

Introduction

A contributor to LTSVplus recently commented on how the intake of numbered service vehicles appeared to have accelerated over the past year or so. This prompted me to consider how the allocation of fleet numbers over time could be examined, and the resulting charts form the basis of this article.

The exact process of how and when fleet numbers are allocated to service vehicles is not known, but the assumption was always that it was on the basis of when vehicles were ordered or arrived. As the following charts show, this is generally true, with a few notable exceptions.

Thanks to the detailed records kept by London Transport and its successors, we have access to the delivery dates of most service vehicles from the 1930s to about 2004. Since then, the submission of numerous sightings to the LTSVplus website has enabled the data to be extended to the present day.

All of the charts in this article plot the fleetnumber on the vertical axis, against the date of delivery (or first observation) across the horizontal axis. The gradient of the resulting line therefore shows the rate of fleet renewal, while errant plots show fleetnumbering anomalies.

A walk through the charts

When the service vehicle fleet was renumbered into the new series in 1939, it was done on the basis of the order in which vehicles appeared in the documents of the time. These were arranged by order of manufacturer, so the lowest numbers went on ADC and AEC vehicles, while Morris and Thornycroft vehicles took the higher numbers. Numbers 336 to 356 were allocated to miscellaneous other vehicles (including tractors and cranes) and were not ordered by make. Vehicles delivered from early 1939 were given numbers in roughly delivery order starting from 357, although up to 384 were initially numbered in previous sequences. The result of all this is that the chart shows a lack of correlation between delivery date and fleetnumber for vehicles in this period.

Figure 2 shows the period from 1940 to 1955 in greater detail, as there are several interesting aspects to this. The first year shows a moderate fleet intake with just a couple of vehicles arriving earlier than the norm. From 1941 however, the fleet intake increases considerably. This is accounted for by the conversion of some buses to ambulances, and to the arrival of a large number of second-hand tippers for use on bomb-damage repairs and shelter construction. Most of these only stayed in the fleet for a matter of months. There was also a batch of American-built Ford lorries assigned to London Transport.

The fleetnumbering sequence had reached 644 by the spring of 1942 but the intake then rapidly tailed off, with just 10 fleet additions over the next 4 years. This is thought to be due to war-time economies. Fleet renewal recommenced in 1946, but over the next 7 years the allocation of numbers appears to be rather haphazard. Certain batches, notably of Bedford trucks, had protracted and random delivery periods, and the registration numbers applied are consequently mixed. As the chart shows, similarly numbered vehicles arrived up to 5 years apart.

The period from 1955 to 1982 shows a return to normality, with the allocation of numbers roughly reflecting the dates of delivery, and just a couple of anomalies. In terms of fleet numbering, 1982 was an important year as it marked the instigation of a new series for vehicles that were leased rather than purchased. This started at 3000, with the existing series retained for owned vehicles. As Fig.1 shows, the intake of leased vehicles was at a considerably higher rate than previously, with the retention period typically several years shorter. On the other hand, the owned series showed a marked slow-down, with a small peak in about 1993 when many Mercedes and Iveco-Ford trucks were bought. Although these are now becoming due for replacement, the enhanced

capabilities of modern vehicles such as the Ford Transit dropside truck mean that replacement by leased vehicles is often a possibility.

Fig.3 shows the period from 1994 to 2001 in detail. As can be seen, the majority of vehicles were numbered in approximately age order. However, a few exceptions are worth mentioning. First is the gap between numbers 4602 and 4667. None of these numbers were reported being used, and the reason for this is still unknown. There were then several cases of vehicles being given numbers much higher than their delivery date would otherwise suggest. It is thought that these vehicles were actually assigned numbers some time after delivery as there is evidence that numbers were not actually carried externally. Examples include four Vauxhall Astra Estates delivered in April 1995, and allocated numbers 4794B-4797B, apparently in about September 1997. Similarly, Ford Transits 4838F to 4842F were delivered between 1994 and 1996 but given numbers that date from about July 1998. The last example is of 5022VW and 5023F. These two vehicles were delivered around the end of 1998 and actually carried numbers 4918VW and 4910F respectively. It appears that these numbers were both duplicated on other vehicles, and new numbers were allocated (most likely on paper only) to rectify this. Numbers 5017, 5020 and 5021 were also allocated to vehicles that were slightly older than expected.

