

Bus Services

Epsom Coaches officially started providing bus services in 1986, as a result of deregulation of the bus industry. Prior to that, London Commuter services were introduced in 1982 and in 1985, the company operated a public bus service in the Hampton area, serving Lady Eleanor Hollies school. This was the start of a revolution within Epsom Coaches, that saw considerable growth over the years.



**Leyland
Leopard
coach,
used as
a bus**

1986

Colonel Gaddafi was the catalyst, to move from coach services into the world of buses, given the tyrants bombing of European targets, this meant that many Americans stayed at home, causing tourism in London to fall. This reflected in reduced demand for the firm's coach services.

Roy Richmond looked with interest at the opportunity's bus deregulation offered, with consistent year-round business and improved cash flow. Logically, Epsom Buses was the name chosen and services commenced with route 5, between Epsom and Watersedge. This service was latterly called X5, when it extended to Tolworth and now runs as the E (for Epsom) 5. Route 5 run away from the main roads, through both the Longmead and Watersedge housing estates. This is commonplace now but was unique at the time and was the subject of much complaint from some residents, but huge praise from others.

**One of the first
purpose-built
buses,
Mercedes-Benz/
Reeve Burgess**

1988



The first buses were Leyland Leopard coaches, re branded in a reverse red/cream livery and titled Epsom Buses. These 12 metre vehicles threaded their way through the parked cars but were eventually replaced with purpose built mid-size Mercedes-Benz 25 seaters, bodied by Reeve Burgess. Other body builders included Plaxton (Mini Supreme) but all based on the reliable Mercedes chassis. The exception was a solitary Optare CityPacer, based on a VW chassis. This proved to have spaceship looks but was not heavy duty enough to be reliable. Another early entrant was an Optare StarRider, a better combination, but painfully under powered.



Optare StarRider



Optare CityPacer

The first day of operation, saw competition and dirty tactics from competitor companies, blocking buses in and generally dismissive of this new upstart. They thought that Epsom Buses would not last long, how wrong could they be? Indeed, within a year, the company were judged by the Townswomen’s Guild of the UK, as the best small bus operator in the UK. Roy Richmond was interviewed on the weekly motoring programme “Motoring and the Motorist” on Radio 4 as a result.

Within a few months, 17 of the company’s 50 strong fleet, were operating bus services. The first tendered route, 598, operated between Banstead and Croydon. The tender was won from Surrey County Council and initially used older coaches, but in 1987, 5 new Bedford Derwent buses were purchased. Although the these were a vast improvement on the coach’s suitability for bus work, they still had many steps to negotiate and the drivers had to get used to manual gearboxes again! Despite that, they looked like a bus and were taken seriously by the competition as more and more purpose-built buses replaced the coaches. Low floor, stepless buses had not been invented at that stage!



**Bedford
/Plaxton
Derwent
on route
598**

1988

Another tendered route was 516, which linked Box Hill with Leatherhead, via Headley. This used large vehicles to start with, but given the very narrow roads, especially in Headley, soon moved to smaller vehicles.

The bus infrastructure was put together in just 6 weeks. Timetable leaflets were printed and distributed, bus stops installed, and drivers trained, ready for the new services. Many coach drivers who perhaps thought they were just helping, quite liked the regular work and never looked back!

The early ticket machines had brackets fabricated by the company's engineers to mount ancient Setright machines, which were converted from pounds, shillings and pence!

It wasn't long before, Epsom Buses were the predominant bus operator in Epsom, as the company were filling a much-needed niche, that had never been filled by the traditional bus operators, who until deregulation had the market to themselves. Not for the first time, Epsom Coaches was at the forefront of change in the industry. The coach levels of service and the outstanding quality of the vehicles were a big change from the traditional bus operators and passengers would often wait for an "Epsom bus". One incident almost saw a baby born on route 5. Quick witted driver, Richard Davies cleared the bus in Epsom town centre and rushed the expectant mum to Epsom Hospital just in time. The company later presented the baby's parents Mr and Mrs Spratt with a lifetime bus pass for their daughter Rebecca.

**Rebecca Spratt
with her
parents,
receives her
lifetime bus
pass from Steve
Whiteway and
driver, Richard
Davies
1992**



Not only quality, but determination, was proven during the early days when severe snow threatened services. Epsom Buses continued to provide services, despite the poor weather, when other operators had long thrown in the towel. Coach services always ran, so buses wouldn't be any different. This did much to build on an increasing reputation and led to more growth.



