

IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Now in its sixth year under the current ownership, Chapman Driver Seating continues with its philosophy of total focus on the urban bus market, using products that are simple, robust, comfortable and maintainable. Mike Morgan catches up with co-directors David Cattanach and Jerry Smith



Co-Directors David Cattanach and Jerry Smith

The successful debut of Chapman Driver Seating's new height adjuster, the SideRiser at Coach & Bus Live 2009, is a significant landmark in the company's recent history.

A respected trading name for many years, the company can trace its roots back to 1901, though it hit troubled times in its centenary year when, in 2001, the group that owned Chapman went into receivership and there was a management buyout.

However, despite a buoyant order book, it was soon placed in the hands of an administrator who sold the business six years ago to OIC Partners Ltd, trading as Chapman Driver Seating from its factory in Milton Keynes.

Salvation was expected to bring a new lease of life and the development of new products and improvements to some of the established seat designs dating back 50 years or more.

However, the hiatus caused by the ownership upheaval coincided with a

new direction taken by the bus driver seat market, which had gone down a route that Chapman's had yet to negotiate. Whereas generations of urban bus drivers took comfort in the traditional pedestal seat with its dependable height adjuster and little else to enhance the seating experience a number of operators adopted a higher specification suspension seat.

There was, however, some considerable appeal in the new style of seats, which had rapidly become standard in trucks over 7.5 tonnes, offering a very welcome means of compensating for the rough-riding characteristics experienced while at the steering wheel of such vehicles.

Suspension seats also looked the part, with their integrated headrests and inviting styling.

What's more they had the option of far more adjustment than found in the average family car (let alone a bus cab), promising a level of comfort that previous generations of bus drivers could only dream of.

Chapman simply wasn't in that market.

Its standard bus driver's seat looked dated in comparison and attempts to convert bus operators to something that ran contrary to what was perceived as progress, met with a stony response.

Director Jerry Smith admits that the new owners had a difficult time. Although they offered a proven product that was robust and easy to maintain, these were virtues that couldn't compete in a market that craved sophistication.

The two directors, meanwhile, had decided that a new strategy was required. They concluded a deal with Carlyle that took away the worry of distribution and aftersales support, while at the same time agreeing that the only way to penetrate the market was to first do some extensive research, questioning drivers at key depots around the country to find out what they liked and disliked about different driver seats.

They provided sample seats and sought driver feedback, while they also obtained data about reliability and ease of maintenance.

Their findings gave them renewed confidence, because the weight of the evidence not only supported the view that bus drivers preferred the Chapman-style seat and pedestal design, but that Chapman's seats offered much better maintainability.

Another conclusion from the research conducted was that the bus driver cab is one of the harshest environments of any vehicle operator and the driver seat is subjected to many adjustments and variation in driver weight every day of the week. With this in mind it was realised that the seat needed to be strengthened to ensure safe use by

drivers of up to 30 stones (190kg).

Following a review at MIRA on stress points and materials, a number of modifications were soon engineered and subsequently put to the test with the aim of ensuring that the seat could withstand the stresses that could be experienced if subjected to daily use by a series of drivers who weighed up to 30 stones.

The test subjected the seat to a 4G shock. Some may regard this as an excessive requirement, but the revised specification confronted a growing trend for the average weight of bus to drivers

to be on the increase. It was not only put into production, but retrofitted to many existing vehicles in the fleets of operators who had become painfully aware of the consequences of problems that arise when a driver's seat is not up to the task.

Instead of facing stubborn resistance to a tried and trusted design, the mood of the market had changed... almost overnight.

Based on what the company had done to address the strength issue, Messrs Cattanach and Smith and their team could confidently go out into the market armed with evidence that they had a seat that could withstand the rigours of urban bus operation.

Chapman was already preferred supplier to FirstGroup and indeed worked with First to provide a seat assembly that incorporated an integral three-point seat-belt fully certified to M3 at MIRA.

