

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 4 of 4

LOOKING BACK

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

Contents

PART 4: LOOKING BACK.....	1
Return to the Glory Days.....	1
Favorites.....	3
The Following Summer.....	3
Close Encounters of the Recent Kind	4
Appendix – Summary of Routes	6
Example Vehicles	7

PART 4: LOOKING BACK

In the first three parts of this series I have tried to describe, albeit probably inadequately, what it was like for a young lad to fulfill a boy hood ambition to work on the buses, and capture the essence of what that job entailed. It wasn't just "ringing bells and taking fares." It was more a way of life that seeps into your blood! I still hanker for it, even today, as you will no doubt gather in this concluding, more reflective part.

Return to the Glory Days

In his excellent book on the Glory Days of Eastern National (EN), Richard Delahoy makes the statement that in his "biased" opinion, the 31ft long semi-automatic version of the FLF was "among the finest buses ever built" (e.g. <http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall5/en2614>). I would like to shed further light on that comment, from my perspective. In addition to my experience of actually working on the various Bristol 'deckers (K, LD/FS, FLF and VR, See: Appendix, Sample Vehicles), at Southend (SD), I have also had the pleasure of travelling on

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 4 of 4

many other different models over the years: Regent III/RT, Regent V, Routemaster, Bridgemaster, Renown, Guy Arab IV, Leyland PD2, 3, Lowlander, and a Loline in the time I spent at Southampton, with trips to Leeds, Leicester, Reading, Nottingham, Cardiff and so on, as well those since moving to the U.S. Consequently, I think Richard's point can be unequivocally put to rest with the following story.

Johnny and I were working the first Wood Green of the day, which for me meant getting up very early to ride my bike the 10 miles from Hullbridge to SD, as was often the case on these early starts (or the reverse on late finishes). Despite the morning chill, the sunrise beckoned a fine day and the prospect of some good overtime! It was the usual rush hour crawl by the time we got up into "the smoke," but nothing out of the ordinary otherwise. The morning return, would be equally uneventful, except perhaps for the ongoing road works around South Woodford and Redbridge.

As we got set to depart Wood Green (e.g. <http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall5/en2930a>), there was smallish suitcase placed in the luggage pen inside, and an elderly lady had occupied one of the single seats beside the stair-well, up top. I was always struck how the terms "up top" and "inside" had prevailed: a throwback to the days when all double deckers were open on top of the lower (covered) saloon. Throughout the journey we exchanged pleasantries several times: she was on her way to see her sister in Southend for a few weeks and was looking forward to their "strolls along the (sea)front." She particularly enjoyed traveling through the "countryside" between Shenfield and Wickford.

By the time we turned into Southend Central Bus Station the sun was gleaming brightly over the estuary, silhouetting the Pier. I set her suitcase outside on the pavement. As she picked it up, she leant into me and beamed "Thank you for such a pleasant journey – just like it used to be!" "An', he's very good for a youngster," she added pointing at the cab. "Ave yourselves a nice cuppa!" and handed me a 50p tip!

She was right. I couldn't help feeling just a little tinge of pride to be wearing my EN dust jacket that morning, as we pulled out to return to SD. We had upheld a long tradition of quality, reliable service first started by City Coaches (<http://www.sct61.org.uk/article/route251>), by providing an excellent, smooth journey fashioned out of couple of key ingredients: I was indeed crewing with a very good driver and he was behind the wheel of *undoubtedly* the finest British half-cab 'decker ever built, bar none (with due respect and apologies to all those other fine vehicles, but I'm sorry - not really even close)!

This point was further underscored many years later, in New York in 1998. For several years I worked for a company that provided vehicle maintenance software to transit operators in the U.S. On one of my many visits to New York City Transit I had the opportunity to participate in a demonstration ride of one of their newly sanctioned buses. Our host spent the hour or so ride from and to their Central Maintenance facility in Brooklyn, extolling the virtues of the 'new'

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 4 of 4

technology which now made Low Floor/Flat Floor vehicles possible. The man seemed utterly incredulous when I mentioned to him, privately, that this had been possible since the Fifties in the UK! Furthermore the ride wasn't the best as the bus had a pretty harsh fully automatic gear box, which seemed to lurch from one gear to another as it changed. It certainly didn't have the smoothness of the driver-shifted semi automatic gear box I had become accustomed to those many years earlier. So much for thirty-plus years of progress!