**The first London
route, S4
Mercedes/UVG**

1997

A significant move was made in 1997, with the first successful tender bid for a London bus route. This was a new route, numbered S4, linking Sutton with the Roundshaw housing estate, on the old Croydon airport site. Three new buses, based on Mercedes chassis were purchased for this service, fitted with UVG bodywork, which proved to be a successful combination and included automatic gearboxes. The service was launched with great fanfare, by Glenda Jackson, then Transport Minister and former actress.

The company went on to operate up to 14 (now) TfL routes, which included the S1, linking Banstead with Hackbridge originally, but later extended to Mitcham. They also operated the 413 service, linking Morden with Sutton. These services were originally operated as part of a route network in the Sutton area, by London General. As part of a network of other routes, which all came up for tender at the same time, London General were able to offer a “group bid discount” and as a result usually swept the board. However, shortly after winning the Sutton network in 1999, London General approached Epsom Coaches, asking if they could take over the S1 and 413 services as they were unable to staff them. This was a great opportunity to increase the business with a further 11 buses required. In a six-week period, Epsom Coaches assembled a team of drivers, procured and refurbished 11 second hand MCW Metrorider single deckers and launched themselves onto the network. The “can do” spirit of Epsom, certainly shone though and has done on many occasions, despite often overwhelming odds, which in this case, even a large company like London General could not overcome. Where others failed, Epsom succeeded!

**One of 11 buses
taken from London
General, for routes
413 and S1
Optare Metrorider
1998**



Whilst the MCW buses served a purpose, they were not in line with the Epsom quality ethos and agreement was reached with TfL, to fund a new fleet of buses to service S1 and 413. The extra money was not for the buses themselves, but for enhancements, which were to be a first in London. This included, drivers air conditioning, an improved driver environment, interurban individual passenger seating and low floor access. These were all firsts for buses in London. The buses were based on the well proven Dennis Dart chassis and were fitted with Plaxton pointer bodywork, to this unique specification. All the features included in the buses, delivered late in 1999 have subsequently become standard requirements for TfL buses. London bus drivers will forever be grateful on hot days, for the lead that Epsom took at the time including air conditioning for their comfort.



**Launch of Quality Line
11 new Dennis/Plaxton
Pointers, the first with
driver's A/C in London
1999**

This significant intake into the fleet, saw a change of name for Epsom Buses, to Quality Line, very much reflecting the standards the company continued to demonstrate, despite considerable expansion, with the bus fleet now outnumbering the coaches.

The new specification for buses, was rolled out as new vehicles were acquired, both for expansion and to replace the existing fleet. Such was the investment, Quality Line operated the newest fleet in London and led the way with the first hybrid, a converted diesel Optare Solo. From this development vehicle, there are now over 2,000 hybrid buses in London. Another trial with TfL, saw music piped throughout the bus. This one didn't catch on however!

Quality Line wasn't just about the bus, it was also about raising the esteem of Bus Drivers, in the public's mind. This meant new uniforms, a strict presentation code, equipment for the driver to clean out the bus after every trip and no assault screens. The latter, very unusual in London, but essential to ensure the interface with the public, to improve professionalism in the bus industry. Whilst banks and building societies removed physical screens, the bus industry in London installed them! By raising the standards of drivers, their value would also be raised, ensuring they are well rewarded for what is not an easy job. Whilst not all drivers worked to this end, many did and as a result, Quality Line drivers were always a cut above others, in their presentation and interaction with the travelling public. The standard and presentation of the bus fleet, was also at the top end of the scale.

New ADL/East Lancs Buses for route S3



Given the scattered nature of Quality Line's TfL network, drivers needed to get from Epsom to the start of each route, which could be as far as 15 miles away. The company in common with other operators, initially used old London taxis for this task, but it was soon realised these were not reliable (although smartly liveried) and it was decided to purchase a fleet of Toyota Yaris Verso cars, brand new and with A/C. This was unheard of, that bus drivers would be trusted to respect brand new cars, when they were used to old cars or vans elsewhere. Smartly liveried, the crew car fleet was a great success and with each having been driven locally over 130,000 miles, they were replaced with another new fleet of Vauxhall Meriva's, with automatic gearboxes. The respect shown by the company to its drivers, was rewarded with their care and respect for the fleet, bus or crew car, which was one of the most modern and certainly the best presented in the UK.

Quality line drivers were always assured of a place of rest. In Epsom a dedicated rest room was available to staff in the town centre. Where such accommodation could not be provided, mobile rest rooms were provided at Wallington and Banstead. Known as “Quality Rest” this was another unique part of life as part of Epsom Coaches.



