

Random Tales of working at Eastern National at Wood Green, London depot – home of “On the Buses”

Bill Almquest Via Facebook Eastern National Remembered (private) Group

As a boy, I attended the top grammar school in Waltham Forest. But all I ever wanted to do was drive a bus. Five days after my 18th birthday I started conductor training with London Transport, at Chiswick. I was at Holloway Garage for a couple of months, until a vacancy arose at my local depot, Leyton. As soon as I reached 21, I put in for driving. But they would not let me train, as they said it would mean training me and also my replacement. Keeping me where I was, meant only training one person. So I left, and joined Eastern National at Wood Green, as per some of the tales recounted below.

Married with a 9-month-old daughter, we later moved to Wellingborough for housing. After 6 months, I was able to join United Counties. I worked at Kettering, Wellingborough and lastly Rushden depots, where I drove the 200, the ex-Birch Motorway service to London's Marylebone Station, plus the 203 Hitchin service, and others. Unfortunately, the depot was closed in March 1978, and I transferred to Eastern National at Basildon, where I drove for a further 11 years. I was on the 400 service when we received the Olympian coaches.

I left in autumn 1989 to join Scott Paper (Andrex) where I was credit manager. My last 15 years at work were as a Company director, within the food industry. I thoroughly enjoyed my years driving buses...

Some short stories

Eastern National, Wood Green, mid '70s. Sam was a conductor on the 151 Wood Green - Canvey, and 251 Wood Green - Southend. Sam had originally come from the West Indies, I believe. There was only one piece of regular overtime, O/T 1. It was just Wood Green - Brentwood and back. In theory, you got off the bus at Brentwood High Street, walked around the corner to the cafe for a quick tea, then back to take over your return bus. Invariably you barely had time to get across the road to get onto your return bus. One day I did O/T 1 with Sam, and as usual as soon as we left Wood Green we started to lose time due to the heavy traffic.

Sam tapped on the window. "Late" he said. "I know, I replied, don't worry. 5 minutes later, the same again," Late" he said. Again I said, "Don't worry". At Romford, Sam walked around the front of the bus, and as I slid open the cab window he said "Bill, put the late on, it's dark inside the bus and I can't see to sell the tickets".....

At Wood Green, we had a West Indian driver, a lovely jolly man. One day he said he was going to have an interview the next morning to drive for London Transport, where the wages were much better. The next afternoon, he arrived for work. We asked how he had got on at his interview. He said that they had taken him out in a Transit van, to assess his driving. After a while, they said that they were sorry, but he would never make a bus driver. 'What do you do now?' they asked. I'm a bus driver, he replied...

One Saturday morning, I was working with my regular conductor, John. 0702 251 Wood Green to Southend on Sea. We left the depot, all the way to Romford, so far not one passenger. On I drove. Brentwood, Billericay. Still no-one. Wickford, Rayleigh. Still just me, John, and an empty bus. At 0925, as we turned the corner at Kent Elms [Eastwood], there were about 25 passengers! The local buses must have been missing. It certainly woke John up! 2 hours and 23 minutes with not one passenger...

Wood Green again. Sid was a driver on the 400, Kings Cross - Southend. As he crossed a set of lights on the Eastern Avenue Southend bound, a police car was sitting at the junction, in Ley Street. They said he had jumped the lights, and it went to court. Sid took my conductor as a witness, who was working overtime on the 251 following Sid's bus. Also Les, the driver of the 251. Les was a nice man, but when he spoke he had the sort of voice where all words were on the same note. The Judge questioned Les thus:

Judge: "You were the driver of the following bus?"

Les: "What?"

Judge: "You were driving the bus behind?"

Les: "Oh, yeah"

Judge: "What colour were the lights when the bus in front passed?"

Les: "They was red"

Judge: "I'll try again. What colour were the traffic lights when your colleague passed through them?"