The final chart (Fig.4) shows the last 6 years in detail, and suggests that the overall intake has indeed increased slightly. The apparent slow-down towards the end of 2004 is probably due to the supply of information. Official data has been received up to this period, and the delivery dates are therefore accurate. Since then, information has come from observations alone, and is therefore dependant on when each vehicle is first seen. Many of the vehicles may have already been in service for some time, so the actual line is probably rather neater, and perhaps shifted to the left a bit. It is hoped that a further supply of official information may be forthcoming in the future.

Conclusion

Although the organisations using service vehicles have changed considerably over the period, the continuation of the 1939 numbering series forms a large part of the interest in the present fleet. As this article hopefully shows, it can also allow an analysis of the fleet over the past 67-odd years. While the instances of un-numbered vehicles have increased of late, the owned and leased series continue to see regular additions, and it is hoped that this remains the case for many years to come. Has anyone seen 7956F?

Anyone interested in this subject, or wanting access to the spreadsheet used to produce the charts, is welcome to contact me, either through the forum on the LTSVplus website, or by e-mail to tom@ltsv.com

Tom Young
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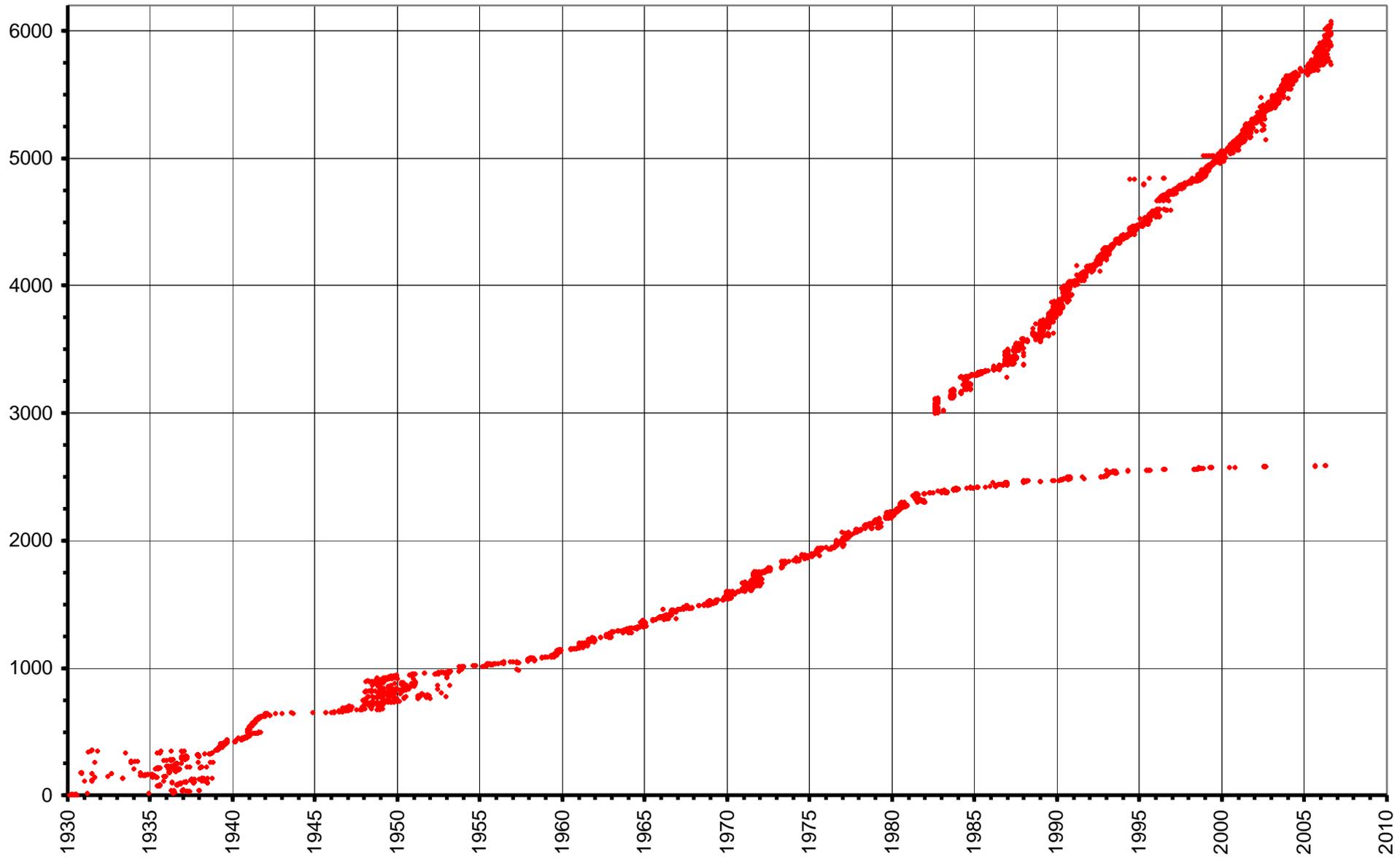


