



The IRTE Skills Challenge recognises and rewards excellence in bus and coach service and repair. Brian Tingham reports from the fifth annual awards ceremony in Birmingham

Best of the

No fewer than 18 teams of bus and coach technicians and apprentices from 10 operators, who had battled it out early in June for the top slot in the fifth annual Skills Challenge 2015, attended the IRTE's prestigious awards ceremony on 16 July.

The awards - which recognise excellence in electrical, mechanical and bodywork service and repair - were this year staged at the National Motorcycle Museum, with IRTE patron and former FirstGroup chief executive Sir Moir Lockhead OBE presiding, alongside IRTE president Gerry Fleming.

Winners of these awards - again sponsored by Allison Transmission, Bridgestone, Knorr-Bremse and Shell Lubricants - should be proud. Each of these individuals and teams has been independently assessed as the very best in the business.

And with 10 major bus operators fielding impressive teams - Abellio, Arriva, First Group, Go-Ahead London, Go South Coast, London United, Metroline, Tower Transit, Translink and

Trentbarton - that is no mean feat.

Furthermore, these awards are hard-won, based on a gruelling set of practical and written examinations and probed by experienced judges. As last year, each of the tests was devised with help from the sponsoring organisations, along with the testing event host S&B Automotive

Academy. Also as last year, DVSA (the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency) contributed its own challenge, with technicians and apprentices being tasked with accurately completing PSV (public service vehicle) annual tests.

To emphasise the rigour involved, it's worth noting that testing for the Skills Challenge took over S&B Automotive Academy's Bristol facility for four full days in June. Competing teams and individuals were allocated slots across the days to complete their tests (newly devised for this year), each designed to flesh out knowledge, expertise and engineering excellence on a mix of S&B's and the sponsors' test rigs, as well as a small fleet of buses donated by IRTE supporters Abellio and MAN.

Putting meat on those bones, all technicians entering

the mechanical and electrical categories of the Skills Challenge faced six tests, together taking five hours but split over multiple tasks (taking from 30 minutes to one hour each). All were watched and assessed by experts from S&B and the Challenge sponsors.

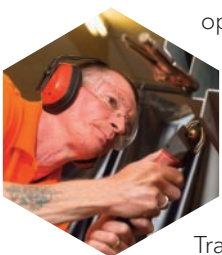
DIAGNOSTICS TESTS

Knorr-Bremse, for example, ran some of the electrical and mechanical tests, teasing out entrants' knowledge and diagnostic techniques in discovering unusual EBS faults on the electrical side. Similarly, Allison Transmission set mechanical fault-finding tests on the Abellio bus, in its case majoring on issues currently emerging in bus and coach workshops.

Other tests involving the MAN bus chassis examined technicians'

understanding of vehicle electronics, focusing on the use of diagnostic tools and scopemeters for determining CANbus and LIN bus faults. As Richard Belton, deputy chief executive at S&B

Automotive Academy, puts it: "It's



best



first time last year, says the tests' rigour fits in with this operator's own development and training structure. "Taking part in a competition

IRTE Skills Challenge 2015 Roll of Honour

Top Scoring Bodywork Technician, sponsored by Bridgestone.

Winner: Jason Williams, Trentbarton
Runner Up: Colin Truter, London United Buses

Top Scoring Electrical Technician, sponsored by Shell.

Winner: Luke Wood, Go Ahead London
Runner Up: Andrew Howie, First Group

Top Scoring Mechanical Technician, sponsored by Allison Transmission.

Winner: Ray Silcox, First Group
Runner Up: Martin Tomkins, Metroline

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

Winner: Tom King, Arriva, electrical
Pamela Chapman, Arriva, mechanical
Runner Up: Chris Brown, Metroline, electrical
Martin Tomkins, Metroline, mechanical

Top scoring DVSA Inspection Technician.

Winner: Ben Gilmore, Go South Coast
Runner Up: Gary Richens, London United Buses

Top scoring DVSA Inspection Apprentice.

Winner: Evan Wilton, Translink
Runner Up: Pamela Chapman, Arriva

Top Scoring Bodywork Apprentice.

Winner: Michelle Wolf, First Group
Runner Up: Matthew Newton, Arriva

Top Scoring Electrical Apprentice.

Winner: Tom King, Arriva
Runner Up: Ross Lewin, Tower Transit

Top Scoring Mechanical Apprentice

Winner: Pamela Chapman, Arriva
Runner Up: Evan Wilton, Translink

Phillip Margave Award for Outstanding Achievement 2015.

Winner: Pamela Chapman, Arriva

IRTE Outstanding Team Award 2015.

Winner: Tim Laws Chapman, First Group, bodywork
Andrew Howie, First Group, electrical
Ray Silcox, First Group, mechanical

always interesting to see how experienced people perform alongside some of the apprentices brought up on new technology."

Meanwhile, technicians entering the bodywork category also had five hours to complete their practical tests, which involved several tasks, each examining their expertise in fabrication, welding, riveting and bonding. Belton explains that all testing started in the morning, with the technicians required to submit their projects for examination by mid afternoon. "All of them were monitored all of the time, watched through every stage of the test, with every completed part also marked separately."



DVSA INSPECTION

As for those taking the inspection technician category with DVSA, each was required to complete ground-up and interior vehicle inspections (no under-body inspections). While DVSA was targeting what Belton describes as reasonably straightforward faults that qualified inspectors must spot on every inspection, some of the technicians and apprentices and inspectors clearly found this test challenging. The result: variable marks, but overall excellent levels of achievement.

What do engineering managers and trainers think of the Skills Challenge now it's over for this year? Mark Hayward, training manager for Metroline, who entered a team for the

like this is good for the company but it's even better for the individuals, especially the apprentices," he adds. "No matter how confident you are, being tested under surveillance will make you nervous and it's good to see where you stand."

Meanwhile, Lloyd Mason, engineering development manager for Arriva, says: "The Challenge is now an established event in the calendar, and gives our technicians a chance to showcase their abilities and

perform to the highest level. At Arriva we value engineering excellence, which is why we continue to take part." Last year, Mason led his team to win the top prize, the IRTE Award for

Outstanding Achievement, which this year he relinquished to First Group. Instead, Arriva took the top prize in the IRTE Electrical & Mechanical award. 