

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 14: Being a Passenger and a Customer in Birmingham: Again!

In March 1976 I was licensed as the Priest-in-Charge of Christ Church Sparkbrook and Assistant Community Relations Chaplain in the Diocese of Birmingham. Sparkbrook was not a completely new area to us as we had been involved with Christ Church and with the area as a whole when we were at Crowther Hall in 1971/2. As the vicarage was occupied by another vicar at the time, we moved into a terrace house in Dolobran Road only a few hundred yards from Christ Church. We eventually moved into the vicarage, which was situated next to Christ Church in the summer of 1977.

Sparkbrook is a multi-cultural, multi-faith and multi-racial inner-city area to the east of Birmingham. The parish begins at Camp Hill about a mile from the Bull Ring where the Coventry Road (A45) and the Stratford Road (A34) divide. The parish stretches a mile or so along the Stratford Road to the South and is bounded by the Birmingham to Warwick railway line to the North. Small Heath is about a mile away from the vicarage. Indeed, in the early days when we did not have a car, we took Debbie in the push-chair on the train into Birmingham (Moor Street) from Small Heath Station. Sparkbrook is a very interesting area and I never grew tired of walking around it on when parish-visiting. There was always something interesting to see: not least in the bus world!

As Priest-in-Charge of Christ Church, I was fortunate to have the support of two very conscientious Churchwardens. One was Newton Palmer who had come from Jamaica to join the RAF during the Second World War. He was very diligent in his duties. He was always at the church at least an hour before the Sunday morning services and read the first lesson every Sunday. He worked for Birmingham City Council. The other was Arnold Brown who had been a foreman tyre-fitter for Goodyear at Birmingham City Transport garages before retirement. One of the things that he pointed out to me was that the smartest buses that I saw on the road were not necessarily the most reliable. This was because when a bus spent time in the garage being maintained or repaired, it gave the body shop people an opportunity to tidy up or touch up the paint work and do other repairs. The buses that kept going day after day did not receive so much attention.

Transport-wise we could not have been better served. No less than eight bus routes ran into the centre of Birmingham along Stratford Road from its junction with Farm Road which was only a few minutes' walk away. The services from the Warwick Road met the Stratford Road services at Sparkbrook where they combined to create a very frequent service into the centre of Birmingham. Some ran into the City via Bradford Street and the rest via the Coventry Road. As far as I was concerned, it did not matter which route they took: I just caught the first bus to come along. I never had to wait more than a few minutes. The 'exact fare/fare-box' system was still in operation and still seemed to me to be the best way of collecting fares on city bus routes, with the exception of off-bus ticketing.

All the services from Sparkbrook were operated mainly by fairly new Daimler Fleetlines, but there were more interesting buses along the Coventry Road at Small Heath. Service 16 from Yardley to Hamstead, one of the few cross-city

routes, was still crew operated by ex-Birmingham City Transport Guys and Daimlers. Older Fleetlines were to be found on the 8A and 8C which ran across the southern end of the parish. The 'A' standing for 'anti-clockwise' and 'C' for 'clockwise'. A couple of miles further south, the Stratford Road is crossed at Hall Green by the famous Outer Circle(11A/C) which, at that time, was still crew-operated with a mixture of ex-Birmingham Guys and Daimlers and ex-West Bromwich Daimler CVG6-30s with MCW 'Orion' bodies. I once travelled on one of these vehicles from Harborne to Hall Green and was very impressed by it.

The only other bus company to operate through the Parish of Christ Church was 'Midland Red' who maintained the old 'Stratford Blue' service to Stratford with their standard Alexander-bodied Daimler 'Fleetlines'. I never had cause to take advantage of this service.

One of the advantages of Birmingham as a city is its geographical location. Indeed, if an English Parliament was ever created, Birmingham would be the natural location for it as it is the most central city in England. From Birmingham it is possible to travel to almost every part of England 'and back' in one day! This is a great advantage when planning church (or any kind of) outings. At Christ Church the Sunday School was not big enough to have its own outing but we had a Church outing every year. These outings were very efficiently organised by the Parish Secretary, Mrs. Helen Collins. The coach firm used was usually Den Caney Coaches of Wolverhampton. They usually supplied a Bedford VAL with a Duple 'Commander' body.

