

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

THE BEGINNING

By Mike Harper
Conductor
Eastern National Omnibus Company
Southend, Essex Depot
1974-1976

Contents

PART 1: THE BEGINNING	1
On the Buses	1
A Conductor's Life	2
My First Duty	2
Solo at last!	4
CAR to GAR	6
Appendix – Summary of Routes	8
Example Vehicles	9

PART 1: THE BEGINNING

On the Buses



Yes this is about Conductor Harper, but not the antics of Jack Harper, the conductor-come-crew mate of Driver Butler (Reg Varney) in the venerable TV series! However I did work on the buses most often used for 'Luxton & District' in the TV show (Eastern National's FLF6LX Lodekkas 2917 & 2930 <http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall5/en2930a>) on several occasions. I even once set the destination blinds to 'Cemetery Gates/ 11' at Wood Green just for fun! But, there was no Inspector Blakey saying, "I'm going to get you Butler!" but there is still plenty to tell, nonetheless.....

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

It was on a train to St. Pancras in the autumn of 1973, returning from an interview at the University of Leicester, that I made an important decision: to go on and get a university education, but to defer my entry for at least a year. The official reason was to gain some experience of the world from other than a school student's perspective and to save some money for college, both of which were true. However, and perhaps more importantly, it was also to fulfill a boyhood ambition while I still had the chance: to work on the buses! And so it was the following July (1974), after completing my 'A'-levels at the South East Essex VIth form college in Thundersley, that I found myself in the first day of Conductor's School at Eastern National's (EN) Southend (SD) depot.

A Conductor's Life

On the surface of it, I had supposed being a bus conductor was little more than collecting some fares and ringing a few bells! But through the instructor, Inspector Kennedy, my classmates and I soon learned that there was more to it than that. We were soon reading fare tables and timetables, practicing making change (quickly), operating our Setright Speed ticket machines, understanding duty cards and completing waybills. Of course, how to ensure the safe operation of the bus along the way was stressed as the number one concern.

The week passed very quickly. Before my fellow students and I knew it, we were being issued our own ticket machine boxes and uniforms. The latter consisted of both the heavier black serge (winter) uniform of trousers and jacket with gold stripes along the trouser seams and jacket pockets, collar and cuffs, and the lighter olive/green (summer) cotton "dust" jacket, which I actually wore most of the time. The winter uniform was replaced by the (actually) more comfortable, but less distinctive blue-grey National Bus Company (NBC) uniform later on.

My First Duty

However the real training began the following week with my supervised 'road' training. I had been teamed up with Fred Matthews and his driver Eric Buisson. In fact, Eric's wife, Rene, was also a fellow student in the same Conductor's school, but more of that later. As was typical for most crews at the time, we boarded an empty 'Wood Green' on its way to Southend's Central Bus Station, or 'Scab' as it was endearingly known, based on its destination code, SCB, to take over a mid-morning 6 to Newington Ave (See Appendix: Summary of Routes).

The entire journey was a blur, with more and more people boarding between SCB and Victoria (Vic) Circus (SVC as I recall). Try as I might, I was unable to leave the lower saloon. Fred tended to the upstairs and, apart from my honour of ringing the first 'ding-ding' to signal our departure from SCB, he rang the remaining bells. I was somewhat familiar with the major destinations along Southchurch Rd, but those along Hamstel Rd and Newington Ave were new territory for me. I'm pretty certain that most of the tickets I issued had, at best, the completely wrong fare stages on them! Fred made sure I completed the first line of my waybill and I managed to catch my breath.

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

The return journey to Kent Elms Corner (EKE) wasn't much better. There were some pretty severe turns along the way and I was being bounced around as I hadn't found my 'legs' yet! I needed to develop the fine balancing act between issuing tickets and negotiating a narrow gangway on a moving bus, with a heavy bag of change on one side and a hefty ticket machine on the other. Fortunately it was something that came relatively quickly. From Kent Elms we had to go back all the way to Newington Ave, return to Kent Elms before heading only as far as SCB to hand over to the next crew. After the hectic pace of the cross-town morning 6's, a hard-earned lunch was in order. Then we were off on a circuit to Canvey.

