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Tales from the cab - and the platform

Doug Brown recalls some eventful trips that did not go quite according to the rule book!



Doug Brown, driver N36705 (note Metropolitan Traffic Area badge number - most EN crews had "FF" Eastern Traffic Area ones), in 1965, aged 30. He worked for Eastern National from 1963 to 1968 as a driver at Brentwood depot.

I was a bus driver for Eastern National during the Conductor era:

Two bells to start the bus;
One ring to stop at the next stop;
Three rings, bus full, don't stop to pick up passengers until you get the stop signal;
Four bells or more, Emergency, cut out the engine, hand brake on and run round to the platform to find the conductor and sort out problem, which could be an ill passenger or a stropky one who did not want to pay his fare. In any event, we do not move until the problem is sorted.

My first day as a driver at Brentwood was the 262 town service which ran to and from the Bishops Hall Estate in the north to the East Ham Estate (Hornbeam Close) to the south. We took the bus over a short walk from the depot at the North Road lay-by in Ongar Road, which has a pub and various shops including a pet shop. My conductor for that day was a grumpy old sod and a proper company man. I got in the cab, started up, but did not get two bells to go. Then I looked in the nearside mirror and noticed the conductor coming to the cab. "Have you got my transfer waybill?" he asked. Now this is a piece of paper which a conductor leaves for the next one when handing over part way through a journey. Obviously as it was my first day I did not know what a waybill was, so I thought for a moment and decided it must be some type of tropical bird he had lost, like a parrot. So I suggested he call in the pet shop to see if anyone had handed it in. "Are you being *****ing funny", he said. He was a grumpy old sod for the rest of the day and told the manager he did not want to work with me again!

My regular conductor Jim was very different. He had three pleasures in life: women, horse racing and beer - in that order! Our favourite route was the 40, Chelmsford to Tilbury Ferry via Brentwood and Ockendon. We often changed shifts with other crews to get on that route. One day during the summer we had a very bad storm which made us run late. As I had a Leyland decker which was much faster than the old Bristols, I decided to push it to make up time. After leaving Widford on the dual carriageway A12, I noticed a motorcyclist trying to overtake, so I decided to give him a burn up (ie, a race). We were neck and neck until we came to a hill and

then he went past after I thought I had given him a good soaking. Then as he passed I noticed he had a pillion passenger. I thought to myself, that looks like my conductor on the back of that motorbike. Then he stuck two fingers up. It was my conductor!! What the hell is he doing on the back of a motorbike when he is supposed to be on the back of this bus? As he went into the distance I pulled into the next lay-by and got out to tell my passengers that I was now without a conductor.

One lady passenger said "I saw your conductor, driver, on the back of a motorbike and he stuck two fingers up to you. Your conductor is a very rude man". "Quite, madam. Now as I have no conductor, I may have to terminate this bus at Brentwood. I will drive to the Spread Eagle pub where there is a phone box and contact the bus company". I got back in the cab and carried on to the Spread Eagle, where among the passengers waiting was a very wet and dirty conductor! He was very angry and called me some obscene names and said that I had thrown him off the bus. I said I never did, I have been sitting in the cab all the time. He then explained that when I went round Widford roundabout very fast on two wheels he was thrown off. The bloke on motorbike was following the bus, saw what happened and gave him a pillion ride.

I got out of the cab and went with him to the platform. In his cubby hole where the waybill was kept, I noticed his racing paper was missing so I asked him where it was. "On the Widford Roundabout", he said. I replied "So that's it, you were not holding on 'very tight please' like you tell your passengers to, you had your head in that paper". He did not reply, but as he went round the bus to collect the fares he told the passengers, "I hope you all have your life insurance paid up, as we have a madman driving this bus". Then my lady passenger piped up "I saw you on the back of a motor bike and you stuck two fingers up to your driver. You are a very rude man, conductor". Of course, I agreed with her! So Jim told me to get back in that cab. I said "Alright darling" to him; "Don't darling me" he replied. So I put my arms round him and gave him a peck on the cheek and said "darling, promise me you will never leave me again like that".