Favorites

Sadly, a few short weeks after that run to WG, Johnny and I made our final run together on a 27 to Canvey. I had worked from the start of one summer (1974) to the end of the next (1975). A lot of experience had been packed into just 15 months. When we got back to SD, I bagged up my money, handed in my Setright and uniform, shook Johnny by the hand, gave Joyce a hug goodbye, and left to go to the University of Southampton.

On balance my favorite duty was the long Wood Green, even those that had a few shorts tacked on the end, for example a round of 61's or 29's. Conversely, if I had to choose my least favorite, it was the 5 from Shoebury's Blackgate Rd to Canvey Leigh Beck. I was never quite sure where I was when we turned right off the London Road at the bottom of Bread and Cheese Hill, up Kents Hill Rd North and again when we went through the Newlands section on Canvey. In fact there was one fare stage that I never actually managed to work out where it was! For the shorter routes in town, I loved doing the 6/A's the best, but never really liked the 29A's. Of course the 67's along the Seafront were always a fun diversion, and the 22's were always nice, since I lived in Hullbridge, they were very familiar. Like home!

The Following Summer

In 1976 I managed to wangle my way back for a third summer to get a couple more months under my belt. As far as I could make out SD only hired 3 conductors for that summer, including me. On my first run, I took over a 6 from Joyce. There lots of hugs and smiles and welcome backs and cups of tea (later) in the canteen. It was good to see many of the old gang again: Joyce, Steve, Phil, Ray, The Winters, Tim, Alan, Eric and Rene, and of course Johnny. Even 'he' was a joy to listen to as 'he' recounted some Australian tale or another, well - for the first time at any rate! Trevor, however, said it was that I just couldn't keep away from him!

But things had changed. The first significant change when I returned that following summer (1976) was that there were no more open-backers, apart from the Seafronts. All the LD's and the FS had gone. I don't recall too much of a cut back in the crew duties at SD by that point. While there were no more 14's, and short relief's on 3's and 7's, the extra FLF's needed must have been allocated in from the more rural parts of the fleet, where the move to One-Man-Operation (OMO) would have been much more significant. It had always been fun, when working 6's, short 25's, 29's or 61's to be able to lean off the back of the platform onto the bonnet of the bus behind and have quick chat with that driver, at Victoria Circus for instance. But, alas, those days were gone.

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 4 of 4

I also don't recall any "three bell-ers," either, rung when the bus was fully loaded to avoid picking anyone else up. Even the commuter runs to and from Rayleigh, Benfleet and Thorpe Bay stations didn't seem quite as frantic anymore. Yet despite the inevitable decline in passengers, making the progress to even more OMO services inevitable, it was often easy to find yourself running behind schedule because of traffic congestion. Saturday afternoons in Southend were particularly challenging, where trying to make it through the town centre in the allotted time had become next to impossible.

Crew shortages were also becoming an issue, making the move to OMO even more needed. On a few occasions we would handover to a Corporation OMO, instead of an EN crew. But, crewing behind a variety of drivers for those several weeks, including several more runs with Johnny working overtime, I still managed to enjoy earning a little more towards my college kitty. Perhaps the most memorable was when Dave, another Conductor, and I were both working 67's one weekday afternoon and had a running 'skirmish' each time we passed one another along the seafront! It started with a few crumpled up coin bags hurled from one open top deck to another, but escalated to the launching of "opened" ticket rolls, which unfurled as they sailed through the air!

