

FLXIBLES RE-ENACT THEIR FINEST HOUR

By Geoff Johnson

Any person who remembers those fast and furious days of road transport during the early 1950s and has no admiration for Ansett-Pioneer's Flxible Clippers cannot have any soul!

Hard words, indeed... but true!

The American-designed Flxible Clippers with their sleek appearance, aerodynamic fronts, spherical rear ends and roof-mounted air scoops were the front runner of modernity, comfort and speed in those early coaching days.

We had not seen anything like them before... and it was many years before we saw anything else that quite aroused the imagination as did the Flxibles.

Following the importation of a prototype from the Flxible organisation in the USA, Ansair built 130 of these superb machines between 1951 and 1960.

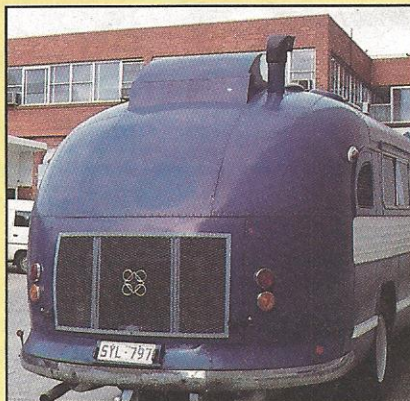
Where are they today? Unfortunately most were scrapped or left derelict when they outlived their usefulness as buses, coaches or even as mobile homes... but all is not lost because a group of enthusiasts anxious that the Flxible Clipper charisma should not disappear has formed a club and have restored several to going order.

Then late last year, the members decided that it would be appropriate to re-enact the first Pioneer Express Melbourne-Sydney service, 30 years later, which was operated with Clippers running to a 17 hour schedule for the 595 mile journey (via Canberra) which included five en-route stops of 170 minutes for meals and changeovers.

The re-enactment run took place on January 23/24 this year and was publicised in the January issue of Truck & Bus. Gladly, I accepted the invitation of Club president Bill Hardinge to take part in the run.

Four old Clippers made the journey. They are owned by Gary Driver, Bill Hardinge, Des Feary and Doug Charlton.

Gary Driver's unit has been beautifully



The rounded rear end of Des Feary's Clipper has been fitted with a grille for cooling the rear-facing Perkins V8 engine. The chassis rails were modified to accept the wide cylinder block and manifolds of the big engine.

Gary Driver was able to acquire a roll of the original red moquette seat cover material used by Ansair for the refurbishing of his Flxible.



restored as a coach while the others are fitted out as mobile homes.

Bus historian Ian Cooper told me that 100 Clippers were built for Pioneer Tours, 11 for Ansett Roadways, four for Ansett Airways, six for Newmans of New Zealand, three for Cooks Sedans of Hobart, three for Green Coach Lines, also of Hobart, two for Benders Busways of Geelong and two for Sullivans Sedans of Launceston.

This meant that 115 went to Ansett companies, six to New Zealand, eight to Tasmania, with the late Mrs Bender being the only mainland operator to acquire Clippers.

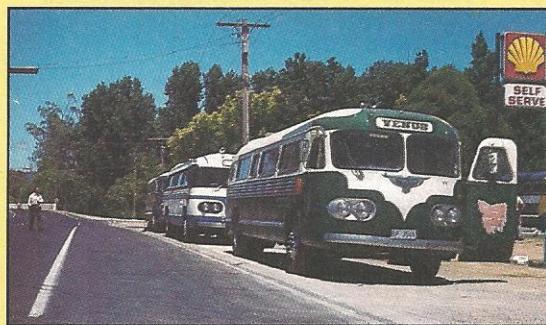
Power units varied with Deutz air-cooled 614 and 714 engines predominating, also Leyland 7.4 litre and Cummins JBS 600 engines were used initially. Later repowers included Detroit 4/71s.

YESTERDAY-2



This was the scene outside the Ansett Terminal in Melbourne as the four participating Flexibles were readied to depart on the historic anniversary re-enactment run to Sydney. Thirty years later, the Clippers still manage to turn the heads of onlookers.

Doug Charlton's Flexible still carries the green and cream colour of Tasmanian Coach Lines and the island map on the door but it has acquired the name Venus. Behind it at a refuelling stop were the Clippers of Bill Hardinge and Gary Driver.

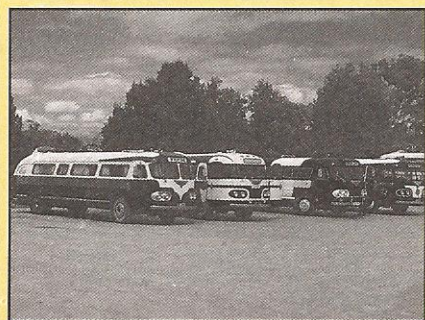


Des Feary's coach has a roller shutter along the nearside which, when opened, adds outdoor living to the comfortable lounge area at the back of the saloon.

Once used for tour work by a pop music group, Des Feary's Clipper has been converted to a mobile home and broadcast control unit. It sports an eye-catching blue and orange colour scheme.



Who would think this beautifully restored Clipper of Gary Driver was almost a wreck when he acquired it? It was the only vehicle in the run that was not originally built for the Ansett organisation.



Lined up at Doug Lever's depot are the four Clippers belonging to (from left) Doug Charlton, Bill Hardinge, Des Feary and Gary Driver.



With an overall length of 33 ft (10 metres), the Clippers seated 29 passengers in recliner seats or 33 in loose back, bag-type seating. The large rear compartment housed the engine and provided luggage capacity of 115 cu.ft.

Instrumentation was very basic in those days compared with the luxury coaches of today. The big gauge at left indicated air pressure and was within vision of passengers in the front rows, many of whom thought it registered mph and became quite perturbed when the needle passed 160!

In 1961 11 Flexibles were extended by 4 ft (1.2 m) to seat 37 passengers for express

work on the Adelaide-Melbourne-Sydney-Brisbane services.

The Flexibles were used on tour and express work and were later replaced by the first GMC PD4106s, passing on to less important duties and eventually being sold as their usefulness to Ansett-Pioneer ran out. Some were still being operated by Ansett Roadways of Hamilton (Vic.) in the mid-1970s.

The re-enactment run started, appropriately, from the Ansett terminal in Melbourne with a blaze of media coverage and progressed steadily along the Hume Highway to NSW and thence to Canberra for an overnight stay at the Ainslie-Rex. This section took approximately 12 hours which included stops for photographic purposes, meals, refuelling and a couple of minor mechanical repairs.

After more media coverage at the Ansett