

Driving the X1

John Bashford

I was employed by Southend Transport in 1986 solely as a coach driver for the 'X' services to and from London. I had a strange contract of employment, which meant I was not allowed to drive town services - only X's. At that time, the mainstay of the fleet were Duple bodied Leyland Leopards of varying ages. There were also a few Plaxton bodied Leopards, and some dual-purpose bodied Leyland Tigers, that ST had from new.

We also had some really smart Mercedes Astromega double-deck coaches bodied by Van Hool, that were a pleasure to drive, especially if you had spent several days driving a draughty Leyland Leopard that was definitely past its sell-by date. On the minus side were the awful yellow ex-Cardiff double-deckers that were used for a while on Londons, when Southend Transport were operating the "Culturebus" hop on and off London tour. Perhaps those buses weren't that bad, but at around 40mph flat out, they weren't much good on the X service!

I requested and was given a rota-line on the "All-Day" rota, which meant that I did a morning commuter run to Hyde Park Corner, parked up for the day at a coach park just off the Old Kent Road, and then operated an evening commuter run back to Southend. The whole of the day was spent parked up with the rest of the 35 drivers who were also on "all-day Londons". There was definitely a community feel about the crowd of us that did the "all-day Londons". Drivers still talk about their days on the X's, and the time they spent parked up at Rolls Road or at the LT depot at Camberwell. Many drivers regret the day that Arriva stopped running them.

Looking back, it was a doddle of a job - about 12 hours pay for driving one trip to London and back, with every weekend off. A big improvement over my previous employment as a driver for a private coach operator, who seemed to think that drivers really loved to work all day, every day, and really didn't want a life of their own!! I do have some happy memories of when ST paid good money for not a lot of work!!

This short story is featured in the book *X1 Southend to London: the rise and fall of a deregulation phenomenon*, by Richard Delahoy