

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

Memoirs of a Bus Anorak: 1940 to 2009, by the Revd. Terry Challis

Chapter 10: Relations with Eastern National "Renewed Yet Again!" Part 2: A Driving Experience - On the Town.

I had passed my Public Service Vehicle (PSV) driving test on the Friday [*in June 1968*] and on Saturday morning I began my first duty at Clacton Bus Station as a driver. The first service that I worked on was the 110 (Holland-on-Sea to Jaywick Sands via Holland Road and the Hospital). This was the most tightly timed of all the town services with only two minutes turn round time at each end. However the regular bus was probably the most suitable at Clacton Garage: that is No. 2701 (81 TVX). This was, I believe, the only batch of Bristol FLFs in the fleet with the four-speed gear-box.

As when I had been a conductor at Clacton in 1965, there were three rotas; the regular crew rota, the seasonal crew rota and the OMO rota. As then, the seasonal rota covered nearly all of the town services. However the Burrsville Circular services (113/114), which had in the past been entirely single-deck and mainly OMO, were now operated by double-deckers and were on the permanent rota. For some reason two seasonal services also seemed to be kept to the permanent rota, these were the 121 'shorts' to Meadow View Camp and the 125 (to Highlands Camp). Another seasonal service, the long-standing 129 (to Valley Farm Camp) seemed to be confined to one-man-operation. Of these, the only service that I worked on overtime was the 125.

After a few days I was put with a regular conductor, who was also a student, and we worked together for the rest of the summer. However when working over-time I sometimes worked with other conductors. On most occasions I signed on at the Bus Station but when working the first bus of the day it was necessary to sign on at Castle Road Garage. This entailed finding the allocated bus and driving it to the Bus Station. This is where another piece of advice from the driving instructor came in. This was that the gear-box would be more difficult to operate when it was cold but, not to worry, be patient and it would soon warm up. I found this to be especially true one morning with UEV 832 (2339) which I think was originally a Chelmsford bus and one that I had probably travelled to work on ten years earlier. It was a good bus. Although slow gear changes and slow progress in traffic might be an embarrassment to a car driver, when driving a bus (or HGV) because it is so big, there is not much that anyone else can do about it if you are taking your time. Thus the slow change of a constant-mesh (crash) gear-box is not really much of a problem, in this respect at least.

Someone, I do not know whether it was driving instructor or fellow driver, told me that it was possible to change gear with a constant-mesh gear-box without using the clutch. However it was important to get the timing and the engine revolutions just right. I tried this at 2300 (11pm) one night on the sea-front coming back from Holland-on-Sea on the last service 112. The bus was a covered top KSW. Much to my own satisfaction it worked beautifully: however I cannot see how one could start a bus from stationary without using the clutch.

The Burrsville (113/114) services were on the permanent rota and I only worked on them on overtime. The occasion that I remember was signing off at about 1400 (2pm) on a Saturday and being asked by the regulator to do a couple of

Burrsville Circulars, which I agreed to do: overtime was always welcome. The bus was 2353 (UEV 841) which was a KSW5G that had been delivered to Westcliff soon after the Eastern National take-over. It was one of the first buses delivered in green livery to Southend Garage. I had a soft spot for this bus as I could remember it being delivered to Southend when brand new. As an ex-Southend bus it seemed a little 'livelier' than ones from traditional Eastern National garages. Like many Southend buses it seemed a bit low on its near-side springs but it ran well and the two Burrsville Circulars were an easy way of earning an hour's overtime.

So what about the rest of the bus fleet at Clacton in 1968? Well, all the Bristol K5Gs and the Leyland PD1 open-toppers had gone. They had been replaced by KSW5Gs and Lodekkas of both the LD5G rear-entrance type and front entrance FLFs with Gardner 6LW or Bristol BVW engines. Nearly all the Walton services (107) were operated by FLFs. The town services were mainly in the hands of KSWs and LD5Gs.

