

BR DIESEL ELECTRIC CLASS 50 No. 50008 “THUNDERER”

The English Electric (EE) Class 50 design can be traced back to one of the pioneer mainline diesels, the Class 40, with its 16-cylinder diesel engine being uprated to 2,700hp. Uniquely, EE offered a leasing deal to British Railways (BR) and all the new locos carried a plate stating: “THIS LOCOMOTIVE IS THE PROPERTY OF ENGLISH ELECTRIC LEASINGS LIMITED”.

Much of the locomotive was based on a prototype Type 4 locomotive (DP2) which had been outshopped during May 1962. It used the underframe, bogies and many components of 'Deltic' class locos but was fitted with an EE engine.

Fifty English Electric Type 4 (later BR Class 50) diesel locomotives were built by English Electric at their Vulcan Foundry Works in Newton-le-Willows between 1967 and 1968. They were numbered in the D4xx series originally before becoming BR's Class 50 during the introduction of their Total Operations Processing System (TOPS) in the mid-1970's. Numbers in the 50xxx series were allocated but railway enthusiasts had already nicknamed them “Hoovers” due to the distinctive sound of the inertial air-filters with which the locomotives were fitted.

They were equipped with English Electric 16CSVT engines producing 2,700 hp. Six English Electric type 538/5A axle-hung nose-suspended 400 hp (300 kW) traction motors were fitted. These gave a maximum tractive effort of 48,500 lbf (2156 kN) and continuous tractive effort of 33,000 lbf (147 kN) at 23.5 mph (3708 km/h). Locomotives were 68 ft 6 ins long and weighed 115 tons in working order. The two bogies were of a 'Commonwealth' design.

Initially, they hauled express passenger trains on the (then) non-electrified section of the West Coast main line between Crewe and Scotland, over the steep banks at Shap and Beattock. Heavy trains often required two locomotives working in multiple, with a single driver, controlling 5,400 hp. The first two were fitted from new with 'Orange Square' multiple working equipment, however, this restricted their multiple working to Class 50's as other diesel classes used different (incompatible) systems.

As built, the class made use of electronic control systems in areas such as slow speed control as well as wheelslip detection. This (then) modern technology was to cause much unreliability for a lot of their early life and it was not until a thorough general overhaul programme, starting in 1979 at Doncaster Works, which improved matters noticeably. The opportunity was also taken to paint them in BR Large Logo Blue livery.

D408 was outshopped from Vulcan Foundry as Works No. 3778/D1149. The loco entered service on 22nd March 1968 in the Western Lines (LMR) which was a generic 'paper' allocation for LMR mainline locomotives in the late 1960's. It was used on Crewe – Glasgow West Coast Main Line duties for which they were built.

This allocation was brief, however, as it moved to the Stoke Division from 17th June. It was fitted with both Air and Vacuum brakes as well as electric train heating equipment.

Class 50 electronics were quite complicated for their time and had included rheostatic braking, to save on brake shoe wear, as well as slow speed control should they be rostered to haul 'merry-go-round' coal trains. These features proved to cause more failures than

were acceptable so were removed in due course.

At some stage in the early 1970s, D408 entered works for the addition of 'Orange Square' multiple working equipment to allow two Class 50's to be coupled together. This permitted better speed over the various steep banks encountered along the West Coast Main Line (WCML), between Crewe and Glasgow, on Anglo-Scottish services.

On 16th February 1974, D408 was renumbered 50008 under the TOPS arrangement but, during that same year, electrification of the northern WCML became operational with the entire Class 50 fleet being displaced by new Class 87 electrics. Thirty five of the fifty 50s were transferred to Western Region by 1974.

50008 was one of the fifteen locomotives retained by the London Midland Region until finally transferred to the Western Region 1976. Once on VWR territory it worked passenger services from London Paddington along the Great Western Main Line (GWML) to destinations such as Oxford, Bristol Temple Meads, Plymouth and Penzance.

Originally the Class 50's were not named by BR (LM) Region but, in the late 1970s, the BR Board agreed to locos being named after Royal Navy vessels with notable records in the First and Second World Wars. Their use on VWR hastened the demise of their diesel-hydraulic Class 52 'Western' locos.