That did it! He picked up a passenger's umbrella with a spike on, hit me across the head with it and then put the point somewhere in my anatomy it was never intended to go! He chased me off the bus and pointing with the umbrella said "Get in that ***ing cab!" By now I was in danger of dying through laughing, I had to hold on to the headlights to stop myself falling on the floor. He then rang the bell like a fire alarm. I got in the cab and drove off still laughing. He kept hitting the destination box with a coin and jumping on the floor above my head, which made me laugh even more. By now Jim had become the greatest showman and I could hear passengers laughing at his antics. At Brentwood many passengers came up to my cab and said we should be on TV as we were better than Blakey or Butler from *On The Buses*.

We were nearly 30 minutes down (late) and from now on speeding would not be enough to make up time, we needed low flying! I looked round to see where Jim was as I didn't want to lose him for a second time. He was sitting down in the saloon reading a newspaper - the crafty so-and-so had scrounged it from one of the passengers and was at the racing pages again. After having my foot in the bucket until we got to South Ockendon, I noticed the 370 (London Transport) ahead of us. Now he went the same route as us, so he would be picking up any passengers for Grays and Tilbury, and this gave me an idea. I stopped at the next bus stop and flashed the saloon lights to get Jim to come round to the front. I told him to find out if we had any punters on for Grays and to find out where they want to get off. One wanted Cuckoo Corner, the rest the Tilbury Ferry terminus. So after dropping off at Cuckoo Corner, it was saloon lights off, head down the A13 to Daneholes roundabout at Socketts Heath, then through Chadwell St Mary to pick up our route again at Tilbury Iron Bridge, missing out Grays completely! We arrived at the Ferry 5 minutes early, so Jim was delighted. This meant we could get a couple of pints in at the Railway Club on

the station before going back - we were scheduled a 15-minute layover there. As we were leaving, the 370 was just coming in. The driver said "Where did you pass me, I never saw you?" I said that we overfly!!

We had a steady run back but we were aware that due to strict licencing hours, all the pubs would be shut when we got to Brentwood. So when we got to the Thatcher's Arms at Warley at 10.10 pm, Jim advised our passengers that we would have a 20-minute refreshment break there. So it was lights out again, while we all adjourned to the pub. One of our lady passengers said she thought it was very kind of us to think of the passengers like this and said we must be the most efficient crew on Eastern National. "We are madam, without a shadow of doubt" Jim replied!

Picture below:

Doug pauses in Romford Market Place en route to Wood Green with 806WVW, a dual-purpose Bristol MW then numbered BD539, in the summer of 1966 – note the open windscreen. The picture was taken by Doug's conductor Brian Barrett).
Brian Barrett, Doug Brown collection



Jim, my conductor, missed the bus twice more after our Widford roundabout incident. On one trip we arrived at the Brentwood terminus and while passengers were alighting, I decided to use the toilets close by. Jim, whose three pastimes were women, horse racing and beer, as you'll recall from part one, also decided that as the betting shop was by the bus stop, it would be a good idea to have a little flutter. The problem with Jim was that when he entered a betting shop, he was on another planet and instead of being a conductor, he became a jockey.

I came back to the bus and assumed he was on board, so I drove off on our dead run to our next starting point, about 5 miles away at the shirt factory at North Ockendon. When I got there I found I was talking to myself - then I thought "betting shop"! I decided that as my passengers would be weekly ticket holders going home, I would not need a conductor until I got to Brentwood Station, where I could pick Jim up again. So I explained this to my passengers and away we went. All was going well until I got to the waterworks at Great Warley, where I picked up a "jumper" - Inspector Ernie. He gave me a nice smile and a wave and gave the starting signal when he got on. But I did not move - I waited until panic set in. This took all of about 6 seconds, when I got 5 bells - emergency stop! He came running to the cab and said "Where is your conductor?". Me: "At Brentwood Station". Inspector: "What's he doing there?" Me: "Well, it took him longer to get a bet on than it did for me to have a pee. I have his ticket machine and box here in the cab so if you want to get busy, get the fares in". He then said "I don't have much choice, do I." He was *not* happy!

At the station, Jim was waiting. He came up to my cab so I said "don't make excuses, you are redundant, I have Inspector Ernie collecting the fares". Jim's face took on the scream mask! The outcome was that we both got a disciplinary letter, Jim for abandoning the bus and me for driving off without the starting signal and operating the bus without a conductor. But we got off, as I said if it was not for Inspector Ernie reporting us, no one would have known anything about it.

