

RESTORATION / WINGS TOUR BUS

ICONIC TOUR



WNO 481 was relaunched at the Classic Motor Show at the NEC this year, restored and with a new life as an entertainment venue ahead.
1972 WINGS TOUR BUS LTD

BUS REBORN



Jeremy Blackmore reports on the rescue and revival of a famous Bristol double-decker once used by Paul McCartney's band Wings and now destined for a new lease of life as a travelling performance space

The brightly painted psychedelic 1972 tour bus which launched Paul McCartney as a major solo artist in the wake of the Beatles' split has been reborn as a travelling performance space inspired by the Beatles' final concert on the roof of the Apple building in 1969. The 1953 Bristol KSW 5G ECW open-top double-decker first entered service in 1953 with the Eastern National Omnibus Company in Chelmsford, and later ran with Eastern Counties in Great Yarmouth, before finding rock and roll stardom during Paul McCartney's first major tour with new band Wings.

Dubbed 'Woodstock on Wheels', WNO 481, the plucky bus that refused to die, has been lovingly and faithfully restored by new owner Tom Jennings and specialist teams led by David Hoare and Bradley Earl, after years decaying in a ravine in Tenerife. Tom has reimagined and re-engineered the top deck so it can transform into a mobile venue for live performances at festivals and charity fundraisers. The new McCartney Stage now makes possible the former Beatle's original vision of the top deck as a venue for live shows. The bus was unveiled at the Classic Motor Show at the NEC in Birmingham this month with a host of special performances.

The refurbished WNO 481, which also boasts a Royal Princess, Mary Poppins and FA Cup winners as passengers in its history, is already attracting interest in bookings from music festivals. Even Glastonbury has shown interest and asked to see photographs of the completed stage.

It's been a long and winding road and a labour of love for former pro-musician Tom

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who became the latest custodian in 2019 after he perused online memorabilia auction sites looking for a Garth Brooks guitar. Instead, he came away, unexpectedly, with a unique piece of rock and roll history.

As a lifelong Beatles fan, Tom knew WNO 481's provenance well. Fifty years ago, he was working towards his HGV class 1 licence and harbouring romantic notions of being a driver for McCartney. "It was the first I'd heard of the bus in years," he said. "So many theories were flying around about what became of her, she became almost a myth! All of a sudden, I got this rush of colour and music and the memories just flooded back.

"I turned the calculator off because I couldn't put a price on legacy. I regard this as being a legacy project. I don't think there'll be much in it either way, whether it makes a profit or loses a little bit. I'm okay with that. I adore owning it. I love having been its latest rescuer."

On tour

In July 1972 Paul McCartney leased the bus from then owners Halls Coaches and set off on a two-month tour of Europe. Evoking the spirit of the Beatles' Magical Mystery Tour, the tour brought a taste of Beatlemania to European fans who had not seen McCartney live since 1966. WNO 481, emblazoned with the names of the band and its members, became the world's most famous tour bus. With their young children accompanying them on the road, the band laid out mattresses and sleeping bags on the top deck as they snaked their way around the continent.

McCartney wanted the bus painted in a style influenced by Magical Mystery Tour and Yellow Submarine and tasked Tom Salter, promoter and owner of Gear boutiques in Carnaby Street to make it happen.

The lower deck was fitted out with coach seats and tables that came from a Plaxton coach identical to the 1970 England World Cup Team coach. Halls also owned that coach, and it is possible they stripped the seats out and put them in WNO 481. Also installed was a galley kitchen and bunk beds for the McCartneys' children. The destination blind proudly announced the next venue on the tour, while the rear bore a giant Wings logo made of wood.

Throughout that heady summer, WNO 481, travelling at a sedate top speed of 38mph – which made for slow going on the German autobahns – carried Wings over 7,500 miles with the world's journalists in hot pursuit.

After its brush with stardom, the bus was pressed into service by Tricentrol of Luton, which repainted WNO 481 into its livery to run day trips across the south of England.



