

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 11: Relations with Eastern National "Renewed Yet Again!" Part 3: A Driving Experience - Rural Rides.

One of the rarely appreciated skills of a bus driver at a garage like Clacton or Rock Ferry is the wide route knowledge that is required. This is more than just knowing the local geography of North Essex, in the case of Clacton, or the Wirral and North Wales in the case of Rock Ferry. Most routes divert into a village or a town housing estate on their way to their destination. This can be especially true of school journeys and works services. My children told me that on the highly developed school-bus network in Bolton, it was not unusual for the driver to ask the school children for directions. This is in no way a criticism of Bolton drivers as I imagine this may well be the case in other towns.

As I have already mentioned, at Clacton Garage in the summer, seasonal crews were sometimes offered overtime on routes covered by the permanent rota. This usually entailed working half of a shift. In the summer most of the permanent rota was taken up with the longer distance services, as the town services were nearly all worked by the seasonal crews. While overtime was always welcome to seasonal crews, many of whom were students, it was a definite advantage if you, as the driver, knew where to go!

The overtime on the permanent rota which I did was mainly on the shorter distance services such as the 101A to Point Clear and the 101B to St. Osyth Beach. Both of these services were worked by single-deckers; usually the older LS type as against the MW. This involved the usual game, for me at least!, of 'find the gear'. In the event I managed to cope without any great disasters or embarrassment.

The other out of town route that we tended to work on overtime was the 107 to Walton-on-Naze. I only worked the direct journeys but some went via Kirby-le-Soken and some went via Ashes Corner. Some journeys were also extended beyond Walton Bus Station to The Naze. Most of these services were worked by FLF Lodekkas but I worked one early morning journey with one of the older LD5G Lodekkas.

Two incidents come to mind when writing about the 107 route. First, late in the morning, there were two services from Walton that ran into Clacton within five minutes of each other. We were on one of these journeys but by some chance we arrived at Clacton out of order. Both buses were left on the stand for Walton. However the conductor of the other bus left his ticket machine on the bus ready to work back to Walton. When he and his driver returned from a quick visit to the canteen, their bus was gone: and so had the conductor's ticket machine! I do not know how they resolved that problem as it was time for us to go home.

The other event was caused by one of the activities that was part of Walton Carnival Week. On the evening of one day the Walton services were disrupted by a pram race (!) which had taken over the streets of Walton. My conductor and I finished our shift just before 2100 (9pm) and my conductor lived at Walton. He wanted to get home and so did a reasonable sized queue of people waiting at the Walton stand in Clacton Bus Station. All the buses on the Walton service were trapped in Walton. My conductor and I therefore offered to work a 107 service to

Walton on the understanding that he would get off at Walton and I would bring the bus back to Clacton 'dead' (light). The regulator, who happened to be the instructor who put me through my driving test, readily agreed with our suggestion. He allocated us an FLF Lodekka from the half-dozen that were parked in the middle of the bus station and promised us two hours overtime. So off we went to Walton with a good load of happy passengers. On our way out of Clacton, between the Railway Station and Holland Road School, we passed all four buses on the Walton service making their way to Clacton, having escaped from Walton. Some of the drivers gave us very strange looks! Having arrived at Walton Bus Station, the most difficult thing was explaining to the waiting passengers why I could not take them to Clacton! I then had a leisurely evening drive back to Clacton across the Holland Marshes and parked the FLF in the middle of the bus station.

One Saturday lunch-time we worked one of the infrequent and irregular journeys on service 102 to Brightlingsea. I knew that the route ran via Great Bentley and that it was necessary to take the second lane on the right after the dip in the main road after St. Osyth. This I did successfully and the journey there and back was uneventful. The vehicle allocated to the working was an FLF Lodekka. Great Bentley Green makes the claim to being the second largest village green in England, covering 43 acres. I imagine that most people who live there and use public transport to get to Clacton or Colchester use the regular electric train service. There was an equally irregular service from Great Bentley to Colchester (77/77A). The other service that served Brightlingsea was the regular 78 to Colchester. At one time there was a British Rail branch line from Wivenhoe. This closed in June 1964 as part of the Beeching cuts. The only time that I travelled on it, it was worked by a J15: happy days! *[The J15 was a very large class of 0-6-0 tender locos introduced by the Great Eastern Railway which lasted through LNER days well into the BR era].*

