

BR Wagon Liveries and Lettering 1948-1983

This guide covers goods and departmental wagons of the BR era up to sectorisation in 1984. There was probably more variation in lettering on nominally identical wagons in this period than at any other time: before group companies had rather more standardisation; after the traditional wagon load freight had more or less vanished leaving block trains of largely similar wagons. The markings and their style and placement changed several times during the period, and goods wagons were rarely repainted and could easily go 15 years between full repaints. Many changes were patch painted when convenient on top of the previous markings, or never made at all.

Look at photographs to decide which markings to add and where, many photos are available online.

Revenue Stock

Fitted (or piped) stock was painted bauxite and had white lettering. Unfitted stock was painted grey and had white lettering on black panels. Insulated stock was white (briefly stone in 1949) with black lettering, this was changed to ice-blue/black around 1960. Meat vans were painted crimson with yellow lettering for a short time before becoming bauxite/white.

Most wagons have a cast semi-circular builders plate on the left of the solebar with the wagon number, builder, and other information. When new the lettering and outline was picked out in white, but it was rarely repainted so can be left plain black/rust for older stock.

From 1949 the layout of the lettering was:

On the left (from the bottom):

Running number, prefix indicating who built it (E, M, S, W, or B).

Capacity (e.g. 16T). Above the running number.

Occasionally a wagon type such as "Plate" above this.

On the right (from the bottom):

Tare weight (unladen weight) – e.g. 9-11

Wheelbase – in feet and inches, e.g. W.B. 12' - 0".

XP marking if able to run at higher speeds and be attached to passenger trains.

Hopper wagons with the lower part of the body sloping often had the tare and wheelbase painted on the solebar.

Painting and maintenance dates were on the solebar in 1" letters, usually considered too small to bother with in N.

Vacuum fitted stock had an * on the solebar marking the position of the vacuum release handle (to release brakes when shunting).

Haresnape "Railway Liveries – BR Steam 1948-68" pages 91 and 94 has the standards for lettering in 1949, though from photos slightly larger letters were often used.

In 1964 a major change was made, the new standard was:

On the left a white box divided horizontally into 3 sections, the central one further divided vertically:

Top box – Telegraphic code

Middle boxes – capacity and tare weight

Bottom box – running number.

Telegraphic codes were short codes indicating the wagon type, usually descriptive, for example HOP 21 for a 21T coal hopper, or VANFIT for a fitted van.

On the right was a new panel with a white border for information such as last paint date. Rows of letters down the left indicated information to be recorded with dates etc. to the right – all in 1" letters. Some were on black panels behind, and after a little while many appeared to be as the old information was over-painted in black when updated.

The XP marking was put in a square box of its own, usually centre left, but quite often elsewhere.

The intention was to use bauxite for both fitted and unfitted stock, this was dropped after a few months because of the confusion it caused.

This sounds very organised, but in practice most changes were made piecemeal and almost any combination of the two styles could be seen. The telegraphic code was quite often added with no box. While there was no wheelbase in the new markings, all the older wagons retained this marking. The maintenance panel on the right seems to have been added more quickly and consistently than the changes to the left hand panel.

The TOPS computer system was introduced in 1973 and had 3 character codes for each wagon type:

1st: General type of wagon such as H hopper, V Van

2nd Distinguished different designs, usually allocated sequentially

3rd Brake type: commonest were O unfitted, P piped, V vacuum, A air.

Other changes to markings were:

1960 – Electrification flashes on each end, sometimes on both left and right, sometimes only on one side. They were added fairly quickly, particularly on stock that ran "under the wires".

1966 – coal wagons other than 16T were given a suffix to their number indicating capacity: K 21T, N 24.5T. Proved not very useful and dropped after a few years.

1974 – TOPS system fully implemented, with TOPS codes replacing telegraphic codes. It seems to have been some time before the new codes were painted on wagons, I've not found any in photos from 1975 and only by 1977 do they seem to have been at all common, though most wagons had them by 1980. Many wagons never received the telegraphic code.

1975 – capacity and tare weight changed to metric. Again spread over several years, the tare was formatted as "tare 9^{800 kg}"

Departmental Wagons

Departmental wagons were even less likely to get repainted than revenue ones. Often an old revenue wagon had not repainted for many years was taken into departmental use and the only change was to prefix the running number and perhaps add allocation markings.

The livery for new stock and complete repaints was:

Up to 1960: black with straw yellow lettering

1960-63: gulf red with white lettering

1963-83: olive drab with white lettering

After 1983 the “Dutch” livery of a yellow band on light grey with white lettering was introduced.

Few wagons received the gulf red livery, photos are rare. After 1960 many wagons remained black but markings were repainted in white not yellow.

Style and position of markings was broadly the same as for revenue stock, with the same changes in 1964.

Inherited stock had their original running numbers prefixed by D and the company letter, ex-revenue stock had a D added to the front of the number. BR builds had DB plus a 6-digit number starting with a 9. The latter usually had a regional allocation shown, a large E followed by a smaller E, M, S, Sc (Scottish), or W; the inherited stock usually just had a large E. In the 1970s a further letter was sometimes added to the front of the running number indicating the department, e.g. K for S&T.

There were of course the well known “fishkind” telegraphic codes such as Dogfish or Shark, usually somewhere on the upper left. These were retained even after TOPS codes were added.

Departmental TOPS codes had their own initial letters: Q – coaching stock; Y freight bogie stock; Z 2 or 3 wheeled or special wagons. So, for example, a Tunny ballast wagon was ZCO.

The above only touches on the markings that could be seen, there were lots of additional specialised marks; even more than for revenue stock you need to look at photos.

References

Paul Bartlett's web site has large numbers of wagon photographs, mainly from around the 1970s and 80s, but some earlier. Searches will find you other sites and odd images that have been uploaded; beware that liveries of preserved wagons are not always accurate.

<http://paulbartlett.zenfolio.com/paulbartlettsrailwaywagons>

There are many books with photographs, though a lot are out of print and you have to search for second-hand copies.

For BR built wagons up to the late 60s Don Roland "British Railways Wagons – the first half million" is invaluable, with descriptions of all wagons built, photographs of most, and lists of running numbers.

David Larkin has published several books, about 50/50 text and photos, each covering a different era. Most of these are still in print from Kestrel:

<http://www.crecy.co.uk/kestrel-railway-books?sort=2a&page=1>

or from Santona (1968 onwards):

<http://www.santona.co.uk/prodww.html>

A series of booklets "Railways in Profile" started by Geoff Gamble and published by Cheona have photographs from the BR era with detailed captions, each booklet covers a different group of wagons, for example cattle wagons and brake vans.

http://cheona_publications.tripod.com/rip_index.htm

You may find second-hand booklets from the "Pictorial Survey" series by David Larkin that have similar contents, slightly earlier photographs.

For colour photographs (and a lot of detail on the wagons) the best books are probably Trevor Mann "British Railways Unfitted and Vacuum Braked Wagons" and David Ratcliffe "BR Air Braked Wagons in Colour", both published by Ian Allan – though almost all the photos are from the 1980s. For earlier colour photos try Hendry "British Railways Goods Wagons in Colour for the Modeller and Historian", though most of the wagon photos are from the 70s or of preserved wagons in group liveries.

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