During the course of the next few days, my knowledge of the both the route system and the history expanded rapidly, taking in the 3, 22/A, 25/A, 27, 29A, 61 and of course the longer distance 2 (to Grays) and 251: the 2 hour 40 minute (one-way) run into Wood Green in North-East London. The most notable omission was the 5 from Shoebury to Canvey, but I guess they figured the 3 and 27 would cover it! During the course of the week Eric and Fred shared much of the fabled "lore" of the SD depot with me: the conductor's ultimate days work – two Wood Greens and a Grays, which would have covered the best part of two-and-half shifts, or an entire working day!; X10 and 151/251 slashes - loading up a entire bus full of passengers and running off timetable to or from London Victoria or Wood Green; the now defunct cross-town 28/29 'figure of 8.' There was a fondness for these past (glory?) days as both these men recounted their little tid-bits and embellishments. Eric had also spent several summers as coach driver too, so he recounted many of those (antics) stories as well.

I also learned that my routine would consist of alternating between a regular schedule of a 'week' (any five days in a row) of early's, starting mostly before 10:00 am, and a week of late's, starting after 1:00 pm or so. The schedule was arranged such that once every several weeks you'd have a long weekend: finishing on a Thursday and not starting until the following Tuesday. This was, of course counter-balanced with changing over from an early week on Saturday, to a late week on a Sunday! Most of the time there was a day or two off between the different weeks. Also, within any given week, each day's duty was different. You would know the day before what the following day's duty would be. Adding in overtime, particularly on the late weeks, always made life extremely interesting. On those occasions you might only know that you needed to be at depot by 10:30 am, to be available to pick something up. Other times you would know that it was for a specific half-shift or whatever. It made for a varied and interesting work schedule. And, of course, plenty of overtime pay! Interspersed with these regular duties were the occasional "spares," when you would just show up with no specifically assigned work to cover, in case someone else didn't show up because they were sick or whatever. These "spare" times could be for only an hour or two at the beginning or end of a shift, to a half or whole shift.

I was also getting used to the different buses we worked on too: primarily the open-backed 27 feet LD Lodekka (<http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall3>) seating 60 (33 up/27 down), and the two different configurations of the longer, front-entrance FLF's: the standard 30 feet long,

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

FLF (<http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall4>) with its rearward facing staircase and manual gearbox, versus the 31 foot semi-automatic version (<http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall5>) with a forward facing staircase and a luggage pen downstairs. Both seated 70 but in different layouts: the former were 38/32, as opposed to the latter being 40/30. During my training I never did work on a KSW (<http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall2a>), by then only used on seafront duties, or on either of ENOC's two FS Lodekka's: I think only one of them was assigned to SD anyway, and unlike all the other LD's, they had a completely flat floor downstairs.

I also learnt some of the trickier operating procedures too. I successfully changed my first ticket roll on a moving bus, without having it unfurl along the entire lower deck. I had to wait for much later on for that to happen! There were several interesting manoeuvres at the end of routes too, to turn the bus around for the return journey. None more so than the 22A where the bus was reversed around blind corners at both Lower Hockley/Church Road, and Lifstan's Way/Woodgrange Drive. The latter was actually into a side-street just beyond Lifstan's Way. However, before I knew it, my week of training was over. I had just about found my legs; it was time to go it alone!

Solo at last!

Well, almost solo: I had my PSV license (FF30535? if I recall correctly), my ticket machine with box and a well worn leather cash bag, which was nice and supple and easy on the hands. All I needed was a driver! My first driver, or 'mate,' was Bill Bailey: a veteran of the Westcliff Omnibus Company, and was a member of the Black Cat gang. Although he never really explained who or what they were, he did still have the tattoo on his hand and seemed to be genuinely proud of it! He was a driver from the old school, although he could get a little impatient when driving, particularly in heavy traffic, which he would have seen get much worse over the years. It wasn't the easiest of partnerships, but there was no denying he was an interesting character, with a long history as a busman and was particularly engaging when he talked about the 'old' days.