Fig.1 - Overall chart 1930-2010

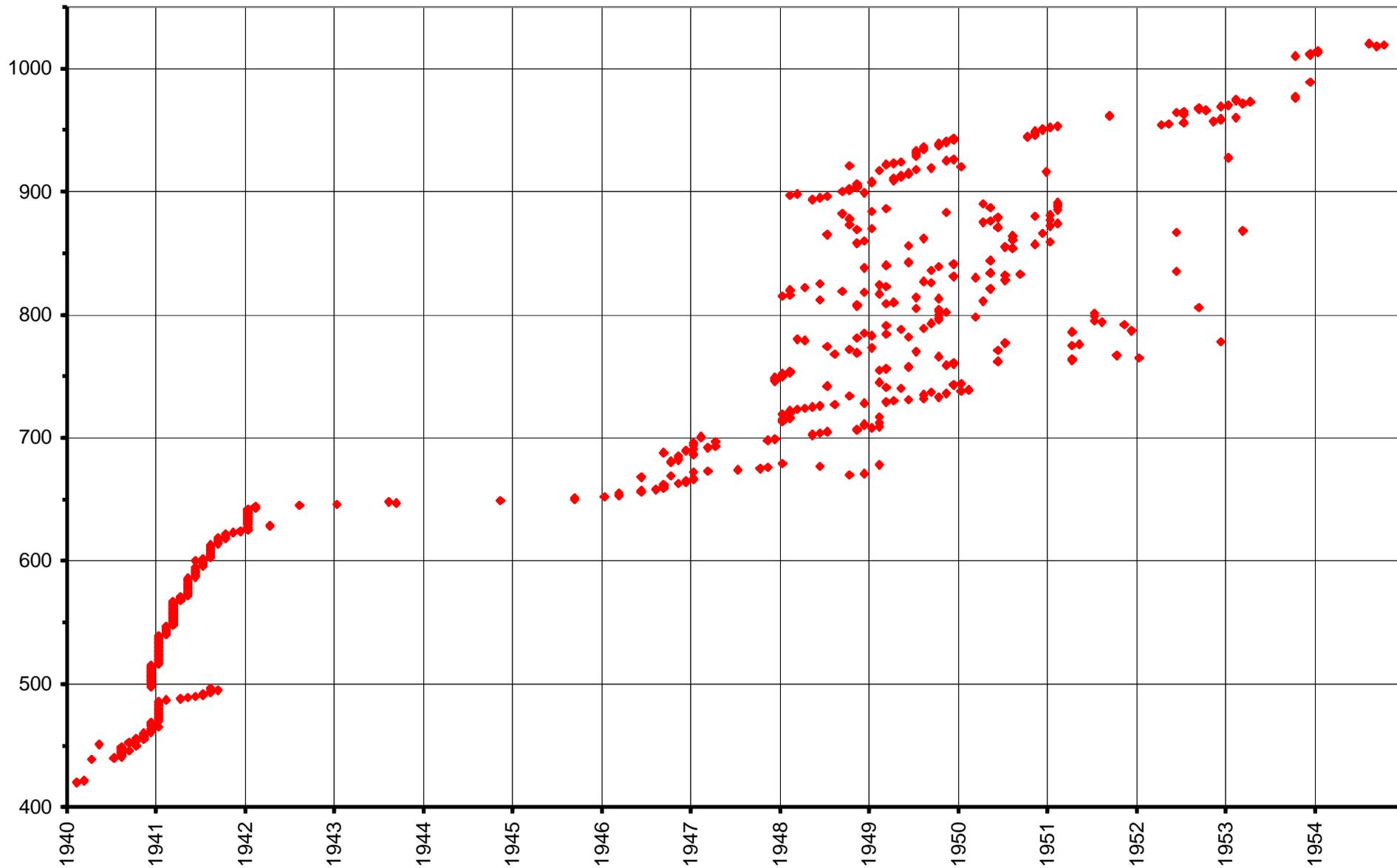


