



The ECW-bodied Bristol LWL6G posed beside an ox wagon at Sandstone. PICTURES: JOHN TITLOW

A BRISTOL BY THE COSMOS

State ownership brought an abrupt and premature end to Bristol's export business in the 1940s, the last surviving example of which survives in a working museum in South Africa. **JOHN TITLOW** discovered this single-decker last year, along with some other British-built classics in a fascinating collection in Johannesburg

When the British Transport Commission acquired the Tilling Group's bus operations in September 1948, one of the consequences was that its manufacturing interests — Bristol and Eastern Coach Works — were prevented from accepting new orders from operators outside BTC ownership, a restriction that remained until Leyland acquired a shareholding in the two companies in 1965.

That put an end to promising export opportunities that Bristol had only just begun to exploit in India and South Africa. ECW also got in on the act, bodying 50 Bristol LWL6Gs with Gardner 6LW engines for South Africa in 1948, just before Tilling sold out to BTC.

Although these single-deckers were similar to those that Bristol and ECW were building for the home market, there were differences. Legislation allowed them to be bigger, 30ft (9.14m) long and 8ft (2.4m) wide. The climate demanded that their bodies were built mainly in aluminium rather than the composite structure that ECW still used at the time and that they had half-drop rather than top slider opening windows, with deep louvres above.

They had porch-type forward entrances and, in common with the L-types built for India, a large oil-bath air cleaner on the nearside front bulkhead, alongside the bonnet.

The last LWL

I encountered what is probably the last survivor of those 50 LWL6Gs — and of Bristol and ECW's brief exporting flourish in the 1940s — in South Africa last April at the International Sandstone Festival. It is in the care of the Sandstone Heritage Trust, a private preservation initiative established on a commercial arable farm growing wheat, maize and sunflowers covering 20,000 acres near Ficksburg in the Eastern Free State.

The farm is located under the Maluti Mountains along the Caledon River, which is

the border with land-locked Lesotho, and was bought by its present owners from a British-owned photographic company in 1995. The wonderful photographic opportunities on offer made it too much for me to resist.

Besides buses, this estate is home to a collection of railways, lorries, aircraft, traction engines, cars, military vehicles (including tanks and guns), ox wagons, earthmoving machinery and stationary engines. It also offers a home to other collectors. This has been done under the leadership of Wilfred Mole, a preservationist for all things heritage.

When the trains were on the move at the festival, vintage transport of all descriptions including buses followed on the parallel dirt roads and when the luxury Blue Train visited, the buses and trains were used to ferry passengers to and from the main event.

Everyone on the farm is friendly and nothing is too much trouble. 'Is it possible to have the buses by the level crossing for

photographs with the passing trains?' No problem, it will be arranged. The site is conducive to photography, coupled with wonderful South African light and the added attraction of the cosmos flowers in full bloom along the sides of the fields.

The LWL was a star of the show. It is preserved in the livery of Welkom Bus Services, which operated it until 1967 in the city of Welkom, Free State Province. A bent selector fork in its constant mesh gearbox ended its working career, after which it spent 15 years in the back of a bus shed, used as the night watchman's hut after the interior was stripped of seats and fitted with a fire.

It was finally rescued by preservationist Stephen Coetzee who installed a new battery, enabling it to start almost immediately. He sourced seats from a Johannesburg trolleybus in a scrapyard. For a time afterwards, it was used to transport pensioners around and it has appeared in two films. Eventually it was transferred to Sandstone.

Its non-standard radiator is a recent addition, manufactured and fitted after the original Bristol one developed a bad leak and failed completely. Wilf Mole would still like to find an authentic one, but says the appearance of this one was improved by being painted silver instead of black. The original was black with a silver casing.

Also in operation at the festival was another green halfcab single-decker of British origin, a locally assembled Leyland Tiger OPS4/5 from



Inside the LWL's ECW body, with seats recovered from a scrapped trolleybus. The flywheel housing in the front bulkhead reads 'Eastern'.