Down but not out — a vintage scanner rolls again

C9, one of the BBC’s early colour OB trucks, is back from the dead. Former audio supervisor Jerry Clegg tells the story.

BBC premises come and go. There was Dickenson Road in Manchester, Pebble Mill in Birmingham and Lime Grove in London, to name but three. They’ve all disappeared, almost without a trace, including Tel.OBs at Kendal Avenue.

But old BBC OB units apparently just go on and on. A former BBC colour scanner, London 4, was spotted in Cornwall recently, with a lathe installed in its production control room, being used as a mobile workshop.

Another colour scanner, North 1 of 1969, was discovered intact in a farmer’s field in Kent, where it had stood for the last twenty years, gently surrendering to corrosion. The vehicle being beyond redemption, all its technical interior was stripped out and purchased as a job lot by an enthusiast, to use in a restoration project elsewhere.

Another colour scanner of the same batch is said to be in storage somewhere on behalf of the National Media Museum.

Enter CMCR9, registration no AMU 418H. Fitted out at Pye TVT Ltd in Royston, Cambridge, in 1969, it entered service as London Unit 5 and then became the Midland Unit in Birmingham in the mid-70s, and eventually completed its BBC service with a brief spell based in Manchester as the first North 3 in 1980-82.

On retirement from the BBC, this scanner was sold to a small video company which eventually went bust, and then to a private owner in Shepton Mallet, an electronic engineer who planned to restore it.

However, circumstances changed and he eventually sold it, after about ten years, to a former BBC cameraman who also had
Left: some forty years after she came into service, C9 is in a sorry state

restoration in mind. He arranged for it to be stored in an aircraft hangar in Honiton, Devon for another ten years.

Recently, 'C9' changed hands again when ownership passed to another broadcast enthusiast, former HTV Lighting Director, Steve Harris. Steve now runs his own business, On the Air at the Vintage Technology Centre in Hawarden, restoring and selling vintage radios and tvs for collectors.

He is fortunate in having a friend in the heavy haulage industry who is an Albion enthusiast in his spare time and owns several vintage trucks. CMCR 9 is based on a rare Albion Clydesdale chassis - so who better to take on the job of restoring the former North 3 to mobility?

The unit was transported to Chester from Devon on a low-loader and is presently being made ready for its first MOT test in decades. There have been problems with the brakes and the vehicle electrics and particularly with the cooling system, but nothing a dedicated band of expert enthusiasts couldn't overcome. The engine now starts easily and runs sweetly and the old lady has recently been driven gently round the transport yard on her first tentative run for many years. Video cameras were there to record the event.

The most amazing thing about 'C9' is the interior, which is completely intact and almost original. It's just as though the crew had gone away for a tea-break back in 1982 and never come back.

The truck is still in its original BBC livery of grey with a green waist-band. The Post Office cords are all there, hanging on a strap on the sound bay, still bearing the legend 'North 3', and a clip-board in the racks area still has BBC planning sheets fastened to it. She's a modern day Mary Celeste, which has been quietly adrift, apparently in fine weather, for the last twenty-seven years.

So what does Steve intend to do with 14 tons of historic BBC scanner, in which Barney Colehan once presided over editions of The Good Old Days?

His declared intention is to restore her to as near as possible original condition for display at vintage transport festivals and broadcast enthusiasts rallies, for the enjoyment of all. He is busy at the moment restoring the EMI 2001 cameras that are with the unit. They were changed at some stage from the original Pye PC80s.

Asked about the daunting prospect of powering up the vehicle's technical equipment for the first time this century, Steve was uncharacteristically a little coy.

'Well, I might not switch on the air-conditioning at the first attempt!'