Fig.2 - Detail chart 1940-1955

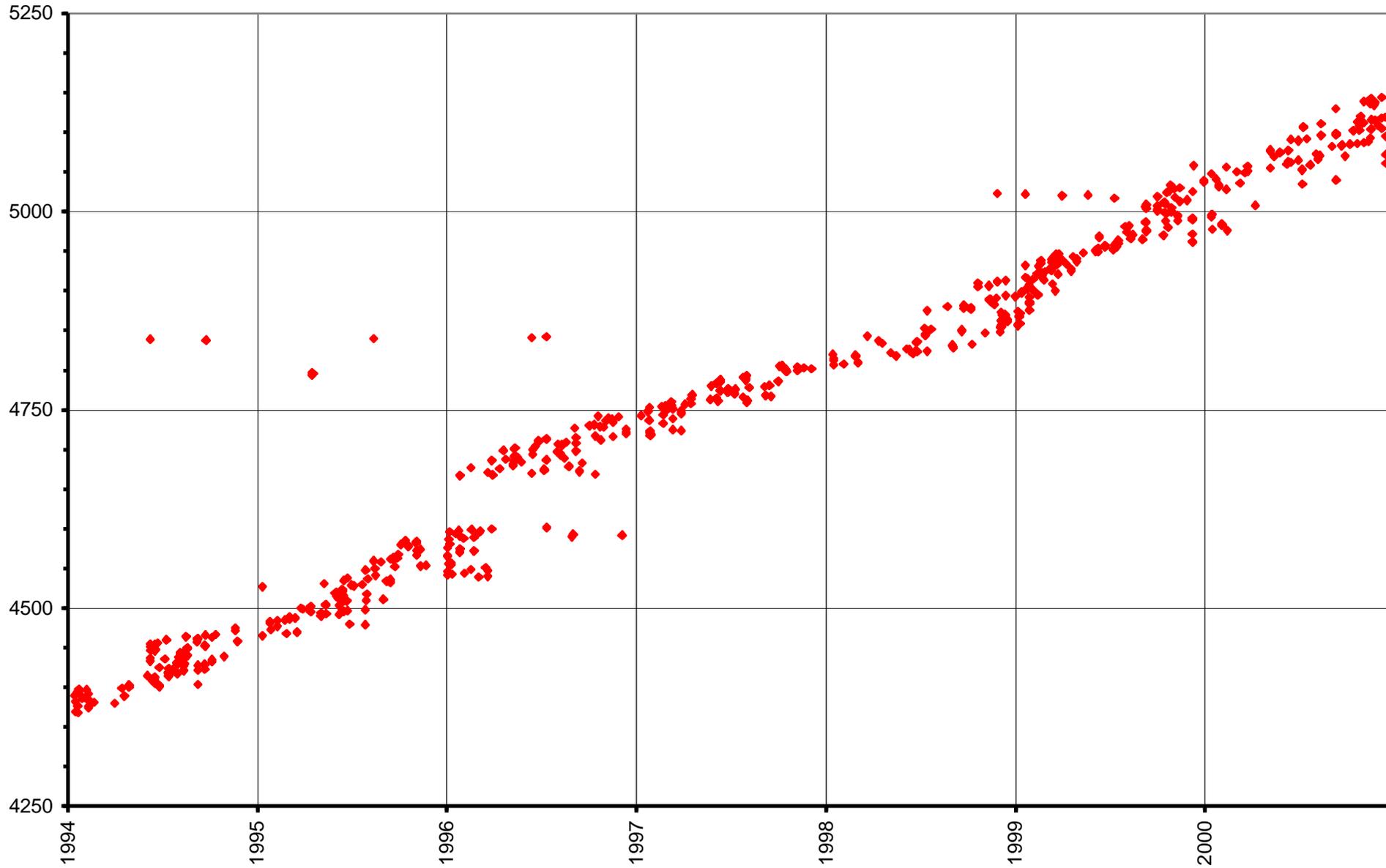


Fig.3 - Detail chart 1994-2001

