

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 1 : The Early Years (1940 to 1951)

I was born in February 1940 at Pitsea in South Essex, the youngest of seven children. However we did not stay there long because of the War and the 'invasion scare' - children were evacuated from the coastal areas thought to be at risk of invasion. Therefore my brothers and sisters were evacuated to Northamptonshire. Being a baby however, I was taken by my parents to live at my father's brass and aluminium foundry 'underneath the arches' at Leyton Midland Road Station. When the 'invasion scare' was over, we returned to South Essex and lived at Hadleigh.

My earliest recollection of an interest in buses, apart from playing with a toy trolleybus as a toddler, was soon after the war had finished when, in London Road Hadleigh, my eldest brother pointed out the difference between an AEC and a Bristol. The local services in the area were mostly provided by **Westcliff-on-Sea Motor Services** at that time. They ran a mixture of AECs and Bristols: being a Tilling firm they were nearly all fitted with Gardner 5LW engines. For many years I could not understand why the Westcliff AECs sounded different to the Southend Corporation ones!

Westcliff had an interesting collection of buses. I remember that the oldest were two what appeared to be AECs but were in fact Dennis Lances built in 1931 and latterly fitted with AEC radiators and the inevitable Gardner 5LW engines, JN 960/1. There were also a couple of ex-AEC demonstrators. One was MV 3394 which was a Regent 1 with a high-bridge Metro Cammell body with, I recall, a "piano front". The other was HX 2980 which had been re-bodied during the War with an ECW high-bridge body. It was to become one of the first 'open-toppers' after the War, being converted in 1950. I think both of these buses were allocated to the small Hadleigh Garage on the corner of Oak Road and London Road (which was actually the former depot of Thundersley, Hadleigh & District Motors, taken over by Westcliff in 1933).

Westcliff's Oak Road Hadleigh garage later became the Supreme Coaches depot after the take-over of Benfleet & District and Canvey & District by Westcliff in 1951. Supreme Coaches (and Superior Coaches of Tottenham) were owned by other members of the Bridge family who owned the Benfleet and Canvey companies, about which more later. Another interesting resident of the Westcliff garage at Hadleigh was a Leyland Cub coach with an ECW 20 seat body. I cannot recall having ever seen it outside of the garage! [There were 3 in all, JN 7833, 7985 & 7986, the first two being shown as withdrawn by the time the PSV Circle published a Westcliff fleet list in July 1951]. Westcliff also had an AEC 'Q' double-decker (as modelled by Corgi OOC), JN 3457, however I never travelled on it or saw it and it was withdrawn in 1950.

The rest of the Westcliff AECs were Regent 1s new in 1933/4/5, most with low-bridge Weymann bodies and roof-route indicator boxes which were no longer in use. There were also some highbridge Regents with Park Royal bodies (JN 2796-2800) that rarely ventured to Hadleigh except on the occasional 'Relief'. I believe that these interesting vehicles were used mainly on the Shoeburyness services (see for example the superb colour shot of JN2800 on the cover of 'The Heyday of the Bus - the Post-war Years' by C Carter, published by Ian Allan). However, there were

many variations on this theme. Some of these Regents were rebuilt with sloping and 'squared-off' drivers windows, and their roof-route boxes were removed (as can be clearly seen in the picture of JN2800).

Some of the AEC Regents were later rebuilt by Beadle in what amounted to almost a complete rebodding, others were refurbished by the local firm of Chas Beale. However two of them, JN 4294 and JN 4745 had been very nicely re-bodied by ECW complete with new front mudguards so that they looked like Regent IIs.

The Westcliff double deck Bristols were not uninteresting either. The earliest were GO5G models, but most were the K5G variety. Westcliff had some single-deck Bristol buses which were all JO5Gs except for one solitary L5G (AJN 826). I think all of these were allocated to Southend for services such as the Wallasea and Paglesham routes and were not often seen in Hadleigh. Some of the JO5Gs were single-deck buses in white 'coach-type' livery for the sea-front services 19 & 19A, Leigh Elms Hotel to Southend Kursaal. Talking of sea-front services, there were three GO5Gs deckers (JN 8570-2) of 1937 which were originally built with open-top ECW bodies and painted white. During the War they were fitted with covered tops and used mainly on Service No. 3 (Southend to Benfleet) on which Benfleet & District also operated. They reverted to open-toppers after the War ready for the 1950 season, replacing the single deckers.

The other GO5Gs were known by my brothers and myself as 'squares' because they had Brush bodies with roof-route boxes which produced a rather square silhouette. In the late 1940s some were rebuilt by Beadle and the others rebodied by ECW. The Beadle ones retained the original high radiator while the ECW ones were fitted with the post-war PV2 radiator and looked almost like a post-war Bristol K type. However, they always gave the impression of being particularly slow and underpowered buses, even more under-powered than other 5LW fitted double-deckers!

The Westcliff "K" were divided into two groups: the pre-war ones and the post-war ones. All the Ks had ECW bodies and all the pre-war ones were K5Gs. These were known to us as "No 1s" as they were regular performers on Service No.1 (Southend to Rayleigh): the 'BHJ' pair, BHJ 532 & 533 were most common on this route in the post-war years. However the pre-war K5Gs were used on all the routes and some were re-built with the lower PV2 radiators which made them look a little more modern. Perhaps the most interesting of these vehicles were the "AJN" batch, AJN 823 to 825, which were originally fitted with canvas-opening roofs. As a result they had narrower rear upstairs windows and two fewer seats upstairs in order to provide room for the canvas roof to be folded away.

