

Website Gems: Esso Tank Wagon No. 1921

When I first wrote some text for the webpage on our Esso tank wagon, I wondered why, at the height of World War II, the Ministry of Supply released material and resources to construct a tank wagon to essentially carry lubricating oil. I did not give it a great deal of further thought.

However, recent research by my friend and former Bluebell Railway colleague Martin Allen has revealed that the wagon was actually one of a number built for the Air Ministry, principally to supply fuel to the numerous air bases which, at that time, served the large number of Allied aircraft based in Britain.

It was built by Hurst Nelson & Co. of Motherwell and was numbered 812 in the Air Ministry fleet. All privately owned vehicles had to be registered with one of the railway companies in order to travel on the main network and our tank was registered with the LMS as No. 162376, star-plated in January 1942.

The white star, two feet across at the right-hand of the tank side, together with the cast star plate on each solebar, denotes that this wagon conforms to the requirements to run in goods trains having an average speed of 35 mph, stopping at least every 40 miles. This wagon was built with a handbrake only.

It was originally built to 1927 RCH specification as a "Class A" tank to carry highly flammable liquids such as aviation spirit (a high-octane petrol) with top discharge via a siphon tube. After the war, surviving tank wagons were sold off, mostly to Shell Mex and BP who kept them for Class A traffic.

Esso also acquired some (including this one, which they numbered 1921) which were converted for Class B traffic with heating coils and bottom discharge. The ladders are part of that conversion. They were not in the original specification, to discourage theft of fuel. Fuel terminals and discharge points had trackside catwalks for access to the top of the tanks.

Class B tanks carried less volatile fluids such as Derv (diesel), gas oil ("red" diesel), fuel oil, or lubricating oil and were generally black. Class B tanks were permitted to have bottom discharge outlets. This tank was fitted with a pair of heating pipes which would be connected to a static steam supply at the discharge point in order to accelerate the flow of viscous fluids.

Tank wagons retained their private ownership and were not nationalised in 1948. As larger tank wagons with vacuum brakes and roller bearings were introduced from the 1950s, this type of tank saw less and less mainline service. No. 1921 was donated to the Railway by Esso in November 1977, and it was initially restored by

Wagon Repairs Limited at Esso's expense. A cast plaque affixed to the vehicle records this fact. The wagon arrived on 25 April, 1978 and was formally presented on 3 May, 1978. No. 1921 is part of our serviceable vintage wagon fleet.

More details can be found at: <http://www.bluebell-railway.co.uk/bluebell/wagon/1921.html>

By Martin Skrzetuszewski, C&W Department