This was trimmed in fire-retardant leather to improve the hygiene issues raised by drivers. Since then further product developments have included work with

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SUPPLIER PROFILE: CHAPMAN DRIVER SEATING

a new long-lasting material – ‘e leather’ – which could be adopted as a cheaper option over traditional full-leather, and combined with a backing material called Outlast. Though developed for space exploration by NASA, it has the desirable property of reducing a driver’s propensity to sweat.

Meanwhile, word spread to the other big bus groups. Driven by a u-turn in driver preference for the Chapman seat, Arriva and Go-Ahead Group turned to Chapman as their preferred supplier in 2008, and Stagecoach was convinced at the Coach & Bus Live show in 2009 by the attributes of the Chapman seat and new SideRiser height adjuster to make Chapman its preferred supplier on new vehicles from 2010.

Instead of looking into the abyss of a depleted order book, Messrs Cattanaach and Smith could be reassured that the traditional strengths of the Chapman seat were not only what made it fit for the purpose, but that its longevity and maintainability were key ingredients in re-establishing demand.

And it’s not just demand for seats in new vehicles. Throughout the difficult trading period of the mid-2000s, Chapman maintained cashflow by undertaking repair and refurbishment of tired and damaged driver seats... not only of its own manufacture, but others as well while continuing to utilise Carlyle’s distribution network.

It was this work that took Chapman down the route of providing retrofit solutions where suspension seats are no longer required, while a surprise and unplanned consequence is that some bus companies that run express coach services are now asking for the Chapman seat in vehicles used on inter-urban routes.

The reason? Because the frequency of driver changeover and intensity of the operation means that such seats take just the same abuse as those in urban buses.

There are other sales successes such as preferred supplier status with East London Buses, TrentBarton, EYMS, and Thamesdown, while Van Hool fits Chapman where static seats are specified.

While Chapman recognises that the industry is experiencing a major downturn in the supply of new vehicles, it is well positioned to adapt to whatever requirements exist in new build or refurbished buses.

Meanwhile the new SideRiser seat with the new-generation fore-and-aft height adjustment by separate handles that turn to raise or lower either the front or rear of the seat, is in its final phase of a five-year accelerated life simulation - a 30-stone driver, four drivers per day, 20 hours per day, seven days per week, for five years. Its design ensures that, in the event of failure, it does so safely.

Life cycle testing is now successfully completed and the final phase of testing to destruction is due to take place as this article goes to press.

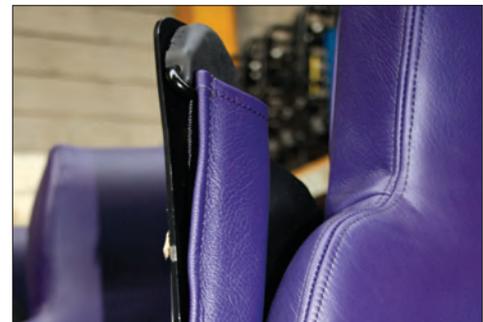
The new orders scheduled for delivery to Alexander Dennis in Falkirk on forthcoming build will feature the SideRiser units on Stagecoach specification seats. The



All trimming and assembly takes place in Chapman Driver Seating’s Milton Keynes factory



Nova Urban customers include Arriva and First



M3 integral three-point seatbelt is an option



Refurbishment business remains strong, providing buffer against any new bus downturn

SideRiser’s failsafe features are regarded by Messrs Cattanaach and Smith as primary factors in leading to UK operators choosing it as the preferred height adjuster for driver seats on their new vehicles.

Now in its sixth year, Chapman Driver Seating’s philosophy of total focus on the urban bus market using products that are simple, robust, comfortable and maintainable is vindicated.

What’s more, with fewer than 5% of materials sourced from abroad and assembly undertaken in Milton Keynes, there’s virtue in Chapman seats being a British product produced in a British factory. ■

● Details from Chapman Driver Seating on 01908 265030 or visit www.chapmandriverseating.com