Presentation of the buses was originally taken care of by the bus driver, who was responsible for cleaning the bus on their return from the days work. This was in line with coaches then, although later, Epsom Coaches led the field in taking away taking cleaning of the coach from the driver. Buses are not traditionally cleaned by the driver, although the Quality Line charter included the driver carrying out a litter pick between runs. Cleaners were engaged internally, but later on, transferred to a contractor, Mark Durbridge and then to Nationwide Cleaning and Facilities Management. Both vehicles and the site were cleaned by the contractors, with a no dirt policy! The price was as given, with no attempt to cut the specification down to a price, which in those early days included, regularly polishing the buses! The high standard of presentation was achieved through this policy and assisted in winning new business and retaining staff, who enjoyed excellent working conditions as a result.

The company were very successful in retaining routes, losing only 293 Morden to Epsom, X26 Croydon to Heathrow and S4, Sutton to Roundshaw (its original TfL route). 293 was lost for a 7-year period to London General, but regained in 2018. The X26 service, was operated for a 5-year period, but was won by London General, using existing refurbished double deck buses, which Quality Line was not able to source. Route S4, was lost to Abellio, given a cheaper price. This after 17 years operation of this route, which was started by Quality Line.

The company tendered for selected routes, including high frequency services, which could be operated economically from Epsom garage, but specialised in low frequency services, with a wide range of services, rather than larger routes, which could be too much of a risk should they not be renewed.

When a new route was won, the tradition of giving out “Quality Street” chocolates to the passengers, was well established but sadly, stopped after the change of management.

For passengers who had not experienced Quality Line, this established that the company taking over their route, was a different from the norm, with a personal touch.

However, much of the expansion of Quality Line, which operated over 120 buses at its peak and after its initial tender success, was in retaining routes and catering for their expansion. The S4 for example, started with just 3 buses but expanded to require 5 vehicles. Route 463, saw an even more dramatic expansion, moving from 2 buses to a peak of 7, plus a double decker for schools. Such was the rapid expansion of this route, the company sold off two 10.1 metre ADL buses, to Eastbourne Transport when they were just two years old, as they were too long for the expanded route. This demonstrates the flexibility the company provided to TfL, with whom they had an excellent relationship, often topping the London performance leagues.

Whilst the company operated examples of most of the mainstream bus manufacturers, they were the first to buy the Mercedes-Benz Citaro in London, for the 293 service in 2003. This heavyweight and durable bus was a revelation and although costing more, they proved to be cheaper to operate than their British equivalents and very popular with drivers, with such a prestigious manufacturer. In fact, the company recruited drivers based on the three-pointed star, attracting 500 applications for 20 positions! Such was the draw of Epsom Coaches and Mercedes Benz reputation.

Mercedes Citaro on Route 293

2003

Popular with
drivers!



A further batch of 12 metre Citaros were delivered for operation of the intensive X26 route, when it was awarded to Quality Line in 2012. These were unusual as they were single door and fitted with larger luggage racks, to cater for the airport traffic. A batch of 10.5m Citaro K buses were purchased for route 413, when this was secured in 2016. This route was one of the two, transferred from London General in 1999. Quality Line had previously operated 413 for a 5-year contract period, but did not bid to re-secure, given their concern at the time about the shortage of quality driving staff. The company were very principled that if they could not operate at a high standard, they would rather not operate at all. This came as a surprise to TfL, who had never had an operator decline to bid for a route they already operated. They did, however, persuade the company to bid for route S1, which was also not to be contested, for the same reason. TfL respected the reasons.

The type of bus operated, was often limited in choice. Mercedes-Benz only built single deck buses, originally 12 metre length, which is not a common size in London. Later, they released the Citaro K at 10.5 metre length, and this proved to be ideal for route 413. For the other single decks, the company majored on Optare Solo and later Optare Versa and Metrocity buses, for their TfL services. These included, routes K5, 465, 411, 470 and the smallest route in London, 404, with just one bus.

These were all fitted with Mercedes drivelines and given Optare's lightweight modular construction, they were far more fuel efficient than the ADL and Wright competition. This fuel saving, was a major factor in securing contracts in London, undercutting the competition who continued to operate the heavy, body on chassis combinations offered by the other British manufacturers.



The launch of the 411 Optare Versa

2014

A saving on fuel of 10 to 15% was not to be underestimated and an advantage that was not taken up by the competition. Not only fuel efficient, but durability and reliability were also present in the Optare product. Their stylish design encouraged the traveling public to see buses as a realistic and comfortable alternative to the car. Since the management of the company changed in June 2017, replacements for Optare have been ADL, in line with sister company, London United's policy, including replacing vehicles that were not yet due for change. Quality Line also brought ADL single deck buses, principally for S3, where the forward wheel design of the Optare Solo was prohibitive, as the route was very tight. The company also operated Wrights vehicles, taking a batch of 8 Streetlite buses to replace Optare Solo on route 463. This was unusual as the vehicles were a year old and previously operated in another part of London. The deal was a good one and with the agreement of TfL, they were purchased. However, this proved to be a mistake as the vehicles were very unreliable and were often replaced by their predecessor Optare's, which were 7 years old and had covered over 375,000 miles, thus proving the durability of the Optare product.