The lower deck has been returned to its 1972 state, complete with seats from a Plaxton coach. 1972 WINGS TOUR BUS LTD



The bus now has a folding side to convert the upper deck into a full stage. 1972 WINGS TOUR BUS LTD

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For sale

Put up for sale in 1982, it was saved from the crusher by Roger White of White's Coaches in St Albans who stepped in when he spotted Oslo on the destination blind and realised the McCartney connection. The bus resumed its celebrity lifestyle, appearing twice on Cilla Black's prime-time Saturday TV show Surprise Surprise – the second occasion with Trevor Brooking and the FA Cup at Wembley.

In 1989 it was photographed at the Southend Bus Rally in a bright red and white livery and took part in two BAFTA Great British Film Rallies, first to Cannes in 1989, and then the London-Cardiff-Edinburgh rally in 1990 where Princess Anne was a special visitor. It also served as a celebrity hospitality and transportation vehicle for the 1989 BAFTA tribute to Julie

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Andrews at the Empire Leicester Square.

Back in its Wings livery, WNO 481 spent the early 1990s at a string of special Beatles events including International Beatle Week in Liverpool and a Beatles Convention in Amsterdam, one of the original venues for Wings' 1972 tour.

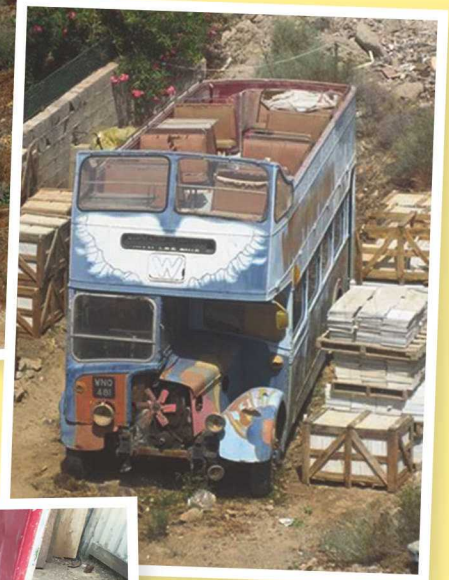
In 1993, the bus was sold to a private buyer who displayed it as a tourist attraction outside a rock café in Tenerife. But when the land was taken over for development, it slowly deteriorated under the relentless blazing sun in a private storage area in a ravine. Vandalism took its toll with windows broken and parts stolen. A positive note was the desert conditions helped to preserve the bus, free of the risks of humidity in such an arid environment. But WNO 481 was not finished yet.

Justin James came to its rescue in 2010 when he became the latest in a long list of owners. James hired a crane to lift the bus from its dusty slumber and freighted it back to home soil in Oxfordshire. In the process it was spotted by Paul McCartney's team who tweeted asking about its whereabouts.

Enter Tom Jennings, the perfect man to preserve this one-off vehicle and take it into its next chapter. Alongside careers in music and accountancy, Tom has always had a passion for motor vehicles. His first Saturday job was in a motorcycle repair shop where he learned how to fix bikes and he later repaired cars from his own garage.



The bus looked rather forlorn in Tenerife, having sat unused for a number of years.
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Areas such as the rear platform required significant amounts of work.
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Some damage was caused to the offside rear corner when the bus was being removed from its long-term storage site in Tenerife.
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Neglected no more

Despite the parlous state of the bus, Tom didn't see a wreck and his interest was piqued. He checked back and was shocked to see not one bid. As an exercise, he wrote out the sales pitch he felt the bus deserved – and ended up selling it to himself; 'an international treasure on wheels firmly parked at the intersection of timeless chart-topping music and classically

beautiful automotive design heritage.'

Owning and restoring such a vehicle though was no small undertaking and he did some serious research first.

"I was so pleasantly surprised to see internet forums full of good karma, fun and affection for WNO 481. To read the enthusiasm of the bus preservation societies and restorers and their work to keep these buses alive for future generations to enjoy, the bus fans, the

McCartney fans, all those on the forums, all helped to talk me into possibly buying it. For Paul to tweet he was looking for the bus 45 years later was remarkable. I took it as a sign if nobody else was going to do anything, then I suppose it had to be me."