My first duty was the grueling 'first Cambridge' (not to the university city, but the Cambridge Hotel, Shoebury/22), which started around 4:50 AM. Fortunately my Dad decided he would get up early with me to drive me to SD, and wish me luck on my first day. So it was with a deal of trepidation that I climbed up the front of my first Lodekka, adjusted the then standard T-shaped destination blinds:



I descended, walked around, hit the emergency door button and boarded; set up my trusty Setright ticket machine, fully loaded with a brand new ticket roll; checked my float of change in my bag; studied the duty card one last time; stowed my ticket machine box in the cubby; and

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

rapped the bulkhead window with a coin, twice. Bill glanced back through the bulkhead window, smiled, nodded, and out we rolled. I was finally on my way!

Unlike most 22 duties, which involved a Southend-Hullbridge-Shoebury-Southend circuit, this one started out from Southend towards Shoebury first, making a complete circuit, before handing over to the next crew back in Southend after a second departure from the Cambridge Hotel. It was a long and pretty grueling duty since it started early, picking up some early commuters out of Shoebury, hitting a solid commuter rush out of Hullbridge, for Rayleigh Station, as well as picking up a fairly heavy load of office workers into Southend, and was still busy on the second leg out of Shoebury, back into Southend, again.

I must say that working with Bill did have some plus points. The first was that with an FLF, Bill was easily able to monitor the passengers loading and unloading on the platform, without me having to give the "double bell" signal to depart from every stop. A blessing on that first busy morning!

Secondly, he was the master of the double de-clutch down the Lodekka gearbox. It was his absolute joy on 22/A's to be going full pelt down the Hullbridge Road, in overdrive, and then have to change down, double de-clutching through the box as we approached the sharp turn at Watery Lane into Hullbridge. I will never forget the sound of the engine roaring multiple times as he negotiated the gearbox down to second to take the corner! My job was to make sure Bill knew that no one wanted to alight from the bus at any of the stops along that stretch of road. An affirmative nod after we left Rawreth Lane was usually sufficient. This early trip into Hullbridge was, of course, the perfect opportunity for this!

Thirdly, Bill wanted to know the 'car' numbers for each day's duty. Each day the buses were allocated to a car number, corresponding to those on the individual duty cards for each shift. They were shown on 'the Board', together with any vehicles that were spare (unallocated). So on one day Car #8 was 2793, the next day it was 2848 and so on. So, with our car numbers from the Duty card in hand, he would check 'the Board' to see which buses we had. Like most drivers, Bill had his favourite vehicles that he liked to drive. The board was maintained by Derek (Ball?): I never knew what his actual job title was! However, in the event that Derek was off sick, on holiday and so forth, Bill was one of the backup men for setting up the Board too. So he also understood when the various vehicles would be in the depot or out on service. So, unlike most drivers it seems, he would change the assignments if one of his favorites was still available to take out that day!

Lastly, I was expected to buy the tea! I can only suppose that this tradition grew up in the hey-days when a conductor was always able to collect enough 'spare' change for this from large volumes of short journey passengers at busy times handing over their fares as they got off, and not necessarily all receiving a ticket in exchange. In these latter days, there were many fewer such opportunities. Although I do recall on a late afternoon 22, taking a full load of evening commuters out of Rayleigh Station, with an Inspector on board. By the time we left the

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

High Street, it was standing room only downstairs, but I had managed to clear all those fares by Trinity Road. However, the upstairs passengers were also now beginning to get off, and just handing me money, with the Inspector watching me on the platform. I rapidly started to count the money into my bag, and issued a ticket to him for the total amount. He smiled, checked it, clipped it and put it the used ticket bin. He then leaned across and poured a handful of change he had also collected, while I was working away from the platform downstairs, winked and got off at the next stop! More often than not, however, I paid out of my own float, if only to keep the tradition going.

I was actually very surprised just how many routes had cafes at, or close to their ends. The 22 was the favourite: it had cafes at both the Anchor in Hullbridge and the Cambridge Hotel. And, indeed, by the time, we reached the Cambridge for the second time that first morning, a warm cuppa was certainly needed. Furthermore, as we turned over the bus at SCB, and hopped on a 'CAR to GAR', a hearty breakfast was most definitely in order!