Quality Line, always needed to be managed with economy in mind, low cost, high quality. This one reason why RATP group, brought the company, as Quality Line, won many contracts at the expense of London United, despite their opening a garage, just two miles from Quality Line's, Epsom base. As often seems to happen with acquisitions, the key to success is to continue the same principles of management to retain the reason for acquisition, which was the case initially, but later the temptation to introduce a group strategy evidently proved too strong. The resulting outcome is there for all to see.

First double decker's ADL Enviro 400 With the QL team

2007



Double deck buses were never in the initial plans for Quality Line, mainly due to garaging constraints, with such vehicles unable to fit under the main entrance of the garage and with a workshop that could only accommodate single deck vehicles. However, the acquisition of the adjacent heat treatment works in 2004 (see building for a new future) for conversion into a workshop, provided the opportunity to at least maintain double deckers.

As a result, in late 2006 the company decided to bid for local double deck routes, 406 and 418. This required 10 double deck buses for a service previously operated by London United, with single deck buses. Quality Line were successful in bidding for the routes and after some internal evaluation, decided to purchase ADL Enviro 400 vehicles. Scania buses fitted with East Lancs bodywork were also considered. Optare at the time, did not offer a double deck product. The ADL buses were delivered a week before the new contract started in June 2007. The buses were assembled at the Hook Road arena for a photoshoot, along with their newly recruited driving team. The vehicles proved to be a successful choice and at the time of writing are still in service, some 12 years later, on the same routes.



Garage Entrance prior to raising for double deck buses

2007

Although Epsom Coaches now had a suitable workshop, the entrance and exit doors to the garage, needed to be adapted to allow the buses to pass through the garage. Not only that, the body shop, whilst having the height required inside, also needed a higher entrance. Due to some advance thinking, the vehicle wash was suitable for double deck vehicles, but the entrance and exit were not sufficiently high enough! After receiving quotations for the work and in typical Epsom fashion, the alterations to the steel work to the garage were carried out by an internal team, led by Steve Whiteway. This included safety works incorporating a pedestrian door and a fast roller shutter, to allow easy access to the garage, triggered by a radar detector. The reinforced concrete beams above the Bodyshop entrance and the vehicle wash, were cut by a specialist contractor.

The company later added more double decker's, to service TfL route 468 Hook to Epsom and to service school runs on both 293 and 463 routes. All of these were ADL Enviro 400 models. The later redevelopment of the garage overcame the earlier restrictions, with higher and longer vehicles easily accommodated.

The commercial bus network was also included in the move to Quality Line and ran alongside the TfL operation for many years, in the same red livery. However, in 2014, continued commercial pressures and doubt about the services viability, saw the relaunch of the routes, under the original Epsom Buses banner. Given the obvious association with Epsom Coaches, quality was even more important than on the anonymous red bus network. The buses were refurbished and repainted in silver, with the strap line "Silver Service". This emphasised this was a local service that upheld the highest standards. Two new Optare Solo buses were purchased, the first for Surrey services in over 20 years. A deal was negotiated with Surrey County Council, to support the routes and a new timetable published to improve reliability. The new service was launched by the then Mayor, Robert Foote, who also worked part time as a driver for Epsom Coaches!

No external advertising was carried on the Silver Service, except for the Rainbow Centre, providing a focussed outlet for Quality Line's leisure partner, who provided gym and swim for Epsom Coaches and Quality Line staff as one of many benefits.



Epsom Buses

Silver Service

The re-launch of Epsom Buses Silver Service

2014



Quality Line is the only part of the original company left, operating buses mainly in the red livery of TfL, although some services have been transferred to other garages in the group. However, the local Epsom Buses network still runs, albeit not to the level of quality it used to enjoy, with dirty and damaged buses, but given the demise of the Epsom Coaches brand, this is of less concern. The local services still provide a much-needed alternative to London bus routes, especially for the elderly.

From the seed of an idea, by Roy Richmond, 31 years before, buses within Epsom Coaches saw the company expand to 150 vehicles and nearly 400 staff. From being a fill in, for a fall in business for the coach fleet, it became the largest part of the business, with coach standards of operation breathing fresh air into a bus industry that for so many years had been unimaginative and lacking competition. Now part of the mainstream bus industry within a large group, the company did things in a different way, especially for its drivers, the success of which was there for everyone to see.



Run Out Plan - April 2017