The post-war "Ks" were mainly K5Gs but, eventually there were also some K6Bs which brought a new standard of performance and comfort, in terms of less vibration, to the services to which they were allocated. I cannot remember to which services they were allocated but I can remember travelling on DHJ611, one of the last batch of K6Bs, when it was brand-new, on Service No.24 (Leigh Church to Rayleigh - not a trunk or very demanding route) which seemed to me to be a waste of its qualities! In railway terms, perhaps it was a 'running in' turn!

The other two main operators in the area were **Eastern National** and **Benfleet & District**. Eastern National shared the Southend to Grays service with their Tilling Group relative Westcliff. The Eastern National service number was 70 (plus 84, for Tarpots Corner to Grays workings) while the Westcliff numbers were 2 and 2B. Return tickets were transferable between the two companies. The Eastern National vehicles that I remember are post-war K5Gs, of the KNO and MPU batches, and, from 1949, ECW re-bodied GO5Gs. On reflection it amazes me that Eastern National used these re-bodied buses on trunk routes like services 19/19A (Southend

to Clacton, not to be confused with Westcliff 19/19A on Southend seafront) and 70. I suppose at the time there was nothing else to use.

"Benfleet & District" were another cup of tea altogether and seemed to have their own following among passengers. Together with Westcliff they provided a service between Southend and Benfleet every 15 minutes. But that is where the similarity stopped. I believe that they had run mainly AEC Regents and some ex Westcliff Tilling Stevens double deckers before my time, but after the war their main fleet consisted of well-turned out Daimler CWA6s with utility Brush and Duple bodies, delivered new to Benfleet/Canvey. In 1950 they acquired many similar ex-Birmingham CWA6s with Park Royal and Duple bodies. Their tickets were not transferable with Westcliff and they seemed to duplicate a lot of journeys, presumably to make the most of any traffic that was available; some duplicates only ran over the Southend to Hadleigh section, others through to Benfleet. Their vehicles were notably faster than anything that Westcliff or Eastern National could put on the road at the time. The associated "Canvey & District" company was similar to the "Benfleet" fleet but, I believe, also included the remaining AECs. Both fleets used a sage green livery and there is a colour picture in the Heyday book mentioned earlier of FOP462 on the Benfleet to Southend route. All the buses in both fleets were of the high-bridge variety.

There was another operator that appeared in Hadleigh on a few peak hour journeys. This was **Campbell's of Pitsea**. They ran a service from Pitsea Station to Hadleigh Church. This was used by commuters who found it more convenient to join the London, Tilbury and Southend railway line at Pitsea instead of Leigh; my own father used this service sometimes. At that time, the bus service to Leigh Station was a bit erratic with few direct services: the regular service No. 22 went a rather long way round on its journey from Hadleigh to Leigh Station. Campbell's fleet consisted mainly of Albion single-deckers although towards the end of this period they acquired a pair of ex-Barton 'unfrozen' AEC Regents with utility low-bridge bodies, FVO 322 & 323. They also bought a brand-new Albion Venturer double-decker chassis, PPU 187, which was fitted with the 1934 Weymann body from one of the re-bodied Westcliff AEC Regents (JN 4294). This was an amazing vehicle by any standard! At the end of this period the Hadleigh service was usually operated by one of these double-deckers.

However, my experience of buses and other forms of public transport were not limited to Hadleigh. There were regular trips by bus to Southend with my mother for shopping. On these journeys, buses from Hadleigh and Leigh and further afield had a minimum 3d fare from Chalkwell Schools going into Southend, so as to protect the traffic for the Southend Corporation trolleybus western circular and the Corporation and Westcliff jointly operated service 25A/25B that had replaced the Leigh tram route. In the Southend area there were delights such as the trolleybuses and the brown buses of the City Coach Company to attract the young bus enthusiast. I can remember travelling on the trolleybuses as well as Corporation buses. It always intrigued me that the Corporation buses had 'Spitting Prohibited' signs inside them.

On rare occasions, I was allowed to accompany my father to his foundry at Leyton in London on the London Tilbury and Southend Railway. The usual motive power was a Stanier 3-cylinder class 4 tank engine. We changed at Barking onto a Kentish Town train. However, there were a few through trains from Kentish Town to Southend. These were usually hauled by a 'tender loco' of some sort (a Fowler 4F or a Black 5). Tender locos were classified as express engines by my brothers and I, who had a very limited experience on these matters at that time!

Speaking about my father, in the early post-war years, he became Secretary of the Hadleigh and Thundersley Cricket Club when it was resuscitated after the war.

The bus connection here is that he had to arrange transport to the away matches and this was usually provided by Westcliff-on-Sea Motor Services. I often accompanied the team to exotic far-flung places such as Maldon, Woodham Ferrers and Clacton. The usual coach provided was a just pre-war (1939) AEC Regal with Duple body or, later, a Bedford OB. Much to my disappointment, I never got to ride on an AEC Ranger. On a few occasions, the vehicle provided was a Tilling-Stevens 'charabanc'. One of these had been rebuilt but that did not stop it breaking down on a non-cricket related outing to Reading!

One other story in this period is of interest. My eldest brother, Ken, returned from his National service in 1948 or 1949. He had been a driver in the Army (RASC) and served in Egypt and Palestine. After he had been home a year or so, he applied to Westcliff-on-Sea Motor Services to be trained as a driver. He was accepted and passed his PSV test first time. His first duty as a driver was to drive a 2A service from Southend to Romford, leaving Southend about 1pm. I well remember that, on my way back to school, I waited at the top of our road (Castle Road) in Hadleigh to see him go by. He was driving a fairly new K5G (DHJ607). This must have been in 1950.

These are my earliest recollections of the buses of the Hadleigh area in the period from the end of the Second World War until I began secondary school in 1951. It may be that some of the comments from this section really belong to the next chapter but I do not think that it will seriously affect my story.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)

© Revd. Terry Challis/Essex Bus Enthusiasts Group 2010