The two main trunk routes were from Clacton to Colchester. They were the 19/19A (to Southend) and the 53 (to Tilbury Ferry). Clacton Garage shared the workings between Clacton and Colchester with Colchester Garage. As mentioned in chapter 2, the 19/19A services had been worked by Bristol K5Gs and re-bodied GO5Gs in the early post-war days. Later on Lodekkas had taken over. Interestingly it is one of the services that I cannot remember being worked by a Bristol KSW. In the late 1950s, the General Manager of Eastern National, Mr Richards, had a vision of making the 19/19A like a Green Line route and thus the double-deckers were replaced by LS and MW single-deckers. I imagine the crews appreciated this especially on the quiet evening journeys. Anyway, by 1968 these services were worked by Bristol FLF double-deckers.

In many cases on the 19/19A and the 53, half of a shift consisted of two round trips to Colchester. However, as far as I can remember, when we worked service 19, we just worked the last round trip: the 9pm (2100) from Clacton and the 10.15pm (2215) back. Throughout the day service 19/19A left Colchester on the hour but the last journey left at 10.15pm and ran via the recently opened Essex University at Wivenhoe Park to provide a slightly later service for the students. I knew where the University was but I had never been inside the gates. In the event we found our way inside the gates all right but, in the dark, I could not see the stands very well and pulled up at the wrong stand. As far as I know no harm was done as we were the only bus in sight and we did not leave anyone behind.

The service 19/19A route to Colchester was about sixteen and a half miles long. For most of the way it followed the A133 which has some good straight sections on it between Weeley, Frating and Elmstead Market as well as a dual carriageway section between Elmstead Market and the Wivenhoe junction. Service 19/19A was one of the routes where the fifth gear on the FLFs came into its own. With a running time of 55 minutes, it was fairly easily timed for most of the day. The

busiest section of the route was between Weeley and Clacton. The 53, on the other hand, was more tightly timed. It followed a route of about a mile longer than the 19 and had the same running time. It also diverted into St. Osyth and Wivenhoe, and the only relatively fast section of the route was the main road between Thorington Cross and Wivenhoe. My experience of the 53 was to work two return journeys one evening in August: the 6.30 pm and 8.30 pm from Clacton.

The 53 and 51 had an interesting history. The 51 was the service to Harwich and in my time at Eastern National it was worked as a separate service between Colchester and Harwich by Dovercourt and Colchester Garages. Service 51 had been created in 1930 by combining the services originally numbered 17A (Harwich to Colchester), 5 (Colchester to Chelmsford) and 42 (Chelmsford to Tilbury Ferry). The 51 was publicised as 'The straight line across Essex by Eastern National - Coast to Coast' (as illustrated on page 10 of *"The Years between 1909 - 1969: Vol.2 The Eastern National Story from 1930"* by Crawley, MacGregor and Simpson). That straight line had however been broken in April 1964 when the route was curtailed to run just between Colchester and Harwich, but a new "straight line" was created the following year when the 51 was combined with the 70 (Colchester to Braintree, ex Moores) and 310 (Braintree to Bishops Stortford) as the 70, Harwich to Bishops Stortford, from 11th April 1965. [*Meanwhile, the number 51 was appropriated for a new Chelmsford town service that started in June 1965.*]

However I would think that it would be true to say that for most of its history the main service was the 53 to Clacton. It is also true to say that, for most of its history, the through workings were operated by single-deckers of one sort or another. In my experience they were LS/MW under floor engined vehicles but before that they were Bristol L5Gs. This was, I think, because the section through Laindon and over Langdon Hills was deemed not suitable for double-deckers. When Basildon New Town was developed in the 1950s and 1960s, the roads were improved and the route became suitable for double-deck operation. This would have brought good savings for the company as the section between Chelmsford and Colchester was heavily duplicated to meet the needs of traffic and, I imagine, also because Moore Brothers of Kelvedon ran a competing service over this section of the route. Between them the two companies provided a half-hour frequency between Chelmsford and Colchester.

