

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 12: Being a Passenger and Customer in Billericay and Birmingham, 1968 -1972.

(This chapter continues from the end of Terry's professional involvement in the bus & coach industry as described in [Chapters 4 - 11](#)).

At the end of September 1968, I was ordained at St. Mary's Church, Prittlewell which is only a mile or two from where I was educated at Westcliff High School for Boys. I then took up my new position as the Junior Curate in the Parish of Billericay. Needless to say my new responsibilities did not allow much time for serious adventures of an 'anorak' type. However I did keep my eyes open and took an interest in what was going on around me in the bus world.

Billericay is at the junction of two important routes across Essex: that from Brentwood to Southend and the one from Chelmsford to Basildon. The bus services, by and large, reflected these routes. The ex-City service which had become the Eastern National 251 operated from West to East but now had a related 151 service which went to Southend via Basildon and thus also went South-East via Basildon. The North to South routes were the long-standing 53 (from Clacton and Chelmsford to Tilbury Ferry) and the 34 from Chelmsford to Pitsea. There were also a number of local services which served Great Burstead (254) and Little Burstead (255) on their way from Billericay Station to Basildon. There was also a Billericay town service from Billericay Station to Sunnymede Estate (256). The 254 and 255 were operated by single-deckers and the 256 by an elderly Bristol K5G. There was also the 253 which was a local variation of the 251 and operated via Ramsden Heath. All these services were operated by Eastern National: the local services being worked by Basildon Garage.

My only personal involvement was as a passenger to Chelmsford to attend Junior Clergy meetings or to Wickford to take the Parish Magazine to press. However on one 'day off', I decided to sample the delights of the latest (and last) Bristol Lodekkas on services 151/251. These almost new buses had Gardner 6LX engines and semi-automatic gear-boxes: a new breed of Bristol Lodekka indeed! I therefore travelled from Billericay to Wood Green on one of these fine machines and was suitably impressed. However it was lightly loaded for most of the way and I imagine that this was the beginning of the decline of this service. I also reflected on what a fine bus the Lodekka had become and that it was sad that, having developed so far, production had ceased. I realise that one-person-operation was the coming thing at the time. I felt the same about the Leyland National 2 which, from a passenger's and observer's point of view, seemed to be a far superior vehicle than the original Leyland National. But then what do I know!?

I have included the word 'customer' in the title of these final chapters as, like many clergy, I was involved in the hiring of buses and coaches for church outings: what I mean is that I hired buses and coaches as a customer, as well as being a passenger. Having been at Billericay for three months, the Vicar decided to make me superintendent of the Junior Sunday School as the previous superintendent had resigned. My experiences as a Sunday School Superintendent are not relevant to these memoirs but one aspect of the work is. Having been responsible for the Junior Sunday School for a few months, it was pointed out to me that it was my

responsibility to organise the Sunday School outing! I discovered, the hard way, what a responsibility it is to be in charge of any outing!

The traditional place to go on the Sunday School outing, I discovered, was Walton-on-Naze. I was quite happy with this as it was an area with which I was familiar. There were also two good reasons for this to be the destination. First, the Pier at Walton had good amusements and provided rides at a reasonable cost. Second, the cafe on Walton Pier provided a good tea suitable for Sunday School children (and their parents!) at a reasonable charge. So what about transport? There did not seem to be any coach firm that was traditionally employed by the Church at Billericay. The Youth Leader at Christ Church, the daughter church, always used Harold Wood Coaches: however this seemed to be a personal arrangement. I had always held Osbornes of Tollesbury in high regard so I contacted them. I did not consider Eastern National as I assumed, perhaps unfairly, that they would be too expensive. Anyway, Osbornes provided an acceptable quotation for two coaches: altogether there would be over seventy parents and children. Thus, on the appointed day, two Duple-bodied Bedford VAMs arrived and took us to Walton-on-Naze: and brought us back.

The next year, I think that it must have been 1970, I allowed the anorak' side of my brain to take over! I knew that Osbornes had an ex-Silver Star coach seated Leyland Atlantean and I deduced that it would accommodate all seventy or so parents and children so I booked it for our Sunday School outing. On the day of the outing the Atlantean turned up in good time and, despite a few raised eyebrows from the parents, it conveyed us all to Walton in reasonable comfort. We all had a good day and refreshed by a good tea, got back on the coach for the journey home. *[Editor's note: there is no record of Osbornes of Tollesbury having operated the ex Silver Star Atlantean that Terry hired - and which broke down. It is more likely that it was TMW 853 of Midas of Brentwood.]*

It was at this stage in my life as a clergyman that I discovered the heavy responsibility of being in charge of an outing! The journey back to Billericay went well until, somewhere on the A12 between Kelvedon and Witham, the Atlantean 'gave up the ghost'. However, I must give Osbornes the credit due, for within an hour, two Bedford VAMs arrived and took us all back safely to Billericay.