The next time Jim missed the bus was at Blackmore. I left him in the lower deck while I got in the cab and drove off. At the first stop about 2 miles up the road, I did not get the starting signal so I went round the back and found him missing. I asked my passengers if he was on the bus when they had got on. They said he was not. I thought he must still be at Blackmore, but there are no betting shops there. I thought I would have to go back for him and was wondering where I was going to turn the bus round, when a police car pulled up behind the bus with blue lights flashing. I wondered if I'd run him over. The police driver beckoned me over and asked "Do you recognize this man in the back, sir?". It was Jim. Without dropping my guard, I said "No officer, I can honestly say I have never seen that man before in my life. Who is he?". They thought it very funny. Then I shouted at Jim "What the hell are you doing in the back of a police car when you are supposed to be on the back of this bus!".

When Jim got out of the police car, he explained that after I'd got into the cab, he had got his racing paper from under the stairs but dropped it and it fell into the road. He thought he had time to retrieve it before I moved off, but I was too quick for him and he could not catch me. He was just about to go into the pub until I came back for him, when he saw the police car and stopped it to ask for a lift!

When the new deckers (FLF Lodekkas) with doors came in, I was able to contain Jim a lot better. Every time I left the bus with Jim inside I closed the doors. He could get out by pressing the emergency button, but he could not close them again. So if I came back and found the doors open, I knew Jim had escaped again and it was time to look in the nearest betting shop or pub for a bus conductor - or, as I called him, my bus jockey.

Tales of garage life

We had a driver at the garage whose sideline was selling condoms. He used to buy them by the gross and supply the canteens of Brentwood, Chelmsford, Southend and Wood Green. His motto was opposite to the ice cream man which was "stop me and buy one". His was "buy me and stop one". He carried them in a small brief case wherever he went; he often got out of the cab to utter to the passengers the immortal phrase, "Something for the weekend, sir?". On the late shift in the

summer, we often went over the depot wall to the municipal swimming pool next door for a bit of skinny dipping. One day the fountains stopped working and they had to drain the pool to find the problem; it turned out the blockage was caused by used condoms. The council took on another lifeguard to keep a check on the public, but we knew it was not them.

We had a bus cleaner by the name of Percy whose whole life was centered round the Army. He used to holler and shout just like a drill sergeant. Obviously us bus crews used to play up to him and every Sunday we had what he called Church Parade - at 6am he would have us marching up and down the depot shouting his orders. One Sunday two police cars came into the depot and when the police got out they were laughing. It would seem many residents in the street next door had wanted to know if World War 3 had started! Percy was told to keep his voice down a bit and from that point on, all drill stopped.

We had another cleaner Marie, who convinced herself that she was Queen of England and could only be addressed as "Her Mage". She also said she had the title deeds to Buckingham Palace. I said to her, how about if I call you "Du Et Mon Droit"; "what's that, she asked" so I explained it is what appears under the Royal Coat of Arms. "Oh that will do" she said. About 6 months later after she had left the bus company, I read in the Brentwood Gazette that the application by the hotel chain Queens Moat House for a drinks licence had been opposed by Queen Mage. It would seem she went to court as Queen to try to stop the licence. I don't think I stopped laughing for a week! Soon after this she was sectioned under the Mental Health Act; I have a great deal of sympathy for people with mental health problems but have to admit they can make us laugh at times.

The toilet block took up a lot of space at the depot and we were told to reverse buses as close to the wall as possible. But before reversing, you had to look to see if any toilet windows were open and if so, take this into consideration. One day a driver started to reverse and the windows were shut, but at the same time another driver was opening them. When the bus and windows came into contact the whole frame was pushed inside and crashed on to the floor of the urinals. Three drivers came running out in a panic with their trousers round their ankles thinking the whole toilet block was about to be demolished with them inside!