There were also two KSW5G open-toppers which had been converted from the WNO batch of 'staggered seat' vehicles. As with all Eastern National engineering work, they had been rebuilt to a very high standard to which the preserved examples testify forty years later. The open-toppers were used on the sea front service (112). When it rained and in the evenings they were usually replaced by closed-top vehicles if possible: these could be other KSWs or a Lodekka of some kind (LD or FLF). The open-toppers were the best of the KSWs to drive: probably because they were only used for less than six months each year and then not in bad weather. One of these buses was an exceptionally smooth running vehicle. The engine ran 'as sweet as a nut'. There was none of the roar and clatter usually associated with Gardner 5LW engines: it was silky smooth. On one occasion it reached 39mph on the straight section of road between Butlin's and the Three Jays on the 112 service. That was flying for a KSW5G!

On one occasion I took over an FLF Lodekka on a town service which was doing a reasonable impression of steam engine: the radiator was in need of water. The radiator cap on most Bristols at this time was a flap held in position by a smaller flap. I had been told that the way to open them safely when hot was to run past it and give it a thump as I went past. Thus the flap would open but I would be out of the way if any hot water gushed out. This I did and, much to my surprise, it worked. I then poured three (!) cans of water into the radiator. Clearly the water level had not been checked for some time.

The only non-Bristol vehicle was the ex-Moores Commer 'Avenger' with TS3 engine and Yeates 'Riviera' coach body (102, 7652 VW). This coach reputedly had very heavy steering. The noise of the engine reminded me of the LS bus 400 (476 BEV) which was fitted with a Rootes TS3 engine as an experiment when new. I seem to remember that 400 had gained the nick-name 'The Banger'. I think that 400 was always a Chelmsford bus but turned up in Clacton from time to time on service 53 (Clacton to Tilbury Ferry). I travelled home from Chelmsford to Clacton on 400 in 1958 and experienced the rasping sound of the TS3 engine for over two hours. 400 was fitted with a Gardner 5HLW engine in 1960. I gather that the Foden two-stroke diesel engine has a similar reputation for noise: as indeed do GM Detroit diesels.

Although the other buses were standard Tilling group examples, besides the open-toppers and 2700, there was one other bus that merits mention. It was, I think, 2364 (VNO 859, now preserved). This was one of the three Bristol KSW5Gs built with platform doors for the long, ex-Hicks, Braintree to London service (322). These three buses also had staggered seating upstairs which they retained *[and which we illustrated in the September issue, where we incorrectly described it as*

VNO 85Z]. I imagine that the idea of open-toppers with platform doors seemed to be a strange idea to the 'powers that be' at Eastern National at the time. Or perhaps they did not need any more open-toppers. Anyway, it was a nice bus but a bit sluggish which was probably due to the fact that the platform doors added about half of a ton to the weight. Driving one of these buses on the 322, the forty-seven miles from Braintree to London, especially in the London traffic, must have required a good deal of patience but the driver could be sure that it would get there!

A few examples might help to illustrate the surprises and experiences in store for a summer bus driver: in the 1960s at least. One day, when the Clacton carnival was on, as usual, the procession brought the centre of the town to a standstill. The buses were in the wrong positions at the wrong time. In my case we ended up at Fernwood Avenue at Holland-on-Sea at about the same time as the other bus on the 112 (Sea Front) service. The schedules side of my brain calculated that if we went back to Clacton straightaway we would be there in time to work our following departure to Holland-on-Sea. Thus we left the other bus to work the service from Holland to Jaywick Sands. We turned the destination indicator to 'PRIVATE', something that we rarely did, and hastened back to Clacton Bus Station. We pulled into the bus station and received puzzled and worried looks from the regulator. In those days it was unusual for Eastern National buses to run 'dead' (light) anywhere: especially those engaged on Clacton town services. I explained my thinking to him and he accepted my idea whole-heartedly. We then returned to Holland-on-Sea as a number 112.

The town services in Clacton were much the same as in 1965. Most were on a simple hourly or half-hourly headway. The exception was the 121 (Highfield Park to Jaywick Sands) which had three buses each hour on a roughly twenty minute headway. One bus each hour ran via Clacton Railway Station and took a few minutes longer than the direct service via Old Road. These extra minutes were the reason why the service was not exactly every twenty minutes. After 1900 hours (7pm), all the buses on the 121 ran direct via Old Road. However one evening I forgot and on the first bus after 1900 I went via the Station to the consternation of some of the passengers! I wondered why it was so quiet at the Railway Station!

In the next chapter, I will conclude my driving experiences as a seasonal driver at Clacton Garage with accounts of my forays further afield than the boundaries of the town.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)

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