard at the former had several vehicles inside, but these had been seen earlier in the day, while we were a bit late for the Griffith House congregation, with only 4 vehicles parked on the surrounding streets. Baker Street Station always has vehicles, and at least six were parked nearby, though parking spaces are scarcer than when the road was one way. Toyota Yaris car 9112T and a Caddy from the Bakerloo Line (8217VW) were notable visitors. Onwards to Kings Cross, 8 more SVs were seen, mostly parked at the bottom of the Pancras Road and mainly L&E vans. Nearby was RV17PZP, a VW Transporter minibus that is (for some reason) operated in anonymous white. I also noted a couple of Network Rail vehicles, which I have to now keep a look out for to feed data to my other website! Up to Camden Town next, but the majority of vehicles here were contractors. A rare VW Caddy, probably from Edgware, and an L&E Kangoo were the only LUL vehicles.

It was by now 2am and time to finish off. Steve sometimes stayed out until 3am but always reckoned that pickings were slim by then. Besides, Dave needed some sleep as he planned to be out again the following day! Heading to Holborn (from where I could catch a night-bus home), I glanced towards Russell Square station as we passed and, seeing a number of vehicles, suggested that we loop back. This station always seems to have a few vehicles, and they always seem to be rarer ones (perhaps because the station has lifts?). Tonight was no exception, and there were two of the all-white VW Crafters delivered about 2 years ago (one crew van and one dropside) plus a Transit from Museum Way. We then had a look at Templar House in Holborn (Eagle Street), which seemed to confirm the suspicion that it had closed as an LUL location a few years ago. Finally, at Holborn Station, was yet another L&E van plus (nearby) 8691T, the TfL Taxis Toyota car that spends its days at Wembley Park.

In the hour or so of driving we had seen another 32 vehicles (plus a couple of repeats from earlier), for a total of 65. Well down on trips of a few years ago, but pretty good going, especially as many of the vehicles are impossible to see in the daytime. I did have my camera and tripod with me but nothing seemed particularly suitable for photographing, considering the positioning of vehicles, the number of staff around and the time it would take to find somewhere to park and then set up the camera. My thanks to Dave for the driving.