On another occasion, I bought a bus in just after the evening peak when the shunter said to me "There is someone shagging in one of them new deckers" [*he was referring to an FLF Lodekka*]. He was aware of this as these buses had air suspension, whereas the old buses had leaf springs, so you could see the bus bouncing up and down on the air bags. He said to me, "If you take that bus round the High Street and back I will buy you a couple of pints". I readily agreed, so he went into the canteen to call everyone out to watch. We got an audience of about 50 and they decided to sing *My boy lollipop* by Millie to "serenade" the illicit lovers; the bus washer also bought his long brush which he washed the top deck windows, to give them a tap. I crept into the cab, got all the switches ready and in gear ready to move off. I flashed the cab light to let the audience know the performance was about to start, then sprung into action. Close doors, start engine, move off and put all the saloon lights on in about two seconds. The singing started while the upstairs windows were being hit. I did not know what was going on but I could hear someone coming down the stairs, so I shut the power off to the passenger doors so that they couldn't open them to get out. Then disaster struck! The traffic lights at Weald Road were just turning to red, so I had to pull up. After a few moments I noticed the red light come on in the cab, showing that the rear emergency door had been opened. Then it went off again, meaning that my lovers had escaped by the rear door and had slammed it shut again. I had to return the bus back to the depot to tell my waiting audience the lovers had escaped. They were all very sad, but the two lovers never came into the canteen again so we never did find out who they were!

Picture below:

This view of 2859, RHK344D in Basildon Bus Station shows off the characteristic rear of the FLF with its central emergency door which was not entirely successful in the quest to keep Doug's conductor where he should be!

Bill Cansick, EBEG Collection, September 1972.



Picture below:

Driver Brown at work with Bristol LS bus 1202, VNO 870, ready to depart from Tylers Avenue garage in Southend for Wood Green. But not just on any trip, Doug recorded this as the last bus to leave Tylers Avenue as a garage, on 30 July 1964, the garage closing the following day. The bus illustrated, 1202, only had a further year's service left in the EN fleet before sale to the dealer who took many EN vehicles of this era, Sid Twell of Ingham, Lincolnshire.

Doug Brown collection



Learning London

During the late 1950s I decided it would be a good idea to learn my way around London. To this end I got a job as a taxi driver in Brentwood and every time a job came in for London I volunteered to do it. For weeks I got hopelessly lost and got so angry with myself that every time I came back I studied the A to Z. This went on for about 6 months and I began to despair if I would ever learn, then one day I was driving the taxi down Rosebery Avenue towards Holborn Circus when all the roads I had been down fitted in my mind like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. I was elated - I had cracked it! From this time on I could go anywhere in London without getting lost. However the City was still a bit of a problem but I worked at it and it was easier to crack than the whole of London.

So when I went on the buses I put it round that I knew London. So one day the Brentwood depot supervisor asked me to do a private hire trip to Gatwick with a decker. This was taking 60 children, 6 teachers and all their suitcases to the airport. When the day came I was given Big Bertha - this was an open platform 70 seater, the only one like it on the fleet [this was 1541, later 2510, 236 LNO, the solitary Bristol LDL in the EN fleet]. Despite being an open platform bus, I was not given a conductor, having to do the job alone.

We piled many suitcases under the stairs while the remainder went up front behind my observation window on the long rear-facing seat. The trip went very well and I got them to Gatwick in good time to catch their flight. In fact it went so well I was asked to do the return journey, a 6am pick up from Gatwick a week later. I wanted to get to the airport and get some food before my return journey so I left the depot at 3am. However as I was driving Big Bertha along the A12 just passing Whalebone Lane, the bell rang twice. To say I was shocked was an understatement, especially at that time of morning! I put all the saloon lights on and pulled into the bus lay-by at Summerville Road, keeping an eye on the platform at all times. No one got off. No one was sitting downstairs either. So I assumed perhaps there was an old tramp sitting upstairs. I got out of the bus and went upstairs, but there was no one up there either. By now my curly hair had gone straight with fright!

From this time on I drove with all the saloon lights on. All went well until we crossed the river and got to the Elephant & Castle junction. Then a lot of people one their way home after a night on the town got on the bus when I had to stop at traffic lights, so I had to keep pulling over to tell them to get off. Then I thought it would be a good idea to just leave the cleaner lights on [there was a switch which put on only half the lights, enough for the cleaners to work but avoiding draining the batteries on a parked bus].

As I was going through Streatham I noticed a newsagent putting a board out on the street which had on it "Air crash, many dead". My mind went into overdrive and I thought about my passengers, so I decided to get out and buy a paper to check. Thankfully it was not my school group but an air crash in India. At this point I happened to look upstairs, only to see a passenger sitting in one of the seats! I thought "I do not believe this" - I went upstairs and asked where he was going. He tried to give me the fare and said he was going to work. I asked him if he worked at Gatwick Airport - he said no, so I said he'd better get off or that was where he would finish up!

