

EXAM TIME

More than 40 apprentice and fully qualified technicians from bus operations across the country gathered at S&B Automotive Academy in Bristol for the IRTE Skills Challenge. Will Dalrymple was there

Operators in this year's event included East Yorkshire Buses, National Express, First Bus, Go Ahead, Lothian Buses, Metroline and Trent Barton.

The apprentice and fully qualified technicians faced tasks on buses including ADL Enviro 200, the S&B MAN coach chassis, a First Badgerline bus and test rigs. In addition, there were theory tests on laptops, electrical faults, diagnostics, wiring tasks and circuits and valve clearance tests. Body technicians performed a body panel repair and manufactured a sill section using MAG and spot welding.

The second day of the three-day event featured a visit by Loveday Ryder (pictured above inset, at right), chief executive of DVSA, which sponsors the event. She told *Transport Engineer*: "I am an engineer - civil, not mechanical - but I rarely get to do anything practical."

She adds that she could imagine DVSA continuing to be involved with the event. "It's really important for us, because obviously we represent the industry in terms of safety and standards-setting. To see people coming in and showing what they can do, demonstrating their skills,



demonstrating best practice, that is absolutely what we should be involved with. I'm very proud that we sponsor it."

S&B operations director Richard Belton, one of the principal event organisers, welcomed Ryder's participation in the event. He reflected: "It's really pleasing to see her interest in the tests and in the competitors."

One keen team captain was Dean Fillingham, engineering manager of East Yorkshire buses. Having only recently joined the company, Fillingham says that he focused on young staff to change the company culture at the Hull-based operator: "I want engineering to be a one-stop job, where one person can do it all. At work, managers take the pressure. Here, they know it's all down to them." The company runs about 280 vehicles including coaches and employs some 700 staff. It currently has 15 apprentices across six sites. Andy Benstead, quality engineer, said the event "showcases the skills in our business and gives apprentices some exposure".

Meanwhile, Lee Sandford, National Express engineering training manager and team captain, reports that three

members of its fully qualified team have returned, including last year's top scoring mechanical technician Craig Perkins in the masters' category.

"It's pushing him outside of his comfort zone, which is good," Sandford says. Commenting on the event in general, he adds: "It's been great to be back this year. There has been a lot of excitement in the bus group to attend. The tests were different this time - that's good, that they aren't repetitive. I am looking forward to the awards event. I'm after the team award this year."

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

As for the point of view of the sponsors, Knorr-Bremse sales





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executive Carl Dibble says: "This year we had our new trainer (Simon Wallace) running the Knorr-Bremse mechanical and electrical tests. As it was his first time attending, it was good to get his feedback. He really enjoyed the event and is already looking forward to next year. There was a mix of abilities from the candidates and they all seemed to be enjoying the event, albeit feeling the pressure. As always, S&B were very accommodating, and provided all of the support we could need. One point to note is that a few of the candidates displayed a really high level of ability and left us very impressed."

From the point of view of S&B Automotive Academy, the event comes at a time of transition, where electric vehicle training is becoming more important. Says CEO Phil Marsh: "There's a lot happening with EV training development. We have doubled sales in the last 12 months, from pretty much a start from zero, and I can't see it abating."

For these learners, it is targeting electric vehicle training to IMI level 4, although S&B offers lower levels as well, says Belton. The academy does have a Smith battery-electric truck to offer learners work on; in reality most

EV training is done on passenger cars, of which it owns several. But Belton stresses that doesn't matter, as the technology, and techniques, are transferable to bus, coach and heavy goods. The training also covers diagnostics of online components. "The components for commercial electric vehicles are the same, but effectively bigger," he observes.

To cater to CV learners interested in EVs, Belton says S&B is contemplating launching training for the new irtec EV qualification, or a new hybrid course of its own comprising a two-year, Level 2 autocare car qualification followed by six to 12 months of training in EV diagnostics.

In the meantime, the academy – and the Skills Challenge – offer a focus on a combined mechanical-electrical, or mechelec, approach. Says S&B deputy team lead Gulam Bakawala: "A lot of mechanical components have now been integrated with electrical systems. What you think is an electrical issue is actually a mechanical issue causing an electrical fault."

Similarly, previously-separate systems are starting to be unified. He adds: "This is where knowledge and up-to-date training is important." **TE**

↓ Sponsor news

ADL has opened new premises in Farnborough. Trident House is said to be critical to taking forward the company's new product development agenda and zero emission mobility ambitions, with the hub housing experts from across the business in engineering and test and development, as well as other teams. It replaces the previous Guildford site.

IMPERIAL ENGINEERING is highlighting the importance of brake maintenance. "These safety-critical systems demand regular inspection and maintenance, in accordance with manufacturer guidelines. Imperial Engineering is experiencing an increase in demand from PSV operators for replacement OEM disc brake components, despite the fact that key items in the system, such as calipers, are intended to last the typical 15-year service life of a vehicle, providing they are properly maintained," says the company.

PREMIER PITS has launched a hinged pit cover, intended primarily as a fall restraint, although it can be walked on. The retrofit system consists of linked 2.5m modules of yellow-painted steel wire mesh that hang down in one side of the pit. Each is fitted with a pneumatic actuator and locking pins that engage automatically as the cover is raised. The advantage of the product is that it can fit the full length of the pit without taking up any space or requiring extra excavation, unlike previous roller-shutter type pit door covers. The cover accommodates pit jacks, too. Above the stairs, one section folds up to become a handrail. The first unit was installed in May.