He made contact with William Staniforth, head of the Chippenham bus rally, described as a 'guardian angel' to the restoration, who put him in touch with David

After significant restoration, the bus was made ready for its relaunch. 1972 WINGS TOUR BUS LTD





The top deck has been updated to provide a stage for live music events. **1972 WINGS TOUR BUS LTD**

“...it’s a nod to the class of ‘72. But it’s a 2022 reissue. I didn’t want a photocopy”

Hoare of Chepstow Classic Buses, who got to work on the bus in November 2019.

Restoration begins

Due to the extent of the deterioration, David needed to rebuild the platform, which was completely rotten. He also rebuilt and repanelled the back end, damaged when it was lifted out by the crane in Tenerife. Urgent work on the staircase was necessary too, plus the diesel pump needed a full overhaul.

Tom was delighted to receive a call from Steve Broughton, who had repainted the bus several times in its Wings and BAFTA liveries during its time with White’s Coaches. Indeed, the blue paint Broughton last used was synthetic, using a hot pot system, meaning the paint was heated up in the tin until it had thinned out. He then poured it into his gun and sprayed the bus with the hot paint. As it dried it went back to its solid state which gave the bus a lot of protection and may be why it has lasted so long.

Steve wanted to know if he could work on the bus one more time and joined forces with Bradley Earl of Simon Morris Thorpe, which carries out paintwork and repairs on HGV and LGV commercial vehicles, at its workshop near Clacton, bringing the bus back to its Essex roots. The pair worked with artists adding a modern day take on its 1972 McCartney design.

Remastered

“What they have achieved is a 2022 remix of the artwork,” said Tom. “Of course, it’s a nod to the class of ‘72. But it’s a 2022 reissue. I didn’t want a photocopy. I could have got that because I’ve got the original artwork, digitised. I had a fabulous group of talented digital artists. It was a joy to see it come to life.”

Tom has ambitious plans for the bus and is adamant its use should stay true to its McCartney heritage. “The Beatles and Wings were very busy bands, did gigs everywhere.



One of the bands to play on the new McCartney Stage at its launch at the NEC was the TR5s, who played a mix of appropriate music. **1972 WINGS TOUR BUS LTD**

Paul McCartney has been busy his whole life. So, I want the bus to be busy,” he explained. “Obviously, there’s a cost attached to taking the bus to events. We’ve got to work out what the cost is. But we want to preserve the exclusivity of the bus, we’ve got to strike a balance. I will never do an event, for example, that Paul McCartney wouldn’t approve of. So, I keep in contact with his office.”

WNO 481’s appearance at the Classic Motor Show – by invitation of the Federation of British Historic Vehicle Clubs – is just the first of many exciting events Tom is lining up. It’s clear the addition of the McCartney Stage has proved inspired in opening up opportunities. He added: “That idea came pretty soon. Constructing a 3D model was amazing for the development of my understanding of the bus and its construction. It’s been an amazing process. I used a fabulous 3D programme called Blender. You can create anything. One day, I just thought, I wonder if I could make the side drop down. I dropped it down and I went, that’s a stage!

“I want to use it at events and music festivals. We had bands appearing on the stage at the NEC including Howie Casey, who played with

Wings in the mid-seventies and with the Beatles in Hamburg. What an honour, what a beautiful coming together. If the bus can attract those kinds of people, I think we’re going to be alright.

“I’ve had some very exciting and lovely offers. But the lifeblood of music are the youngsters. So, I would love the bus to work with record companies and PR companies who work with young musicians.”

He is eyeing up a visit to the Beatles’ home city of Liverpool and has approached the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, founded by McCartney, offering its students the chance to perform on board. A heritage bus company has offered the bus permanent storage near Clacton, keeping it close to its Essex roots, but an offer has also come in for the bus to spend time in Suffolk.

“That’s an exciting possibility,” said Tom. “Then the bus can be there all the time, apart from when it leaves to go and do something amazing. If there’s a charitable thing we can be involved in, that we can bring the Beatles/McCartney stardust to via the bus, that’s what we’d look to do. There are loads of things being mooted. They involve some incredible people. We shall see – but she’s showtime ready!” //