I had "Private" on the destination blind and of course the bus was painted green not red. I did not realise until then that the public could be such idiots. Eventually we got to Gatwick and back and a good time was had by all except me. And I never did find out how or why the bells had rung back on the A12 in the early hours of the morning!

Picture below:

The length of “Big Bertha”, 236 LNO, is readily apparent in this undated picture of her outside Southend Victoria Station on the 251, her regular haunt – when not on private hire work to Gatwick Airport!

Richard Delahoy collection



The Winter of '63

I passed my test to drive a double decker for Eastern National on April 3rd, 1962. The winter of '63 was to test my new driving skills to the limit! It froze on Boxing Day 1962 and did not thaw till the following April. It was one of the coldest winters on record in the United Kingdom. At that time there was no salt used to melt the snow, just four men on the back of a Council lorry throwing sand over the road. This was quite useless and eventually the roads became mirrors.

On the day after Boxing Day I was on the 5.10am sign on for Blackmore, the first bus on route 260. However when I went to go out of my front door, I found snow 2ft deep. I did think about not turning out, but this could have cost me a day's pay, as we could only refuse to take a bus out in thick fog and it had to be **thick**. As I lived at Rose Valley, which is within walking distance of the garage, I put my wellies on and turned out. It must have taken me an hour to walk to the garage and by the time I got there I was knackered but assumed I would not be sent out. How wrong I was! Three drivers and conductors had turned up and Inspector Ernie said we had to go out. I told him he was mad but he was adamant we had to turn out. I told him I would only go out if I could take a Leyland Decker, so I took 1136 (FJN 205, one of the Leyland PD2s ordered by City but delivered after the Westcliff take-over) – they were more sure footed on slippery roads than a Bristol.

So with a conductor I duly set off. Now with a whiteout you do not know where the road is and the darkness made it worse. I could only drive at walking speed as I had to keep assessing if I was driving on the road or footpath, and the more we got out into the country, the worse it got. Eventually I got to the Blackmore Road and nothing had been along here, it was a total whiteout. I was worried that I would end up in a ditch – so what I did was to watch the telephone poles and wires – that way I knew that if I kept away from them, I would not be going into the ditch. After about 2½ hours we eventually got into Blackmore (normal running time was just over 20 minutes!).

The publican at the Prince Albert invited us in and gave us a drop of the hard stuff with tea and toast. This was most welcome! We told the passengers waiting there that if they came with us, it was possible they would not get back, as only three crews had turned up. About 12 decided to risk it and got on board. Our return destination was Brentwood Station but I was only going to the Town Centre, as by now I felt as though I had enough, let alone risking going down the hill from the High Street to the station. It took us another 4 hours to get back to Brentwood as all the idiots had got their cars out and got stuck.

When we got back to the depot we were the only ones who had gone out and got back safely! The conker box (Bristol Lodekka) that went out to Doddinghurst on the 261 was in a ditch and the bus on the 251 was in another ditch near Billericay. After this snow fall the company bought 200 shovels and a lock up shed to keep them in. Conductors had a light weight coke shovel while drivers had a navvies one. We had to sign when we took the shovels out and again on their return.

Alan Watkins adds a passenger's recollection of that dreadful winter.

In the savage Winter of 1963 (which went on a lot longer than 1947, the latter a massive initial dump, possibly bigger than the 1963 initial dump, but it didn't last as long), the 251 route then was divided into two parts at the foot of Bell Hill, Billericay, with vehicles ex Southend using the local Council estate entry and exit horseshoe as a "turning circle". Passengers had to make their own way on foot up and down Bell Hill and there was a vehicle parked opposite Mill House (not an official stop) where the road leveled out and that bus continued towards Brentwood.

What the hell happened at Brook Street I cannot say! Or Crays Hill for that matter, the latter a wicked hill in poor conditions with a turn involved as well. Or Crown Hill, Rayleigh. Who knows? I wonder how long it was before 251s were once again able to run all the way from Southend to London Wood Green?

Alan's memories also go back to that other record-breaking extreme winter, 1947, as he recounts a trip on the City main road service: "I can say for certain that in the winter of 1947 the City Coach Company used snow chains on those wonderful old Leyland TS's and my Mother told me that they did during the war as well, when she was a driver for them. Whether Eastern National did in those far off times I have no idea.

