



Changing of the guard

British brands Leyland, Albion and AEC used to dominate Australian urban bus fleets – until continental competitors such as this groundbreaking B59 Volvo came along. **Steve Skinner** enjoyed taking the old Swede for a spin around Brisbane recently

It's amazing what a difference a decade can make. This month, we are going retro and checking out this immaculately restored 1978 Volvo B59 route bus, the pride and joy of the Queensland Omnibus and Coach Society.

We'll compare the B59's specs with its predecessor in the Brisbane City Council fleet – the Leyland Panther – as well as crunching some numbers against its modern counterpart, the Volvo BR7LE/Volgren Optimus combination.

Last year we reviewed the old B59's Brisbane sister ship – a 1968 Panther.

The Volvo and the Leyland are only 10 years apart in age, but they are light years apart in performance. In fact, the Volvo drives remarkably similarly to any modern route bus.

More on that later, but first a short history lesson.

The first big order for Volvo buses in Australia came from Brisbane City Council 40 years ago in 1976 – the same year the unknown Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* was released at the movies.

Big Adelaide and Melbourne orders for Volkos followed soon after.

Number 827 was the last of that pioneering batch of nearly 100 Brisbane units, and began its working life at the Toowong depot before transferring to Carina. It potted around Brisbane for a quarter of a century until being donated to the Omnibus and Coach Society in 2002.

Late last year, the society brought it back to active life with about \$30,000 worth of help in cash and in-kind from the Queensland Government, the Queensland Bus Industry Council, Coachworks, Patco Automotive, PPG paints and Alpha Glass. Volvo helps out with servicing.

Most of the bus is original, including the plywood floor of the Domino Hedges body. The eye-catching conveyance is now a regular people mover at community events around Brisbane.

GOOD GOER

From the outside, the Leyland and the Volvo look similar, as they did in their

yellow heydays. They are similar on the inside as well, including the primitive-looking driver's area.

On firing up the engine, they both blow a cloud of grey smoke. But from then on, they are chalk and cheese.

While the Leyland is sluggish, the acceleration of the B59 Volvo is on par with any modern city bus we've driven.

In fact, its performance specs are not that much less. That's courtesy of the almost 10-litre turbo diesel horizontal engine, which has done well over a million kilometres.

It pushes out 250hp (185kW) and 865Nm of torque. By comparison, Volvo's modern BR7LE (7.0-litre, low entry) chassis produces 290hp (213kW) and 1200Nm.

The old Volvo takes off from the lights very well, keeps up with the traffic easily, and climbs all but the steepest hills remarkably comfortably.

But with only a two-speed ZF automatic transmission – which is far from smooth – and a diff ratio of 5.4, top speed is rated at only 80km/h.

The society doesn't like pushing the old girl past 70, though.

On the roads of the day, 80km/h was plenty, and certainly a lot better than the Leyland's top speed of only 60km/h.

Of course, the modern Volvo counterpart has the choice of multi-speed ZF or Voith auto transmissions.

Meanwhile, when it comes to engine and gearbox noise, the old Leyland was horrendous. The old Volvo, however, is surprisingly close to its young relative's decibel level.

PULLING UP

While the old Volvo motors along well, it doesn't stop so impressively.

The only retarder is the two-speed transmission kicking back from second to first – and if you are going down a steep hill, it won't do that either.

The drum brakes are air-operated – quite a big deal in the day – but you are on them all the time, and they take a fair bit of leg force.

They pull you up safely enough though, and the air parking brake knob feels a lot more reassuring than yanking on a handle in the old Leyland.

Of course, the modern counterpart has disc brakes and EBS (electronic braking system).

Apparently, one of the few downsides of the B59 Volvo during its golden years was that the air system could



Opposite page: Going home – where it all started for the B59 way back in 1978, at Brisbane's Toowong bus depot
Above: Access for driver and passengers was pretty good;
Left: There were no digital displays in 1978
Below: The B59 with its modern counterpart, a Volvo BR7LE/Volgren Optimus at Brisbane City Council's Eagle Farm depot in December



STURDY BODY

Domino Hedges had a factory at Northgate on the north side of Brisbane and obviously did a good job on these old buses.

