

All in a day's work – the 251

Brian Barrett

One of the Group's earliest members, Brian Barrett worked as a student conductor and later driver, at Brentwood and Southend depots, in 1964/5/6. Here are his memories of those heady days working the "Main Road", the erstwhile City Coach Company Wood Green to Southend route, numbered 251 by Eastern National, with some thoughts on the Bristol Lodekkas used on that service.

My conducting career at Brentwood covered the Summers of 1964 (on Main Road) and 1965 (Locals). By those dates, the 251 Group was mainly FLF with the occasional LD whilst the double deck element of the local rota was mainly LD shared between 5Gs and 6Bs, the latter displaced from Main Road duties.

My basic rate of pay as a conductor was just under £11 per week (equivalent to £195 today). Saturday was generally the busiest day and my busiest shift was early shift B40 on Saturday 5th September after which I paid in £31/0/9d (= £550). I was fortunate to have Doug Brown as my regular driver but as he had better things to do with his time than work overtime, I worked with most of the Main Road drivers, most of whom had done at least twenty years and some approaching forty years. They represented professional busmen at their best with tremendous pride in the job they were doing.

The conductor and the Lodekka

At WG, SD and BD, drivers and conductors were permanently paired and went round the rota together, with drivers having an unofficial right of veto. A non-career conductor, such as a student or a lady who thought it a good idea to keep an eye on her driver husband tended to be avoided. However, the right team made the job much easier with the driver understanding the need for restrained driving to allow the conductor to collect a surge of short distance fares whilst the conductor understood when the priority was to keep the bus moving and assisted, for example, by helping passengers on and off with pushchairs and always being near a bell when the bus was at a bus stop. Good career conductors earned respect from the driving grade in general by their competence and many subsequently became one-man operators.

Most conductors enjoyed the Lodekka as it made their twin responsibilities of fare collection and keeping the bus moving easier. Its big advantage was the central upstairs gangway which made fare collection quicker and the conductor's view of the platform was not impeded by passengers seeking to reach a seat. Of great assistance to both conductor and driver was the location and nature of the bells. ECW always provided a generous number of bells, two in each saloon, enabling the conductor to start the bus from anywhere within it. The most popular bell was under the conductor's locker where it could be operated without impeding passenger flow but on FLFs some conductors preferred using the buzzer on the front bulkhead where you were in the way of passengers coming from or going to the upper deck. The TVX FLFs (1571-90, later 2700-19) were equipped with duplicated pushes at the top of the staircase, a bell with a decal reading 'For Conductor's use only' and a buzzer presumably for use by passengers. Although this assisted drivers who knew that a starting bell signal was given by the conductor from a location where they were well placed to observe the platform, it again meant that the conductor had to impede passenger flow to use it. This was not a feature of any subsequent FLF batches.

In 1964, after the introduction of the 151, Brentwood Main Road rota had 25 Monday to Friday duties and five pieces of overtime, worth around 3 to 4 hours each. Early round trips generally went towards Southend first whilst later generally went towards Wood Green. The overtime pieces comprised return trips to Gants Hill, where off peak 151 trips terminated, or a trip to Southend. Generally, crews operated the same duty for a week.

A typical early was B4 as described below for 31st July 1964, the first day of operation to Southend Seaway (after Tylers Avenue garage/terminal was closed):

0554	Sign On		
0609	Brentwood – Southend Seaway	251	1602 SD
	Paid Meal Break		
0834	Southend Seaway – Wood Green	151	1598 SD
1138	Wood Green – Brentwood	151	1597 WG
1305	Sign Off (Takings £20/12/3d, equivalent to about £360 today).		

A typical late was B21 as described below for 5th October 1964:

1702	Sign On		
1718	Brentwood – Wood Green	251	2790 SD
	Paid Meal Break		
1908	Wood Green – Southend Seaway	151	2782 SD
2204	Southend Seaway – Brentwood	151	2782 SD
2353	Sign Off (Takings £13/11/1d).		

A typical overtime piece was OT 2 as operated on Thursday 13th August 1964:

1052	Sign On		
1108	Brentwood - Gants Hill	151	2733 SD
1201	Gants Hill – Brentwood	151	2733 SD
1248	Brentwood – Gants Hill	151	2730 BD
1341	Gants Hill _ Brentwood	151	2730 BD
1435	Sign Off (Takings £6/16/11d).		