50008 was allocated to Bristol Bath Road depot on 10th April 1976 but from 8th May it became based at Plymouth (Laira) depot. Whilst there it received the name "Thunderer", on 1st September 1978, after the name of a World War I Royal Navy Orion Class Battleship.

It was the fourth ship to carry the name "HMS Thunderer" and was the last vessel to be constructed by the Thames Iron Works. She was the last, and largest, warship ever built on the River Thames, but after completion the builders declared bankruptcy. Later 50008 was twinned with the (now closed) Manadon Royal Naval Training College in Plymouth - which is why it has a diamond-shaped crest above the nameplate.

Class 50's also worked services on other routes, such as between Birmingham New Street and Bristol Temple Meads. Their introduction on these routes enabled the last remaining diesel hydraulic "Westerns" to be withdrawn.

During the late 1970's, BR decided that the Class 50's needed refurbishment to improve reliability and this was carried out at Doncaster Works. The many years of being thrashed up and down the West Coast Main Line had taken their toll. As a result, Class 50 train time-keeping suffered enormously.

While in works they were overhauled and modernized before being repainted into BR Large Logo livery. 50008 was released to traffic on 21st December 1981. After refurbishment, locos returned to the Western Region where their use tended to be concentrated on the Exeter - Waterloo route, although many others still worked on varied diagrams, including a dedicated pool of locomotives for infrastructure work such as 50008.

50008 worked it's last train in November 1991 and was withdrawn on 5th June 1992 at Laira. This was the 46th Class 50 to be withdrawn from revenue earning service and, after over 24 years of active service for BR, it's engine hours totalled 8,537.

After being taken out of service it was purchased by pop producer Pete Waterman who sold it to Sea Containers Ltd, during 1998, for commercial use. The locomotive remained

in their ownership for several years stored outside at premises of London & North Western Railway (Pete Waterman's company) in Crewe with the intention that it was eventually going to be exported abroad. Externally, the locomotive lost its jumper cables and had one of its high power front headlights plated over. Internally, several items of equipment were removed prior to the (abandoned) export of the locomotive to Peru.

In 2006 it was sold to Garcia Hanson who funded its restoration, some of which was undertaken whilst it remained at LNWR. The locomotive then relocated to the depot based at the former Alstom facility at Washwood Heath, Birmingham to complete the work.

At that stage, 50008 was painted into British Rail blue livery it once carried during its final years of service whilst allocated to the Laira DCWA Civil Engineer's pool within British Rail. The private owner had connections with freight operator Devon & Cornwall Railways Ltd (DCR) who took over it's operations on the main line. DCT is now a subsidiary of Cappagh Group.

A new company was incorporated so that 50008 is now owned and operated by Hanson Hall Rail with it's usual base being at Knottingley near Wakefield in West Yorkshire. The loco operates regularly on the main line, moving anything from track machines to brand new multiple units. It has also be seen on enthusiast charter trains and preserved railways during diesel galas.

In June, 50008 was one of the visiting locos at Railfest 2012 at the National Railway Museum in York. Over the years it has visited heritage railways including Nene Valley Railway and the East Lancs Railway.

During June 2013 it moved to Barrow Hill Roundhouse Museum to undergo Engine and Generator repairs. On 9th June 2021 it was photographed at Eastleigh prior to departing, at 09:20, on an Eastleigh – Westbury – Eastleigh Test Run. This was 50008's first run in the Hanson & Hall Grey Livery.

In October 2018, the Severn Valley Railway hosted the biggest gathering of preserved Class 50 locos to celebrate the Golden Jubilee Gala. 50008 was one of eleven present with ten of those operational.

In the March 2022 GW Railwayana Auctions sales, Lot 731 comprised one of the original builders plates. It had been removed after withdrawal whilst 50008 was at British Rail Engineering Ltd, Doncaster. At the hammer it was sold for £2,700.

Last year 50008 top and tailed , with Class 33 D6515, London Underground's 4TC unit on a Branch Line Society rail tour to the North Norfolk Railway's Rails & Ales Gala on 7th - 9th June. In March 2025, 50008 was noted on the Mid Norfolk Railway to collect stored HST vehicles 43112, 43238, 43319 plus ex-Caledonian Sleeper Mk3 Sleeper 10551. It took them to Nemesis Rail, at Burton On Trent, for various works before being exported.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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