One year we went to Llandaff Cathedral and Barry Island. This was memorable because the Challis Family spent most of the time at Barry Island under the pier sheltering from the rain! However the visit to Llandaff Cathedral made the trip worthwhile. Other destinations for outings were Blackpool and Southport, both of which were very enjoyable. I remember the Blackpool visit because the VAL had a puncture in one of its near-side front wheels on the M6. All fifty or so of us, with a traffic police escort, stood or sat on the bank at the side of the motorway while the driver jacked up the coach and changed the wheel.

Christ Church stood at the junction of Farm Road, Grantham Road and Dolobran Road. The other end of Farm Road was Stratford Road and on one corner of that junction stood the garage, office and workshops of Smith's Imperial Coaches. Smith's ran a fleet of very smart coaches on excursions, extended tours, summer express services and private hires. The list of their day excursions included such far flung places as Aberystwyth, Blackpool, Bournemouth, Clacton-on Sea, Hunstanton, Llandudno and Teignmouth. Smith's Coaches also ran coaches to the away matches of Birmingham City Football Club whose ground, St. Andrew's, is about a mile away from Farm Road.

I availed myself of their services one Wednesday to travel back to my home county of Essex and visit Margaret's mother in Clacton. The coach was a Bedford VAM and it set us down at the Eastern National Wash Lane Coach Park; it was a real home coming! I think the fare in the mid-1970s was about £2! The journey time was between four and five hours each way.

For the bus enthusiast, Smith's Coaches was a very interesting company. In my time in Sparkbrook their fleet consisted almost entirely of Duple and Plaxton-bodied Bedfords (VAMs, VALs and YRTs) although their first Ford, an R1114 with Van Hool body, arrived in 1976. However from 1979 Smith's Coaches purchased heavy-weight coaches such as AECs and Leylands. I think that it is true to say that they discovered that light-weight coaches, such as Fords and Bedfords, were not well suited to long-distance motorway work.

However in the early post-war years Smith's Coaches had a very interesting fleet which included Maudslay Marathons, Leyland PS1s, an AEC Regal III and Fodens which they bodied themselves. Later the fleet included 2 Fodens with Bellhouse Hartwell bodies, a trio of Daimler CVD6s with Burlingham Seagull bodies and a Daimler D650HS with Duple Elizabethan body: their first underfloor engined coach. There were also a few Bedford-Duple Vistas and a couple of Commer Commandos with Plaxton bodies. Anyone who wishes to know more about this interesting coach company should read 'It's A Pleasure - It's Smiths' by Roger Smith (Published by Brewin Books ISBN 1-85858-222-9). Roger was the third generation chairman of the company when the firm closed at the end of 2001 after serving the people of Birmingham for 77 years.

My final recollection for this chapter is of a church outing to Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-on-Avon where the Revd. Roger Spiller was the curate. Roger had been a member of Christ Church, Sparkbrook before ordination and he had invited us all to tea and evensong. This took place on one Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1979.

As usual, the arrangements were made by the ever efficient Helen Collins. However on the day I was surprised (and pleased!) to discover that the transport provided was not the usual Bedford from Den Caney Coaches but a dual-purpose Leyland National from West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority. This was one of the long Leyland Nationals delivered in 1978 with a 'T' suffix registration. This vehicle proved to be very suitable and we all had very enjoyable outing. As I remarked at the time, it was a truly multi-cultural event with passengers from both the Afro-Caribbean and indigenous white communities and a driver from the Asian community!

Having referred in this chapter to Christ Church Sparkbrook, I feel that I must include the sad news that the church itself was badly damaged by a tornado in July 2005. As a result, the building had to be demolished for safety reasons. However, all is not lost, for there are plans to build a Health Centre (Super Surgery) on the site and this building will include a worship area for the congregation.

In 1980, June and I felt that we should move to the south-east of England for family reasons. We had enjoyed our time in Sparkbrook and we knew that we would be leaving behind some good friends. However we had decided that it was time to leave. The Challis family that left Sparkbrook had increased by one during our time there. Our son, Jonathan was born at the Sorrento Hospital at Moseley in May 1978.

The first parish, or rather group of parishes, that I was invited to look at was in Suffolk. However, being basically a 'townie', I decided that rural Suffolk was not for me. And, more importantly, that I should not impose myself on rural Suffolk! Eventually we moved to north London: but more about that in the next chapter.