In September 1971 my time at Billericay was coming to an end. I was accepted by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) as a candidate for service overseas. My wife, Margaret and I had always agreed that this was something that we should do and I was still of the same mind. This commitment meant spending a year at Crowther Hall, the CMS training college at Selly Oak, Birmingham. This was completely new territory for me. I had never been to Birmingham before: indeed, it was a place that I had never had any inclination to visit. However, the experience of living in a place can prove to be very different to one's prejudices. I was to spend the year from September 1971 to September 1972 there. The training included experience in some of the multi-cultural areas of Birmingham. The result of this was that I grew attached to places like Sparkbrook and Sparkhill and, much to my surprise, to Birmingham as a whole!

The bus scene was completely new to me. West Midlands PTE had recently taken over the control and operation of the bus services but there were still traces of Birmingham City Transport around. It was fascinating. However I must pre-fix my comments with the disclaimer that the following remarks are the experiences of a bus enthusiast who is an 'Essex Man' with no expert knowledge of the West Midlands transport scene. For more expert information about Birmingham buses I refer readers to *Glory Days: Birmingham City Transport* by Malcolm Keeley (published by Ian Allan).

The main service to the city centre from Selly Oak is the 61/62/63 group of services which run to Allen's Cross Estate, Rednal and Rubery respectively. They are the successors to the Birmingham tram services which used to run from the City Centre and used reserved tracks down the middle of the Bristol Road south of Selly Oak. In 1971 these services were operated by 'jumbo' Daimler Fleetlines with Park Royal bodies which had been ordered by Birmingham City Transport but most of them had been delivered to West Midlands PTE. I call them 'jumbos' because they were 33 feet long with dual-doors. In fact they were the last double-deckers in Birmingham to have dual-doors.

I found these buses to be very impressive. They coped with these busy services very well and I was especially impressed by the ticket system. It was an 'exact fare' system with a fare-box. The passenger simply stated his or her destination, dropped the fare into the box next to the driver, took a step and collected the ticket from behind the driver's cab. It was all very quick and if fares have to be collected on buses on town services this seems to be the best system. However since those days I have become an enthusiastic convert to 'off-bus ticketing'. This is one of the joys of using the articulated buses in London: and indeed any bus in the central area of London.

Trips to the city centre revealed many other interests including 'Midland Red' buses and coaches and Harpers' of Heath Hayes, whose vehicles worked into the City from the north of Birmingham. There was also a 'Midland Red' service that ran through Selly Oak. This was the long-established and still operating service 144 from Birmingham to Bromsgrove and Worcester. Bearing in mind my experiences in the Southend and Birkenhead areas, I initially assumed that the local services were protected in the Birmingham area. However, I eventually discovered that this was not the case and was able to come back to college from the City Centre on a 'Midland Red' S21 or S22. When I last observed this service (144), it was being operated by First Bus with Alexander-Dennis Enviro 300s (2010).

Other routes of note in the Selly Oak area were the 20 which ran past the Selly Oak Colleges and came from the City Centre via a rather circuitous route. It was one of the first routes to receive new Daimler Fleetlines with single-door Park Royal or Metro-Cammell Weyman (MCW) bodies of a design which came to be built for many years from 1971 onwards. To my mind these were some of the first aesthetically satisfactory bodies on Fleetlines and Atlanteans to come from Park Royal or MCW. Another route which passed through Selly Oak on its way around the outskirts of Birmingham was the famous Outer Circle 11. This was still operated by former Birmingham City Transport rear entrance double-deckers.

At Crowther Hall, I met and married my second wife, June. I have been blessed with two patient and long-suffering wives who have accepted and tolerated my love of buses with grace and, for the most part, understanding. On our visits to Birmingham City Centre, June used to comment that it was strange being with a man who paid great attention to the buses and not other women!

During the last term at Selly Oak it was decided that June and I should go to Kenya where I would be Bishop's Chaplain and Administrative Secretary in the Diocese of Maseno South which was situated around Lake Victoria. We would be living at Kisumu, the main Kenyan port on the lake and the provincial centre of Nyanza Province. Thus a new life, a new kind of work and a completely new bus scene came into view.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)

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