Below: during his first summer at Brentwood Brian conducted this FLF, 1630 of Southend depot, seen in Billericay on 16 July 1964. A week after the photo was taken, on

Wednesday 23 July 1964 Brian conducted 1630 on the 1108 from Brentwood to Gants Hill and the 1201 from Gants Hill to Brentwood. He later drove it at Southend as 2756, on service 22.

Bob Campen collection



The driver and the Lodekka

To most drivers, first and foremost driving was just a job popular with those that didn't like an office environment or being closely supervised. Bristol buses generally were a joy to drive with light steering, clutch and brake pedals and an organ type accelerator pedal. The rake of the steering wheel made for a more comfortable driving position than its K type predecessor, which more than compensated for the reduced nearside visibility occasioned by the radiator cowl. Older drivers appreciated that the cab was lower than on the K types which made getting in and out easier.

Few could discern any difference between Bristol and Gardner engined examples, with a similar pause between gear engagement being necessary; this reduced on cold engines as the revs died away quicker. For four speed Lodekkas, it was normal to start in second gear reaching maximum revs in each gear before making an upward change. Such was the flexibility of the 5LW engine that it was possible to start in third gear and remain in that gear while operating town services. Five speed gearboxes followed the same technique although many drivers did not use fifth gear at all and some stops on hills required a first gear start to avoid excessive clutch judder.

Drivers were keen to reduce the amount of time spent stationary and quickly noted that the forward entrance FLFs did not allow as rapid entry and exit as the rear entrance. However, braking for a stop nudged the passenger in the direction of the door akin to walking downhill. Another advantage was the close supervision of the platform area, increasingly important in an era when the standards of conducting were declining rapidly. There was a reluctance to report a vehicle defect, probably because it took time to fill in the form and, in the case of 251 group pool vehicles, mechanics were reluctant to remedy the defects on the buses from foreign garages. The need for brake adjustment was the most common running fault, followed by slipping clutches on FLFs.

All double deck deliveries until 2742 followed the cab interior layout first used in postwar K and L types, which left a lot to be desired. With the electrical switches and the starter awkwardly located behind the driver to his right side, this was a considerable discouragement to communicating to other drivers by flashing headlamps. The horn and dipswitch were on a stalk to the right of the steering wheel, while the speedometer gave a rough indication of speed but did not function below 10mph. The engine stop was on the driver's nearside but rarely seemed to work so drivers usually resorted to placing the bus in gear and then lifting the clutch. For FLFs, also on the driver's nearside were the door controls. Doors were opened by the driver when the vehicle came to a stop and closed on receipt of the starting signal from the conductor.

The change in the cab layout from 2742 was the first major change for Bristol double deckers since the introduction of the K family and was long overdue. The instrument panel was updated with an electric speedometer and sensibly located controls mounted in front of the driver. A new switch box incorporating the exterior lights, headlamp flasher and windscreen wipers, as well as the starter button was to the right of the driver just in front of a London Transport style self-cancelling flashing indicator. By leaving the headlamp switch in the on position, the headlamp could be flashed by flicking the sidelight switch up and down. On these buses headlamp flashing became very popular and hand signalling very rare.

The only other subsequent modification of note was the introduction of a new lighter gear selector from 2780 and a different arrangement of the lower deck front bulkhead to give the driver of wider angle of view of the platform commencing with 2808 (illustrated below) but also present on 2793, delivered 7 months earlier.



Left: laying over at the Southend Seaway terminus before pulling forward onto the departure stand to return to London as a 251 is Wood Green's 2808, FWC 426B, one of the Bristol engaged FLFs (it was later re-engined to a Gardner 6LW in October 1977). New to Chelmsford

depot, it was allocated to WG from November 1965 to November 1967, then transferring to Clacton. Brian drove this particular bus once during his 1966 spell working at SD, on 14 September on the 1416 Basildon to Southend service 151. **Derrick Rudland, Richard Delahoy collection**

This article is an abridged and edited version of two much longer pieces written by Brian Barrett, *Eastern National and the Bristol Lodekka* and *251 Reminiscences 1952-1966*. Copies of both full articles, plus a supplementary account of Brian's time with *Crosville 1968-69* are available as a pdf file – e-mail the EBM Extra Editor if you'd like a copy.