There wasn't a whole lot of work needed for the restoration. It included: the manufacture of new panels; removal of rust in the windscreen frame area; replacing rusted rear body pillars alongside the rear windshield; installing new rubbers for the windows; and, of course, re-painting in the original colour.

These 11-metre vehicles were licensed to carry a maximum of 78 passengers – 39 seated and 39 standing.

That compares with a length of 12.5 metres for the modern Volgrens (also built in Brisbane), with the Brisbane Council units licensed to carry 88 passengers – 43 seated and 45 standing.

The Volgrens are about the same height and width as their old ancestor.

The vintage Domino Hedges frame is tubular steel, with aluminium panels.

Tare weight of the B59/Domino combination is a respectable nine tonnes. The BR7LE/Volgren Optimus is of bolted aluminium construction, weighing in at nearly 11 tonnes, but with a much higher gross vehicle mass of nearly 19 tonnes, and a crash and rollover strength presumably beyond comparison with the 70s model.

The seats in the old Volvo are much softer than in modern route buses, but they are not the originals.

The windows are original though, and that's obvious from the deafening crashing noise they make every time you hit a decent bump, or the teeth-rattling vibration when the bus is idling.

The window panes are also much smaller than today.

Because the engine is laying down, you can stand at full height right at the back row of seats.

Inside a unit on the roof are two big fans that provided something quite innovative at the time – what was called 'jet air', which is really just a fancy term for blowing fresh air around the bus. Proper air-conditioning was in the future. There is no heating, but who needs it in Brisbane?

The desto board is manual, of course, and getting at the handle wouldn't pass any current OH&S test.

SMOKE-BLOWER

I have to confess to a twinge of guilt in driving around the Brisbane CBD for



the video accompanying this story – that's because the pollution spewing out of the low exhaust pipe in this old girl is terrible.

One can only feel sorry for lunchtime CBD shoppers all around Australia through the 70s, 80s and 90s, when Euro 3 – let alone 4, 5 and 6 – sounded more like a rock band or space mission than an emissions standard.

Another downside of the B59 is the relatively small 200-litre fuel tank, compared to at least 300 litres for the modern counterpart. According to the original spec sheet, though, fuel consumption was rated at a fairly respectable 46 litres per 100 kilometres.

It was dark when we finished our Brisbane jaunt, which showed that the lights – and especially high beam – are good even by current standards.

The final words belong to Nick Wilson, president of the Queensland Omnibus and Coach Society. He points out that this model began the onslaught of continental European buses – notably Volvo, MAN, Scania and Mercedes-Benz – against the main British brands, notably Leyland at the time.

"It was the end of the era for the British

Leyland and AEC vehicles that had dominated the Brisbane City Council fleet for all those years, and likewise through Australia," Wilson says.

"It was the first time that a non-British European make had cracked a government market, and for that reason it's very significant for Brisbane and Australia."

The rest, as they say, is history. ☺



Top: A Volvo BR7LE/Volgren Optimus flashes past its ancestor out the front of the Toowong depot; Above: The 9.6-litre engine lays down and pushes out plenty of power and pollution

SPECS

MAKE/MODEL
1978 Volvo B59 route bus

ENGINE
Horizontal 9.6-litre six-cylinder turbo diesel

OUTPUTS
250hp (185kW); 865Nm

EMISSIONS CONTROL
None

TRANSMISSION
Two-speed ZF

BUILD
Domino Hedges, Brisbane

CAPACITY
78 – 39 seated, 39 standing

DIMENSIONS
11m long; 3.3m tall; 2.49m wide

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Top: 70s décor up the back and narrow, rattly windows
Middle left to right: The air parking brake with a lift-up collar was pretty snazzy in its day; The dash and transmission control can't get much simpler
Above: Flashback to the Brisbane CBD in the late 1970s. Note the purple suit, long white socks and long hair – but not on the old guys wearing suits, who are presumably the Brisbane councillors

occasionally spring a leak, run out of air and lock the brakes on.

There is no suspension seat, so it's just as well the air bags give a remarkably good ride.

The old bus handles well, and the steering through the giant skinny wheel is light and surprisingly accurate.

That steering is power operated, which is another reason drivers apparently jostled to jump in the Volvos rather than the Leylands during the long crossover period when they were both in service.

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