CAR to GAR

That was the Duty card instruction to return the bus back to the garage, empty and out-of-service. Its reciprocal was of the above mentioned 'CAR to SCB'. This was where most services originated/terminated in central Southend, with the notable exception (for EN crews at any rate) of short 25's, which had a brief layover in Southend's "Deeping," the underground bus stop below the Shopping Centre at Vic Circus. So there was a constant stream of crews, drivers and buses plying back and forth between SD and SCB. Whilst a nice stroll down the High Street was great in good weather, at other times the privacy and shelter of an "empty" bus, as opposed to one in service, was the preferred choice. There were plenty to choose from every hour: two 2's, 11, 19, two 251's, and 400. Also, although I can't fully recall now, but I think there were some short 25's, 27's, 29's, 61's as well, particularly early morning and late evening as those duties started and ended. In any case it was always a common courtesy to see if there was any one waiting to go back to SD, or, to make an announcement in the Canteen, which inevitably meant there were several others riding to or from SCB with you. I've already mentioned the short 25's with their Deeping layover, but the other main change over point was in the SD depot itself, where crews would relieve each other on the longer Canvey services (3/5), since they didn't pass through SCB.

This also brings to mind a curiosity about how folks talked about the different routes we operated. In town services were almost always referred to by their numbers (6,25,29) and not their destinations. No one was doing a round of Leigh Churches (short 25's), or Newington Ave's (6/A), or perhaps even more whimsically "Kent Elmsies," although that might have been fun! Curiously, the 61 was often referred to as a Sutton Cemetery! Whereas, for the longer services, it was much more common for the destination to be used, instead of a number: a Hullbridge (22), a Grays (2), a Wood Green or London (251) and so on. These would often include some kind of qualifier too: first, morning, mid-day, afternoon, late, last and so on. There was also some (albeit readily understood) ambiguity involved in this. The first Shoebury

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

was a 22, not a 3 or a 5: these would have been the first East Beach or Blackgate Road, but I can't remember actually ever doing either.

Having been refreshed with a hearty breakfast Bill and I were back out for the second half of our shift. I don't remember now what that was, although I suspect it was a round or two of short town services (6/6A, short 25/25A or 29A), but it was over very early in the afternoon. I had survived my first solo day. It was time to go home for a good rest and to relax before the next day's work. Fortunately this was a later start so I could get the bus in. In hindsight, I really wasn't ready for that first week and did not take on any overtime. That would shortly follow, once I'd got into a regular daily routine.