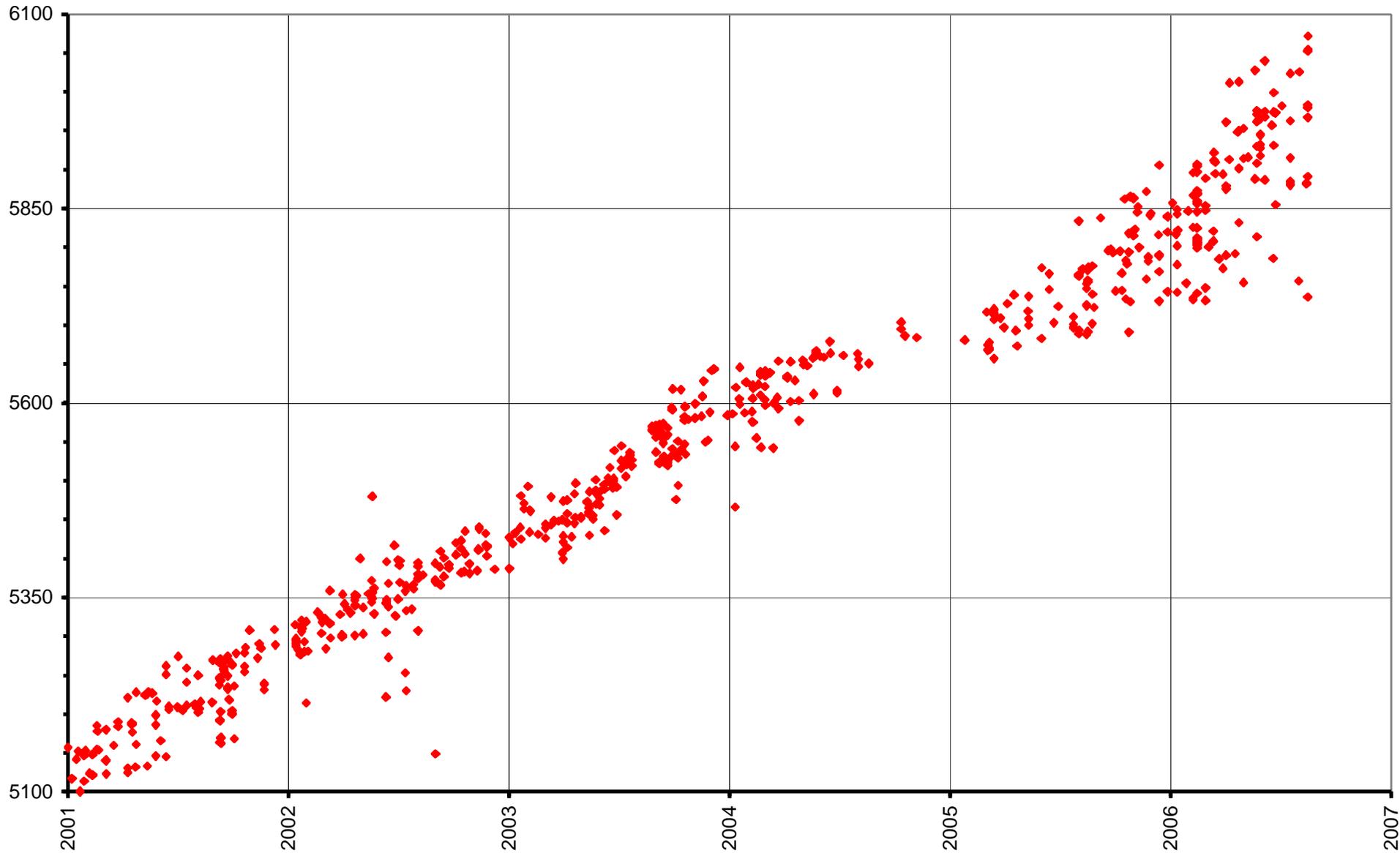


Fig 4 – Detail chart 2001-2007