

# ROLL OF

**60 technicians from 10 bus operators took part in the IRTE Skills Challenge. Brian Tinham reports from last month's glittering awards ceremony**

**S**ome 60 technicians and apprentices, from 10 bus operators, who had stepped up to the plate for the prestigious IRTE Skills Challenge 2014, attended a glittering awards ceremony last month.

The awards, which recognise and reward excellence in electrical, mechanical, and bodywork service and repair, were fittingly staged at the Gaydon Heritage Motor centre, and presided over by ex-FirstGroup chief executive and IRTE patron Sir Moir Lockhead, and IRTE president Gerry Fleming.

Winners of the awards – sponsored by Allison Transmission, Bridgestone, Knorr-Bremse and Shell Lubricants – can hold their heads high. Along with those independently judged as runners up and highly commended, they prevailed over their peers from Abellio, Arriva, FirstGroup, Go Ahead London, Go South Coast, London United, Metroline, Preston Bus, Tower Transit, and Translink.

Now in their fourth year, these are serious awards underpinned by serious practical tests and written examinations. Each was devised with help from the sponsors (all of which are strong in bus technology), along with the testing event host S&B Automotive Academy. For the first time, DVSA (the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency) also contributed its own test, with technicians entered for the competition's mechanical category being challenged to complete a PSV (public service vehicle) annual test.

Also indicative of the gravity of the Skills Challenge is that accommodating the testing cycle early in June consumed a full week at S&B Automotive Academy's Bristol facility. What's more, trials were conducted on a mix of S&B's and the sponsors' test rigs, as well as on a small fleet of buses donated by IRTE supporters Abellio, MAN and Mercedes-Benz.

## Testing times

Looking at the mechanical category, for example, the transmission test involved a written examination, and diagnosis and correction of a gearbox oil level fault on the Abellio bus. Getting this right, says Steve Curling, from Allison Transmission, beats even some experienced technicians, and yet is critical to preventing bigger issues down the line. Similarly, on the braking test, devised by Knorr-Bremse, 30 minutes

were allowed for inspecting a disc brake set up and determining its roadworthiness.

Mechanical testing continued with: multiple-choice questions and a visual test covering lubricants; engine component measurements using dial test indicators, gauges, vernier callipers, etc; and the DVSA trial, with contestants asked to carry out as much of a PSV test as possible, including topside, inside and lights inspections – identifying defects and categorising them as pass or fail.

Meanwhile, for the electrical tests, entrants were asked to investigate faults on an EBS system provided by Knorr-Bremse – including reading wiring diagrams and assessing values. They also had to identify an electrical door fault on a Mercedes-Benz bus, and wiring faults on a MAN vehicle – the latter separating those able to spot simple, low-cost root causes from those who could not. And there were faults with slow wiper motors, widescreen washers and other equipment requiring contestants to use multimeters and oscilloscopes.



# HONOUR

Finally, on the bodywork side, technicians and apprentices were tasked with repairing a sill section – the five-hour test involving spot welding, riveting, bonding, MIG welding and MIG brazing. Each finished piece underwent testing by S&B engineers.

“The tests devised by the sponsors focused on the key skills that technicians need to operate,” comments Richard Belton, deputy chief executive of S&B Automotive Academy. “It’s about going back to basics, as no manufacturers’ diagnostics were allowed. The competitors needed to follow a logical process to work out what was wrong.”

## Operators’ verdicts

What do the operators’ who fielded technicians and apprentices for the contest have to say? Metroline training manager Mark Hayward is unequivocal: “Taking part in a competition like this is good for the company, but it’s even better for the individuals, especially the apprentices. No matter how confident you are, being tested under surveillance makes you


work hard. It’s also good to see where they stand.”

And he adds: “The IRTE Skills Challenge fits well with our development and training structure at Metroline. We are extremely proud of our apprentice training framework, for example. It’s a five-year programme that takes candidates with the commitment and determination to win. We train them to be well-rounded engineers and managers. Next year we’ll enter apprentices and technicians again.”

Metroline engineering director Ian Foster agrees. “We’ve supported the IRTE and SOE for as long as I can remember. Skills and qualifications are something we all need. We’ve reintroduced diagnostic skills, mechanical skills and bodywork skills: stripping down and repairing engines; carrying out gearbox and axle rebuilds, not just unit changes; and brazing and welding. We’re also working with Volvo, MAN and ADL to get the maintenance matrices we need. In the next two years, we’ll have master technicians in all trades and technicians fully trained on everything from hybrids to all the body systems. So, for me, the Skills Challenge is about celebrating and benchmarking our in-house competence.”

Peter Lewis, engineering performance manager at UK Bus, FirstGroup, expresses similar views. “The Skills Challenge is a showcase for our talent. We’ve invested heavily over last three years with Manchester and Bristol colleges, and our own mobile training facilities to improve our performance and reduce breakdowns, while increasing reliability. The challenge is a very good way of testing how effective our training on modern vehicle systems has been... Everyone felt it was well run and well organised, and we’ll definitely be entering again next year.”

But the last word goes to Alan Coney, engineering director at Tower Transit. He believes the Skills Challenge has put this new operator on the

map and he’s enthusiastic for the future. “We entered two technician teams and an apprentice team, and they and their managers all took it very seriously. It gave them the opportunity to shine against their peers in other, much larger bus operators with bigger resources. I was always confident that our people were competent to stand their ground. We’re too new for this to benchmark our training, but it’s been very good for morale.” 

**IRTE Skills Challenge: 2014 roll of honour**  
**Top Scoring Bodywork Technician, sponsored by Bridgestone:**  
**Winner:** Paul Lenihan, Tower Transit  
**Runner up:** Simon Mockford, Go-Ahead London  
**Highly Commended:** Gary Henshaw, FirstGroup

**Top Scoring Electrical Technician, sponsored by Shell Lubricants:**  
**Winner:** Colin Harris, Arriva  
**Runner up:** Kevin Hunter, London United  
**Highly Commended:** George Leach-Walton, London United

**Top Scoring Mechanical Technician, sponsored by Allison Transmission:**  
**Winner:** Stephen Cribbin, Abellio  
**Runner up:** Peter Buckle, FirstGroup  
**Highly Commended:** Martin Tomkins, Metroline

**Top Scoring Electrical & Mechanical Award, sponsored by Knorr-Bremse:**  
**Winners:** David O’Hara and Peter Buckle, FirstGroup  
**Runners up:** Chris Brown and Martin Tomkins, Metroline

**Top Scoring DVSA Inspection Technician:**  
**Winner:** Adam Geddes, Preston Bus  
**Runner up:** Stephen Cribbin, Abellio

**Top Scoring DVSA Inspection Apprentice:**  
**Winner:** Jon Marriage, Metroline  
**Joint runners up:** Tina Hayden-Williams, FirstGroup, and Daniel Kitchen, Preston Bus

**Top Scoring Bodywork Apprentice:**  
**Winner:** Mark Rawcliffe, Preston Bus  
**Runner up:** Gregory Pinto, Tower Transit

**Top Scoring Electrical Apprentice:**  
**Winner:** Daniel Gardner, Arriva  
**Runner up:** Daniel Robinson, FirstGroup

**Top Scoring Mechanical Apprentice:**  
**Winner:** Pamela Chapman, Arriva  
**Runner up:** Tina Hayden-Williams, FirstGroup

**IRTE Award for Outstanding Achievement:**  
 Keval Rayatt, Colin Harris and Tom Hubbard, Arriva