For the enthusiast and drivers bored with Bristol buses, service 53 held other delights. After Eastern National took over Moore Brothers in 1963 the Moore's Colchester to Chelmsford service was absorbed into service 53. This meant that Kelvedon Garage had a share in the working of service 53. The occasional delights were in the form of ex-Moores or 'ordered by Moores' 30 foot long Guy Arab IV double-deckers with Massey 67 seater low-bridge bodies. I never saw one of the two Northern Counties bodied ones on service 53. These buses were fitted with Gardner 5LW engines. In the excellent book *'The Colours of Greater Manchester'* (by Michael Eyre and Peter Greaves and published by Capital Transport), a batch of Daimler CVG5s with Crossley bodies of 1949 are described as 'the most underpowered buses ever'. These Moore Brothers Guys are also surely strong contenders for this title as well as many buses in the ex-Tilling Group companies. Eastern National's KSW5Gs with platform doors come to mind as well as Eastern Counties many Gardner 5LW powered Lodekkas also fitted with platform doors.

In Brian Everitt's book *'The Story of Moore Brothers Kelvedon, Essex'*, he says: "Some reduction of weight (on 30 foot Guy Arabs) was achieved by the use of fibreglass instead of metal for the bonnet top, front wings and concealed radiator panel, but increased power was desirable for this larger bus and therefore Guy Motors decided they would not offer the 5-cylinder Gardner engine for this chassis

version. However, it is interesting to note that an exception was made for Moore Bros. and the five-cylinder engine was fitted, principally because of their services operating over flat terrain".

On the one occasion that I saw one of these buses at Clacton on the service 53, it was one of the two that had been ordered by Moores' and delivered to Eastern National and to Eastern National specification (581/2 AOO, 1049/50, later 2018/9). This meant that the seats were covered with Eastern National pattern moquette and the buses were fitted with Tilling type 'T' destination indicator at the front (only). The Clacton driver who was taking over this bus, who also happened to be an OMO driver and therefore was on over-time, looked delighted in having such an interesting bus to drive to Colchester. Whether he was just as delighted when he got there, I cannot say!

Early in September 1968, on my last Friday as a driver at Clacton Garage, my conductor and I were asked to cover the second half of a duty that involved the 6.30pm (1830) to Ipswich and 8.30pm (2030) return plus the 10.30pm (2230) to Thorpe Green and return. As I have mentioned before, service 123 to Ipswich was a long route of 29 miles with a running time of 1 hour and 45 minutes. It diverted from the direct road to Ipswich to take in Bradfield on its way to Mistley and Manningtree. Then after Brantham it went off the main road at Tattingstone to run through Holbrook. Neither my conductor nor I were completely sure of the route but we thought that we could cope between us if we were allocated a single-decker. The normal bus was an FLF Lodekka which, from the driving point of view, I would have preferred. Such was the urgency that we were given an MW single-decker and successfully navigated our way to Ipswich. At Ipswich Railway Station we caught up with an Eastern Counties single-decker and followed it to the bus station. Fortunately we found the Clacton stand successfully and after a visit to the canteen returned to Clacton without incident. At 10.30pm we returned the way that we had just come on the short working to Thorpe Green and back on service 106. For some reason all the short workings to Thorpe Green were included in the 106 service timetable although they covered exactly the same route as the 104 and the 123.

The next day I worked my rostered shift on the seasonal rota and signed off as a bus driver for the last time. Thus ended one of the dreams of a lifetime: I had been a bus driver!

I must conclude this part of my memoirs by eating a large portion of 'humble-pie'! Throughout these memoirs I have been less than complimentary about buses fitted with Gardner 5LW engines. However my experience as a driver has brought about a sneaking regard and affection for them! In fact the Bristol KSW5G with low-bridge body is one of my all time favourite buses. This is partly because it is the type of bus that I passed my PSV test on and partly because I preferred the higher driving position than the more 'laid back' position of the Bristol Lodekka. It also had a relatively simple gear-box.

In 1958 a group of parishioners from St. James Church in Hadleigh came to Clacton for the induction of their old Rector, the Revd. Roger Lewis, as the new Vicar of St. Paul's Church in Clacton. Their transport was a Bristol KSW5G of Southend Garage: one of the EJM batch. Rather cheekily, I said to the driver: "How do you think that you will get up Market Hill, Maldon?". He answered: "Once I get her into her crawler gear she will go anywhere!". I am sure that he was right!

In due course, I will write about my experiences as a bus passenger and customer during the rest of my much travelled life, which I hope will be of interest.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)

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