



Driving buses in Southend

It all started in 1966 when I applied to become a bus driver with Southend Corporation Transport. I was taken on a test run in AEC Regent 261 down to the seafront near the Kursaal. The driving instructor got out and said "Have you ever driven a crash box before?" my reply was No, so I jumped in and tried to master the gears but made a hash of it. After a time it became easier until I mastered it and went on to love the two remaining AEC's 258 and 261, always asking for them on overtime.

The training bus was a Leyland PD2 which I also passed my test in. SCT had a special route for teaching drivers and it went as follows. I must say at this point that we were learning the old Southend road layout, before the town was drastically altered.

We left the garage and proceeded down London Road to the Victoria Circus roundabout, and then along Southchurch Road turning right into Porters Grange Road (now Queensway), and left into Hill Crest where we did a hill start. We then turned right into Southchurch Avenue that led to the Kursaal. As we approached the seafront, we had to change down into first gear, which was a crash gear, the others being synchromesh. Then we turned right onto the seafront as far as Pier Hill. Here there was another hill start, where we did a sharp right turn, just missing the wall with the front mudguard by inches. The secret was to turn when you saw the small white mark on the wall put there by the Instructors. Then, left by the Ritz Cinema, turning right into the High Street, then to Victoria Circus and up to the garage. The reversing movements were done in the garage using cones as the kerb stones.

After passing my test, I went on bus types, driving each model around the town to get the feel of the different types, having air or vacuum brakes which were different on each bus. My next task was to learn all the routes

which I did riding around on the service buses. My first driving job was on route 6 from Newington Avenue to Kent Elm Corner in a tin-front PD2, or 'bull nose' as they were called. One of the heaviest journeys was on route 3 from Shoeburyness to Canvey Island, which covered the London Road, Benfleet Station and if you were unlucky, catching three separate schools on Canvey. The early morning duties for the Canvey run consisted of bus from the garage down to Victoria Circus then Shoeburyness to Canvey; back to Shoeburyness; Canvey to Shoeburyness, then back to Victoria Circus.

On early turn, it was common practice for bus crews to be as quick as they could getting their buses from the garage in order to go to the Bluebird Café in Broadway Market for tea and toast. It was quite a sight seeing a line of buses (not all should have been at that location) with their crews in the café. We then went our separate ways to start our journeys.

Some of the things that went on would make your hair stand on end, Ashingdon Hill Rochford used to be very narrow and it was the policy for the bus at the top of the hill to flash his headlights to allow the bus at the bottom to proceed but there were a few drivers that waited until the bus was halfway up the hill and then roar down passing you by inches with a big grin on their face.

One of the funniest things to happen to my conductor on the Canvey run was a little old lady who gave him twenty two halfpennies (remember we were using pounds, shillings and pence). Being a six footer with a broad Irish accent, he looked into his hand, looked down at the old lady, opened the bus window and threw the coins out, whilst issuing the correct ticket to the lady. He thought this was quite a cheek giving him all that change. This conductor was very fast issuing tickets and was proud of the fact he could clear the bus with a full load before he reached the Blue Boar pub from Southend

Victoria. Another time we were running dead to the garage and I went round the Victoria Circus roundabout a bit fast and his ticket machine box and money flew out of the bus and burst open, sending the money all over the road. Bells ringing in my ear, I stopped to help pick it all up.

I enjoyed driving the different types of buses. The AEC Bridgemasters were very bouncy on the suspension and all the school children used to bounce up the stairs causing the bus to move up and down much to their delight. They were strange to drive as they had a high revving engine that no good at top speed but fast pulling away. The gearstick came out of the floor vertically behind you, for about six inches, then sloped at 45 degrees towards the front, so when changing gear, the movement was either up or down.

The seafront Daimler preselector buses were

a bit of a pig to drive, since if you did not press the preselector pedal down properly, it would jump out of the floor and trap your knee under the steering wheel. The only way to push it back down to the floor was to hold the steering wheel and jump up and down on it.

Leyland Lowlanders (front entrance) were quite nice to drive except that as I have long legs, there was not much room under the steering wheel. Photos and information about SCT buses can be found on the SCT61 website at www.sct61.org.uk/

One of my most frightening experiences was when another bus ran into the back of mine in the Fairway, Eastwood. In those days the route 23 and 29 used to terminate at Eastwood, Belgrave Road, as always crews left late as not to hang about at bus stops. On this occasion I was on the 23 with a PD2 and left first, with the 29 (PD3 highbridge)

Numerically, the last of the bouncy Bridgemasters: 322 (WHJ 433) in the later livery, in Southend High Street, on route 7.

David Harman





1965 Leyland PD3/Massey 'highbridge', 344 (C344 CJN) in Southend High Street on route 29. Was this the fateful bus?
David Harman

following. I stopped at the Fairway School and heard the sound of skidding tyres and the crash of the bus hitting mine, pushing my staircase almost into the lower saloon. No injuries on either bus, thank goodness. The other driver was suspended for a time as punishment but it was later found that the road surface had just been re-laid and something was wrong with it. He resumed driving after a shortened punishment.

The Albion Aberdonian single deckers had a gearchange that was like stirring soup even when in gear. These were used mainly on the Waking OMO (one man operated) routes, I went onto the OMO roster after a time on the crew buses. The people in Waking always gave you gifts at Christmas and apples in the summer. Imagine that now!

Looking back I enjoyed my time with SCT, having followed in the footsteps of my father who drove for Westcliff Motor Services and

SCT. I can remember as a child walking through the SCT trolleybus depot; Oh for a camera then.!

Eventually, I left the buses and went back to my old job, but in the early seventies I joined Eastern National at Southend as a driver but that's another story.

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