

TOP technicians

This year's IRTE Skills Challenge - which seeks to find the best of the best bus and coach technicians and apprentices - lived up to its reputation. Brian Tingham reports



Some 50 bus and coach technicians and apprentices from 10 UK operators, all of whom had competed in Bristol for the sixth IRTE Skills Challenge, attended the awards ceremony on 14 July. The annual awards - which seek to recognise excellence in electrical, mechanical and bodywork service and repair - were this year held at the JLR Experience, Castle Vale near Birmingham, with Ian Chisholm, managing director of SOE (Society of Operations Engineers, the umbrella organisation for the IRTE), SOE president Shaun Stephenson and IRTE professional sector council chair John Eastman presiding.

Victors in these prestigious awards - sponsored this year by Allison Transmission, Bridgestone, Groeneveld, Knorr-Bremse and Shell Lubricants, and supported by DVSA (Driver & Vehicle Standards Agency), MAN and S&B Automotive Academy - can hold their heads high. For not only has each of the individuals and teams been independently assessed as the best of the best, but also, this year, against an even higher standard, according to Richard Belton, deputy chief executive at S&B which hosted testing over three hot days in June.

And competition was fierce. No fewer than 19 teams (10 technicians and nine apprentices) competed from an impressive field comprising



Abellio London and Surrey, Arriva UK Bus, FirstGroup, Go Ahead London, Go South Coast / Salisbury Red Bus Company, London United Busways, Metroline, Tower Transit, Translink and Trentbarton. This is serious stuff: indeed, S&B's facilities were effectively closed to students for almost two weeks, including set-up and testing.

So what greeted the challengers? As in 2015, all entrants were tasked with undertaking a set of practical and written examinations each lasting from 25-45 minutes, with the exception of the bodywork candidates, all of whom faced a five-and-a-half hour challenge. Again as last year, all tests were devised with assistance from the sponsors, with the event host S&B taking the lead role and also providing tools and test rigs. Sponsors and supporting organisations donated the chassis, vehicles, equipment and components, and were involved in simulating faults.

TOUGHENED TESTING

Looking at mechanical testing first, all 19 technicians and apprentices entering this category had to complete nine units - six practical and three theoretical. Examples from the practical tests included:

diagnostics and set-up on Knorr-Bremse bus disc braking systems; fault-finding and measurements on the rear braking system of a MAN Euro 4 bus chassis; and fault identification and assessment on a range of Bridgestone-supplied tyres.

Others comprised:

steering tests on a MAN TGX truck chassis, requiring contestants to set the geometry to manufacturer specification using laser alignment equipment; a general measurement challenge, involving crankshafts, engine cylinders and discs, etc; and DVSA's challenge (see later).

As for the theory tests, it's everything you might expect, with papers covering: general mechanical knowledge (vehicle, steering, braking, suspension, tyres, etc); a general inspection test, based on the DVSA bus inspection manual; and an examination set by Shell covering lubricants and fuels.

Moving on to the electrical challenges, 15 technicians and apprentices were in the running, each facing six practical and one theoretical test. Examples included: diagnosing starting issues on a MAN bus chassis using conventional tools, wiring diagrams, etc, and explaining the rectification process; and identifying faults on two of S&B's electrical simulation panels, again using multimeters, oscilloscopes and wiring diagrams.

Contestants also had to: diagnose charging system faults on a FirstBus training vehicle and suggest remedial measures; complete fault-finding challenges on Knorr-Bremse EBS simulation boards and explain solutions; identify and test a range of components for correct functioning; build a circuit to a wiring diagram devised by S&B; and complete a general electrical theory test.


If that sounds gruelling, spare a thought for the bodywork challenge (14 technicians and apprentices competing), which involved manufacturing a large



step assembly from scratch. S&B's Belton explains that challengers had to demonstrate their capabilities in everything from cutting and folding to welding and riveting, as well as fibreglassing and vinyl floor covering.

"They were marked on the quality of work, the assembly process itself, and the appearance and fit of the finished assembly. Time was tight, but some did complete the task and the quality of their work was extremely good," says Belton.

Finally, turning to DVSA's own test - undertaken by all technicians and apprentices competing in the mechanical category - this involved a topside (inside and out) inspection of a new coach donated by MAN. Contestants were given an hour to complete the inspection, with DVSA examiners monitoring their every move, looking for accuracy and completeness against the PSV (public service vehicle) test inspection manual.

So how did it go? S&B's Belton states that this year's candidates' skill and knowledge levels were "absolutely excellent". Indeed, he says some of the scoring was "incredibly close", adding that the apprentices (who faced the same tests and marking procedures as time-served technicians) acquitted themselves extremely well. "Typically, the apprentices are very competent on the electrical and electronic sides. So what they may lack in experience, they make up for in terms of understanding modern technology, techniques and equipment." 

IRTE SKILLS CHALLENGE ROLL OF HONOUR 2016

Top Scoring Bodywork Technician, sponsored by Bridgestone

WINNER

Collin Truter, London United Busways

RUNNER UP

Witold Wolski, Go-Ahead London

Top Scoring Electrical Technician, sponsored by Shell

WINNER

Kevin Hunter, London United Busways

RUNNER UP

Tom King, Go-Ahead London

Top Scoring Mechanical Technician, sponsored by Allison Transmission

WINNER

Chris Wright, Go-Ahead London

RUNNER UP

Stephen Cribbin, Abellio London
and Surrey

Top Scoring Electrical & Mechanical Award, sponsored by Knorr-Bremse

WINNERS

Neil Owen and **Michael Eaves**,
Arriva UK Bus

RUNNERS UP

Kevin Hunter and **Jack Chaffey**,
London United Busways

Top Scoring Mechanical & Bodywork Award, sponsored by Groeneveld

WINNERS

Ricky Walton and **Jason Williams**,
Trentbarton

RUNNERS UP

Craig Lillie and **Brad Everett**,
Go South Coast - Salisbury Red Bus Co

Top Scoring DVSA Inspection Technician

WINNER

Stephen Cribbin, Abellio London
and Surrey

RUNNER UP

Liam O'Brian, FirstGroup

Top Scoring DVSA Inspection Apprentice

WINNER

Chris Barry, London United Busways

RUNNER UP

Jamie Wright, Go-Ahead London

Top Scoring Bodywork Apprentice

WINNER

John McKeen, Translink

RUNNER UP

Ryan Cassidy, FirstGroup

Top Scoring Electrical Apprentice

WINNER

Gavin McManus, Translink

RUNNER UP

Thomas Hallett, Arriva UK Bus

Top Scoring Mechanical Apprentice

WINNER

Eugene Arbuzov, FirstGroup

RUNNER UP

Jamie Wright, Go-Ahead London

Philip Margrave Memorial Award for Outstanding Achievement

WINNER

Martin Tomkins, Metroline

IRTE Outstanding Team Award

WINNERS

Witold Wolski, **Tom King** and
Chris Wright, Go-Ahead London