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 1 of 4

Appendix – Summary of Routes

	2	Southend Central Bus Stn -Victoria Circus -Westcliff -Leigh -Hadleigh -Thundersley - Benfleet (Tarpots) -Pitsea -Basildon -Corringham -Stanford-le-Hope -Orsett -Grays
	3	Shoeburyness East Beach – Thorpe Bay – Bournes Green – Southchurch Road – Southend Victoria Circus – Westcliff – Leigh - Hadleigh – Thundersley - Benfleet(Tarpots) – South Benfleet Stn – Canvey Leigh Beck
(PM School Relief)	3	Southend Victoria Circus – Southchurch Rd - Bournes Green - Thorpe Bay - Shoeburyness East Beach
	5	Shoeburyness Blackgate Rd - Thorpe Bay – Bournes Green – Southchurch Road – Southend Victoria Circus – Westcliff – Leigh - Hadleigh – Thundersley - North Thundersley Benfleet(Tarpots) – South Benfleet Stn – Canvey Newlands - Leigh Beck
	6	Newington Ave - Hamstel Rd – Southchurch Rd – Southend Victoria Circus – Central Bus Station – Westcliff Station – Prittlewell Chase/General Hospital. – Bridgewater Drive - Kent Elms Corner
	6A	Newington Ave - Hamstel Rd – Southchurch Rd – Southend Victoria Circus – Central Bus Station – Westcliff Station – Carlton Ave – Arterial Road - Kent Elms Corner
	7	Southend Central Bus Station – Pier Hill – Kursaal – Eastern Esplanade – Maplin Way – Shoebury – Eagle Way/Constable Way
(PM School Relief)	11	<i>Southend – Prittlewell - Eastwood – Rayleigh – Battlesbridge – East Hanningfield – Great Baddow – Chelmsford</i>
	14	Southend Central Bus Station – Prittlewell – Kent Elms – Arterial Road – Rayleigh Weir – Basildon Industrial Estate
(Weekday AM)	19	<i>Southend – Eastwood – Rayleigh – Battlesbridge – Maldon – Colchester – Clacton</i>
	22	Shoebury Cambridge Hotel – Thorpe Bay – Woodgrange Drive – Southend Central Bus Station – Victoria Circus – Prittlewell – Eastwood – Rayleigh – Hullbridge Anchor
	22A	Southchurch Lifstan's Way – Woodgrange Drive – Southend Central Bus Station – Victoria Circus – Prittlewell – Arterial Road - Eastwood – Grove Road - Rayleigh – Hullbridge – Lower Hockley Church Road - Dome Caravan Site
	22B	Southchurch Lifstan's Way – Woodgrange Drive – Southend Central Bus Station – Victoria Circus – Prittlewell – Arterial Road - Eastwood – Grove Road - Rayleigh – Rawreth Lane
	22C	Southend Central Bus Station – Victoria Circus – Prittlewell – Arterial Road - Eastwood – Grove Road - Rayleigh – Rawreth Lane – Rettendon – Runwell Hospital
(Sunday Only)	23A	<i>Leigh Station – Leigh – Elmsleigh Drive – Kent Elms – Eastwood Rise</i>
	25	Leigh Church – Chalkwell Park – Westcliff – Southend Victoria Circus (Deeping)
(Short)	25A	Leigh Church – Chalkwell Park – Westcliff – Southend Victoria Circus – Central Bus Station
	27	Southend Central Bus Station - Victoria Circus – Westcliff – Leigh - Hadleigh – Thundersley – Benfleet (Kenneth Road) – South Benfleet Stn – Canvey Winter Gardens – Eastern Esplanade
	29	Southend Central Bus Station – Prittlewell – Fairfax Drive – Blenheim Chase/Mountdale Gdns -Woodcutters Arms – Eastwood Belgrave Rd
(Weekday Evng.)	29A	Southend Central Bus Station – Prittlewell – Fairfax Drive – Chalkwell Park Schools
	61	Southend Central Bus Station – Victoria Circus – Southchurch Rd – Bournemouth Park Rd – Sutton Cemetery
	61A	Southend Central Bus Station – Victoria Circus – Southchurch Rd – Bournemouth Park Rd – Prittlewell Ecko Works
(Weekday AM/PM)	67	Eastwood Kent Elms Corner – Elmsleigh Drive- Leigh – Chalkwell – Sea Front - Pier – Kursaal – Lifstan's Way – Southchurch White Horse – Temple Sutton Cluny Square
	151	<i>Canvey – Benfleet – Pitsea – Basildon – Billericay – Shenfield – Brentwood – Gidea Park – Romford – Ilford – Woodford – Walthamstow – Tottenham – Turnpike Lane – Wood Green</i>
(Shared CY, BN, BD, WG duty)	251	Southend – Eastwood – Rayleigh – Wickford – Billericay – Shenfield – Brentwood – Gidea Park – Romford – Ilford – Woodford – Walthamstow – Tottenham – Turnpike Lane – Wood Green
(Shared SD, BD, WG duty)	400 (OMO Limited Stop)	<i>Southend – Westcliff – Leigh - Hadleigh –Thundersley – Benfleet (Tarpots) – Pitsea - Basildon – Romford – Wanstead – Leyton – Dalston – Islington – London Kings Cross</i>

A Conductor's Chronicle
Part 1 of 4

Example Vehicles

KSW Open Top	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall2a/en2383
Early LD with long grille	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall3/en2453
Early LD with split rear "cathedral" windows	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall3/en2467
Later LD with short grille	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall3/en2491
Later LD with single split rear window	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall3/en2522
FS	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall3/en2539a
FLF with "old" short grille	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall4/en2740a
FLF with "new look" grille	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall4/en2820
FLF6LX Semi-Automatic	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall5/en2919
	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall5/en2930a
VR	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall6/en3028a