I have a very vivid memory of 1947 when the main road at Hutton was around two feet deep in snow - we waited hopefully at our local bus stop outside Hunters Chase. It was more or less "virgin snow" because there was no traffic in those days and certainly not in those conditions - eventually the good old City Coach Company TS came trundling round the corner from the Hutton Plough heading for Billericay, which is as far as we wanted to go. We put our hands out

and the driver pointed to further down the road where about 30 yards past the stop it slid (fairly) gracefully to a halt and we scampered after it (as much as you can scamper in deep snow!) and clambered on.

We also got back home, although on the return journey the driver stopped at an unofficial stop (the little bridge near the then Archers Fruit Farm, which carries a Chelmer tributary beneath which ran through the foot of our home), probably so he could get a little "run" at the tiny hill by Hunters Chase going to Brentwood".

“Short Workings”

Here is a selection of short stories and recollections as recounted by Brentwood garage driver Doug Brown

On driving Bristols:

Seeing the now-preserved AJN 825 recently, I recalled that when I started on EN we had an elderly Bristol K at Brentwood - the vibration was so bad that at the top speed of 30mph you could see in 3-D and your teeth fillings felt like they were coming out! However, I found the later KSWs better to drive and preferred them to the LD and FLF Lodekkas. I liked the more upright driving position of the KSW, compared to the Lodekkas, especially in the fog as you sat further forward and the steering column was closer to the vertical.

Photo below:

Lodekkas had the steering column inclined away from the vertical, in contrast to earlier Bristol double deckers, as demonstrated by this cab shot of the preserved FLF coach, 2614 in Canvey Museum. Doug didn't find the steering position so pleasant to drive but would doubtless have appreciated the ease of operation of the semi-automatic gearbox and the greater power output of the Gardner 6LX engine (as compared to the 6LW), both features being specified on the final, 31' long, Lodekkas in the EN fleet. Richard Delahoy



What I didn't like was the way the depot engineers used to cut the fuel pumps back to improve the miles per gallon. The problem was that when you came to a hill, the buses were no good. Now before I worked for EN, I had been a motor mechanic and knew how to open the fuel pumps out with a screwdriver and a spanner. So at every terminus I got busy! It only took a few minutes but the acceleration was much better and we got a higher top speed of 45mph or so.

When the engineers realized what was happening they put a lead seal on the screws on the fuel pumps to stop our unofficial alterations. But I had another plan: by putting an empty cotton reel behind the rack arm, this stopped the vacuum sucker from returning fully and gave us a bit more speed. The downside was that it increased the smoke - on one occasion on a calm day I caused a 12' high black fog behind the bus along Bentley straight mile (the A128 Ongar Road at Pilgrims Hatch)! As I pulled the bus into the lay-by at the Rose & Crown stop, a police car stopped and the policeman came up to my cab window to complain about the smoke. I told him that I drove them, not serviced them, and that he'd better take it up with the garage staff, not with me. Time to remove the offending cotton reel!!

Anyway, he duly complained to the company and back at the garage the fitters took the bus in to be checked and ran it on full throttle (with a brick on the accelerator pedal) for hours, only there was no excess smoke. I managed to convince them that the smoke had come from a tanker on the road in front of me . . .

When the first FLF Lodekkas came they had brakes that were hydraulic air assisted and when they got really hot, they suffered brake failure. Various tests were done but no-one could find the fault. I suggested that the problem was that when the brakes got really hot, the hydraulic fluid boiled. I thought the cure was to convert them to straight air brakes.

Visiting the Castle Point Transport Museum I was reunited with Big Bertha (that's the LDL, 2510, before you have any other ideas). I have to confess that I don't have any nostalgia for those older buses, to me they were hard work, sweat boxes. You didn't drive them, you fought them!

What's in a name?

At one stage some of the Lodekkas had a small Eastern National fleetname placed on the front grille, in addition to the usual names on the side. It didn't take long for some conductors to use a coin from their cash bags to modify the name, so we soon became "FASTER NATIONAL", or sometimes "FATER NATIONAL"! *[Richard Delahoy adds that it was common to also find interior notices that had been edited, such as the transfers on the cove panels over the bench seats over the rear wheel arches on FLFs mysteriously changing from "5 SEATS" to "5 FATS"]*.

Read all about it!