However, sadly, that September, I finally hung up my trusty old Setright for good! It wasn't quite as wrenching this time as I hadn't been paired up with a regular driver, but I knew I wouldn't be coming back for several reasons. Firstly, there wouldn't be an opportunity to do so because of a big summer project for my degree the following year, and secondly I seriously doubted there would be a job to come back to! Ironically my last duty was Shoebury/5 followed by an early-evening Hullbridge. For the former, I was determined to find that one mysterious fare stage I had never previously found – but I completely missed it (again)! So that evening, after cashing out for the very last time and saying good-bye to whoever was left in canteen, which by then were very few, it was a slow melancholy walk across from SD to Vic Circus get the following 22 home. The conductor recognized me and gave me one last 'free' crew ride home as a parting gift. The only things I took away with me were my enamel EN badge, a last glimpse of a dimly lit SD depot disappearing into the evening's fading gloom, and a lifetime of experiences, packed into, as it turns out, only actually 19 total months of working on the buses! But what a blast!!



Close Encounters of the Recent Kind

For the past twenty four years or so now I have been living in the United States. Yet even here, I have managed to stumble across the occasional Lodekka, in my travels. The first was on a trip to Boston, where the company had hired an open top bus to take us from a downtown hotel to the harbour for dinner at a conference one evening. To my absolute pleasure it was an FLF. Despite much garish paint inside and out, and good deal of conversion with the passenger doors now being on the right, instead of the left, there were still some vestiges of Tilling green to be seen. Unfortunately there was not enough detail left to identify its original owner. I have also seen a shorter front entrance Lodekka (FSF) used as a mobile chip shop at the Highland

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 4 of 4

games held in Pleasanton, California; another FSF was "on duty" as a booking office for Gray Line tours in San Francisco; and an FLF used as factory storage shed near San Jose airport.

Most recently I happened across two of them being used as a video games "room" and a smoking "room" adjacent to the British-themed Cameron's Pub in Half Moon Bay, California. As is customary in the U.S. these are falsely painted an LT-type bright red, and probably by now consists of parts of several vehicles. One of two (left, with the somewhat disinterested family) has the very faintest of traces of its rear vehicle registration left. As best as I can make out, it starts with what looks like 'something-OO', which would make it a 1962 EN vehicle, or at least that's where that part of it came from!



Also, in a secondhand bookshop in San Ramon, California, where I now live, I also stumbled across a book called "*Buses & Coaches 1945-1965*." As I was thumbing through it, something caught my eye. It was, oddly enough, a chimneystack! But a very recognisable one: sure enough it was the Anchor Inn at Hullbridge, with an ex-Westcliff K5G ready to depart on a service 22 to Leigh Rectory Hotel. Upon further inspection, the book also contained 2600, one of the magnificent CH37/18F "X10" FLF coaches at Victoria and 4200, a DP41F LS on Coach-Air service at Euston Square en-route to Southend Airport. Naturally I had to buy the book!

But, perhaps the most evocative encounter was one summer's morning on one of my many trips to New York. I was walking from my hotel on my way to a meeting at Park Ave and 55th St, when a memory was stirred, awakened deep within my mind: echoing around the cavernous corporate canyons of mid-town Manhattan was the unmistakable "song" of a very familiar "bird.**" It was a Gardner 6 cylinder engine being put through its paces in the lower ratios of a 'crash' gear box. I hurried quickly to next intersection to see the rear of an open-top FLF on sightseeing duty, disappearing cross-town. Amid my revelry, I was carried far away from the sultry morning heat of New York City on the tail of that sound, to, maybe, Victoria Circus, or was it somewhere along the Eastwood Road from Rayleigh?

"Where to luv?....."

"One and a half to Kent Elms?"

"That'll be 12p"

"Much obliged.....Any more fares please?....."

(Mike now manages Web Site Editors for Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco).

***Post-script: Perhaps more a more familiar bird than I originally new: <http://www.sct61.org.uk/es2819>*

A Conductor's Chronicle

Part 4 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>
(OMO)		
	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>
(OMO)		
	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>
(HH Duty)		
(Short)	25	Leigh Church – Chalkwell Park – Westcliff – Southend Victoria Circus (Deeping)
	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 Ecco 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 4 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/en2900
VR	http://www.sct61.org.uk/gallery/engall6/en3028a