Les: "They was red"

Judge: "I understood that you were a witness that when the bus in front passed through the lights they were green"

Les: "That's right John, they was green"

Case dismissed.

Wood Green Depot. February 1975. I was working as a conductor, whilst waiting to take my driving test. (I took my test and passed on Tuesday 25th March). Dave was a nice man. Dave was a driver. But Dave was also a bit of a character. He would say some really odd things. Anyway, Thursday 27th February, I was on Duty L6 with Dave. 1402 WG [Wood Green]- Southend. Arrive back at WG at 2053. As we are on final approach to the depot, Dave pulls up and beckons me to the cab window. "Do you fancy a pint?". "OK" I replied, "where?". "We can have a drink at Wood Green Tube Station" says Dave. "You pay in, I'll go on ahead and get the drinks in. When you come over, walk up to the ticket collector's box. Stand behind the box, put your hands on the wall and slide the wall along, there's a pub behind there". So I think this time he's really flipped, and I know that when I get there, Dave will be waiting, to tell me they were closed.... But there's no sign of Dave. I loiter, nervously, when suddenly the ticket collector says to me "are you going for a drink?" and he slides the wooden panel along, and lo and behold behind is the London Underground Social Club. And amidst all the Underground staff having a drink is Dave with my pint. Oh ye of little faith....

The next day is Friday 28th February 1975. At 0846 a Northern City line train fails to stop at Moorgate Station. 43 people die, and 74 are injured.

1975. Wood Green depot, 1130 am. The inspector came out into to garage and said "We've lost a bus. It was due out of here at 6.30, when it arrived at Southend they were going to do work on it. It hasn't turned up". We found it in the line-up of buses due to go out. It was a crash box. For the past 5 hours, every time it got to the front of the line the next driver out would drive it around the block, back to the end of the line, then run and take the semi-automatic next in line. Another true story from the home of "On The Buses".

Seeing a photo of FLFs outside Wood Green reminded me of a true story from the early '70s when I worked there. When you finished your duty you would put your takings in your cloth bag and put it in the night safe. The next day they would count the money in the cash bags. A driver or conductor had to be present, for which they got 3 hours overtime. One day Mr Gaggs, who was probably in his sixties and worked in the office, was counting money when a masked man, who was armed with some weapon, dashed in and said "give me the money". So Mr Gaggs picked up a broom, hit the man with it and said "don't mess about", at

which point the man ran out. "Bloody drivers" he said. When it transpired it was actually a real attempted robbery he had to sit down and couldn't stop shaking for quite a while!

Follow ups:

[Bill Almquest](#) Even after 45 years, I remember taking 2766 out of WG to Southend and feeling like I was going backwards! I liked driving "stick jobs", but at the time they were building the M11 and you could be 45 minutes late by the time you got to Gants Hill! Oh, and guess what bus they gave me to go back to WG.....

[Tebzy Alan Tebbit](#) When on temporary loan to Southend, I worked a 251 up to Wood Green, with CF [Chelmsford] 2706, on docking loan to one of the 151/251 depots. I parked it in the line, but after my meal break, I was surprised to find it in pole position. Luckily I preferred a stick job.

[Martin Farmer](#) I well remember bringing a crash box to Wood Green. WG crew would run it around block and take a semi and leave you to take crash box back to SD [Southend]. It's a wonder anyone knew where any of the buses were.

Also I remember one day on a 151 due to works at the rear entrance you had to enter through the exit and leave the bus for the inside staff to turn around. I decided to turn around in the depot myself and turned round near where single deck coaches parked but hadn't noticed that there was an iron girder lower than 13ft 6in and hit it. Apart from the bang when I hit it, a shower of glass and bits of fibre glass came raining down, inside staff not happy. When I had the depot interview at BN was asked whose fault it was. Management expected me to say it was my fault, I said it was the company's fault as there was no height restriction notice - result no further action. The bus was 2913 and after repair there was always a slight bump on the roof where it had been repaired.