What about the time that a newspaper seller nearly caused a strike? A real character called Nobby Clark was a true grafter - by night he worked in Fleet Street "on the print", from 6pm to 2am. Then he piled a load of newspapers into his motorcycle sidecar, to sell from a stall on Brentwood High Street. The stall was kept behind the public toilets and was a double combination wardrobe with the doors removed. One side held the papers, while he could stand in the other half if it was raining. The whole thing was on pram wheels with wheelbarrow handles so that he could move it around.

Nobby used to stand in the middle of the High Street selling papers to motorists stuck in the traffic jams there. When a bus came along he'd be on the platform, selling papers to everyone as they got off. Then he'd go inside to catch those staying on the bus. As a thank you, the driver and conductor would get a free copy of their choice.

On one occasion, returning from a week's holiday, I was astonished to see Nobby with a broom handle with a clip on the end, standing in the road and passing newspapers up to the top deck passengers, who were throwing payment down to him. It turned out that whilst I'd been away, the depot inspector had stopped him going onto the buses, saying that they were private property! I was having none of this, surely the driver is in charge once the bus is out on the road. As the TGWU shop steward, I went to see the boss and we had a hell of a row about it, but he backed down and didn't try to interfere again.

No thanks for the good Samaritan

One day I was driving on the 262 route when I came across a car on fire. The driver was in a state, not knowing what to do, so I asked if the fire was from the petrol or the electrics? (Remember, I'm City & Guilds qualified as a motor mechanic). He didn't know so I lifted the bonnet, to find the battery frying. Using a hacksaw from the toolbox in his car, I was able to cut the positive lead to remove the source of ignition for the fire, then I used the fire extinguisher from my bus to put the fire out.

I duly called for a changeover bus as my bus was no longer carrying the legally required fire extinguisher, and I put in an occurrence form. Two days later I was amazed to get a disciplinary letter, saying I'd misused company property and suspending me without pay for 3 days! Some thanks for acting the good Samaritan! I went straight to the supervisors office and gave him a piece of my mind, saying that I'd like to see what people thought when they read about it in the local newspaper.

I walked round to the Gazette's office ready to give them the story, only to find the supervisor had driven there first and was waiting for me – result, the 3 days suspension was cancelled!

[Richard Delahoy recalls a similar situation when he was a casual part-timer for Southend Transport in the 1980s. He'd been asked to go to Reading one evening to collect a newly acquired second-hand Leopard coach from a South Wales operator who'd dumped it there. Coming back on the A13 through East London, at Prince Regent Lane lights he too came upon a car on fire. Parking the coach a safe distance beyond, he ran back and offered the coach's fire extinguisher to the grateful driver. On arriving in Southend and reporting this, he was given a right rollicking for not taking the car driver's name and address so that they could be billed for a new extinguisher!]

The Human Touch!

My conductor, Jim, and I were parked up at Hornbeam Close, the terminus of 262 when a little boy and his Mum got on the bus. He was very talkative and said to me "I want to be a bus driver when I grow up". I said, "do you now, we had better do something about this, come with me", I took him to the cab and made sure the gearstick was not in cog before lifting him in. He sat on my seat and after a lot of vroom, vroom on the steering wheel, I said "don't you think it's time you left?" "Yes" he said. I told him to "press that button" and when the engine fired it startled him a bit as it had now become a vibrating beast.

I asked him to go near the windscreen so I could get in my seat. I told him “from now on you don’t touch anything and hold on the grab rails behind, do you understand?” “Yes”, he said. At every bus stop he waved to passengers and they were waving to him. I do not know who was enjoying it most. At Brentwood, Mum came to the cab and took him out and when I got out of the cab. Mummy gave me a hug and a kiss. had I picked up a jumper or any office bureaucrats had seen me, I would have been sacked.

I wonder if that little boy became a bus-driver? He probably would not want to do so today with all the rules and regulations!

And to conclude Doug’s stories, here’s one from his later days as a coach driver:

Encounters with the boys in blue

During my winter solstice from driving coaches, which lasted from end of October till April, I used to pass the time doing a bit of fitting, an AM/PM school contract, an evening Bingo run and on a Saturday night a London Theatre, mostly for Bee-Line of Brentwood. This firm had 3 deckers plus a coach. The deckers were all of the open platform variety, of course. Then one day the proprietor decided to update his fleet and asked me to collect 4 deckers that he’d bought from Aldershot and District, these buses having doors. He said I was the only person he could trust to bring the deckers through London without taking their roofs off. I said I would only do this job if he paid my train fares up front – I didn’t want to be out of pocket and I knew some operators did have cash flow problems. I went to the railway station to find out what the fare would be and added a few quid on for food. He coughed a bit at the price but eventually turned up with readies.