Driving experience

In Summer 1966, I started as a driver at Southend. Here crews operated a 6-hour 40-minute day six days per week with a different duty every day, arranged as a week of earlies followed by a week of lates. Every few weeks an early turn on Friday followed by Saturday and Sunday rest days returning to a late turn on Monday gave a long weekend off. There were also split shifts over both peaks with a break in the middle but apart from those covered by crews who worked permanently on split shifts, these duties were split into two overtime pieces. Additional payments and enhanced payments boosted the payable hours figure but these were so complex that most crews relied on the wages clerk to get the calculations right.

2803 was the first Lodekka that I drove when, after completing three days of route learning at 1700, I was offered the 1720 service 2 to Grays and the 1918 return on Wednesday July 27. Generally regular FLF operation in 1966 was confined to 2/2A, 3/3A, 11, 19/19A, 22/22A/22B, 151/251, although they also appeared on 15 and 235 plus 25/25A on Sundays to relieve the usual KSW fleet. LD6B were usually to be seen on 6/6A, 16/17, 21/28 and occasionally on 9B and 14, whilst the small LD5G fleet and the FS5G were generally only seen out at peak times or on 25/25A if serviceable KSWs were in short supply.

My regular conductor was a student friend of mine, Jim Young (who sadly succumbed to Covid in 2021). We shared a flat in Westcliff and spent a very enjoyable and profitable summer. Thanks to Jim, my exposure to the many truly appalling non-career conductors at the depot, mainly other students, was minimised and we contrived to maintain high standards. At the time there was a chronic shortage of both drivers and conductors and overtime was plentiful. During my best paid week I worked 103.04 hours which became 151.30 with allowances, for a total of £46/0/6d (about £755 in today's money), substantially more than I was being paid as an Assistant Traffic Manager at Yorkshire Traction six years later!

My last day as a SD driver was Saturday September 17th 1966 and a pleasant surprise was to be taken off my rostered duty of 386 which had started at 1624 to operate 440 which finished with the last bus from Wood Green to Southend as detailed below:

1748	Sign On		
1818	Southend Seaway-Wood Green	251	2790 SD
	Paid Meal break		
2146	Wood Green-Southend Victoria Circus	251	2791 SD
0033	Sign Off.		

I returned to SD in October 1967 and Dave Crowley the Driving Instructor let me have a go in 2884, then in use as the 'driver familiarisation' bus as he was currently training all drivers on its characteristics, specifically the semi-automatic transmission. Opinion was sharply divided between senior drivers who thought it unnecessary and an erosion of their professional skills, and younger drivers who revelled in the ease with which gear changing could be made and couldn't care less about professional skills. In all other respects the handling was identical to other F series Lodekkas. Dave's view was that semi-automatic gears would be very useful in encouraging conductors to transfer to the driving grade but otherwise a waste of money on a solitary batch of crew operated double deckers and so it proved to be.

The 251 was a very pleasant day out for a driver with easy timings virtually unchanged since 1930 and limited but predictable congestion at the London approaches, for which crews made appropriate allowance by judicious early running. Indeed it was rare for a traditional five-minute comfort stop (for SD and WG crews only) not to be taken at Brentwood. It was technically undemanding for drivers with good quality roads and, at night, street lighting for most of the journey.

[References to fleet numbers are as carried by the respective buses at the time; the fleet was renumbered in August 1964. Depot codes are the standard Eastern National ones, viz BD Brentwood, SD Southend and WG Wood Green].

Brian then went on to join the Tilling Group as a Senior Management Trainee in 1967 and was appointed Assistant Traffic Manager at Yorkshire Traction in July 1970. After time at the University of Newcastle and as Assistant Director of the Bradford Bus Study, he joined Midland Red as Chief Planning and Development Officer, before taking up the same role at NBC regional level. After a period as Director of the Market Analysis Project, Brian was made Group Marketing Manager and subsequently Director of Marketing. A change of direction saw him appointed Marketing Director of Trusthouse Forte Catering and later the same role in Forte Hotels. Finally, he was appointed Chief Executive of Virgin Rail before retiring in January 1999.