At Aldershot Garage I was shown my deckers but there were only three, not four. I asked where the other one was and I was taken into an outside yard and there was this old bus in the bushes! This was the spares workshop. Everything in the cab was rusty, some windows had been cannibalised and a wooden door had been fitted across the open platform. I said I could not take that beast, it hadn’t been started in years. They said not to worry, they would get it roadworthy for me in the next 3 days.

With the first decker I bought back, I was surprised how well it went. Coming through central London (no M25 in those days) I was climbing Ludgate Hill when a Police mini went past and pulled me over on the forecourt of St Pauls. The policeman came up to my window and asked what an Aldershot and District double decker was doing in the City of London, being driven by someone without a uniform. I said “I reckon it’s been nicked, don’t you?”. But he said that was unlikely as if a bus is stolen, it usually ends up in a ditch before it gets very far, or else it is driven under a low bridge and takes the roof off. Seeing that I had done neither of these things, I showed him my licence and the acquisition document for the bus. That answered his questions, so I asked him to tell his mates that I would be round that way for the next three days with the other buses, so that they wouldn’t stop me.

The next day I got stopped – not at St Pauls this time but on the Wandsworth one way system, and on the third day on the Kingston by pass! The Police only seemed to like red deckers in London! Now comes the bit I was not looking forward to – collecting the wreck. The A&D mechanics told me that the brakes and lights worked OK, but warned me that it used a bit of oil and so gave me a gallon in a container, suggesting that I check the oil again in London. They also advised that the exhaust box was full of oil so I might get an exhaust fire.

So we set off, and whilst climbing the Hogs Back on the A31 she started to get a bit hot and the exhaust was like a bonfire. Then all the smoke stopped – instead, I had a 6ft blow torch! No one would dare overtake in case their cars caught fire even though this was a dual carriageway. Then a daring police mini driver did a wide berth and got in front of me. He got out and came running to the bus shouting “Your b*****y bus is on fire!” and as he came running his hat fell off. He didn’t stop to pick it up, but kept shouting that the bus was on fire. I told him to stop panicking, saying that it was not on fire and pointing to the exhaust which by now had become a methane burner. To prove the point, I shut the engine off and the flames went out. He went to the exhaust and said it was making a gurgling noise. I suggested he did not stand there then, in case of an explosion!! So he came back to the cab and asked if this was Steptoe’s mobile junkyard*. Then massive ball of fire came out of the exhaust and as a van drove through, it burst with a deafening bang. The van driver nearly lost control.

At this the policeman decided it was safer to scarper, telling me not to start the bus up again until he was at least a mile up the road. Thankfully I never got another blow torch from the exhaust but every now and again lumps of red-hot coke would fall out on to the road, causing cars to swerve.

The worst thing about driving this old beast was the gear stick - you had to catch it first, as it had so much play it rolled all over the cab and to change gear you almost had to put the gearstick through the windscreen for some gears and behind your back for the others. I checked the oil in London as the A&D mechanic had suggested and found the sump almost empty; I had to put the gallon in just to get to Brentwood. Then the smoke started all over again!

By the time I got back to Brentwood I was shattered and the first pint in the local pub tasted like nectar!

Richard Delahoy recalls that he too was once stopped whilst moving an empty bus – in this case on the A23 with an ex London DMS still in LT red which he was taking to Brighton, where the Corporation were painting some for Ensign Bus’s sales stock. His experience was the opposite of Doug’s – in this case, “why was a red London bus so far from London?”. Again, a chat with the local constabulary explained things and he was allowed to continue (thankfully without comment about the missing panel on the nearside!).

* For younger readers, “Steptoe’s scrapyards” is a reference to the classic 1960s/1970s BBC sitcom, Steptoe & Son - see www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/steptoeandson/.

Chris Stewart adds that Bee-Line operated from The Hive, erstwhile home of Brentwood Town FC in Ongar Road, Pilgrim's Hatch and ran at least two ex-Thames Valley KSW6Bs (one of which survived in Denyer's yard) and an LS6B coach to bus conversion.