

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 2: Times of Change (1951 to 1956)

1951 was a year of great change for me as I transferred from Hadleigh Primary School to Westcliff High School for Boys which is in the County Borough of Southend on Sea. In those days, if a child from South Essex in the Essex Education Area passed the eleven-plus examination, he or she had to go a high school in Southend Borough as there were no grammar schools in the Essex Area. The alternative was to go to Palmers College at Grays. My two eldest brothers went there and had to endure an hour long journey on a Westcliff or Eastern National 'G' or 'K' each way. In the winter, my mother told them to sit near the front of the bus so as to be near the engine and thus try to keep warm! I imagine that, like most school-boys, they went upstairs. I believe some of the EN buses had Clayton-Dewandre heaters but I do not know how effective they were. At that time no Westcliff double-deckers had heaters. In fact, I doubt if any Westcliff double-deckers ever had heaters!

Travelling to school involved a fifteen minute journey by bus along the London Road to the stop before Chalkwell Schools, and then a ten minute walk. An option was to stay on the bus to Chalkwell Schools and then catch a Corporation trolleybus down Nelson Road but, in practice, that was no quicker. As time went on, I sometimes went to school by bicycle. But then another option presented itself.

There was a bus service that passed the Westcliff High Schools on its way from Leigh Station to Hobblythick Lane. This was (and still is) service 21. *[Service 21 then ran from Leigh Station to Prittlewell (Bell Hotel), every 30 minutes Mondays to Saturdays. Today's service still covers the same roads between Leigh Church and Westcliff Schools, via Manchester Drive, but as part of a much longer trunk route, Canvey Eastern Esplanade to Southend, every 20 minutes (hourly on Sundays)]*. I was attracted to this because some of my class-mates lived on Canvey Island. Their prescribed route to school was by bus to Benfleet, then by train (L.T.S. Line) to Leigh and then bus (21) to the school. I could have got on the 21 bus at Leigh Elms Hotel but the prospect of being sure of getting on the bus drew me to Leigh Station. As a result, after a while my main route to school became service 24 from Hadleigh to Leigh Station and then the 21 to the school.

For the school-boy bus enthusiast this route to school was a real bonus. Besides getting to school without any long walks, there was a veritable feast of buses to be observed at Leigh Station. For a start, the Service 21 departure at 0828, which I travelled on, was duplicated and usually consisted of two Beadle (re-built) Bristol GO5G such as JN6890 and JN6897. I always remember feeling sorry for the drivers of these vehicles; they had to grind their way up Belton Way East followed by Southend Corporation AEC Regents and Daimler CWA6s on the frequent service 25. The drivers of which, no doubt, followed them with a mixture of sympathy for these poor Westcliff drivers and impatience at having to crawl along behind them. One day the driver of one GO5G said to the other; 'You've got the other new one then!'

My almost daily change of buses at Leigh Station became even more interesting in 1955 with the coming of the Southend Co-ordination Area. This area extended from Shoeburyness and Foulness to Benfleet Tarpots Corner and from the River Thames to the River Crouch. Thus it included Benfleet and Canvey Island, Hadleigh, Rayleigh and Rettendon.

Within the Co-ordination area, Eastern National (which had finally absorbed its fellow Tilling, latterly British Transport Commission, sister company Westcliff in 1955) ran 63% of the mileage of all services in the area and Southend Corporation the remaining 37%. Southend Corporation had also abandoned their trolley-bus system in autumn 1954 and bought a number of motor buses to compensate. The replacement buses were a mixture of re-bodied ex-London Transport Daimler CWA6s and brand new Leyland PD2s. These were the first Leyland buses for Southend, previously only AECs and Daimlers had been purchased. The thirteen CWA6s had their original utility bodies replaced by attractive new Massey bodies which were 7 feet and 9 inches wide rather than the then legal maximum 8 feet, the war-time chassis having been built to the maximum of 7' 6" in force until 1950. The result was that they did not appear to look 'over-bodied' in contrast to some other re-bodied buses of this era. The Leyland PD2s had 'tin-fronts', six with Weymann "Orion" low-bridge bodies and five had Massey low-bridge bodies. I gather that the intention had been to have five more Daimlers from London but on inspection only 13 were deemed acceptable and so more Leyland chassis were ordered instead.

These new vehicles certainly made an impression when they first appeared at Leigh Station on the 25 group of services, then the most frequent service in the area. *[In 1955, the 25 group ran between Highlands Boulevard and Thorpe Bay Corner, with a complicated timetable offering a 5 minute headway over the core Leigh Church to Victoria Circus section (which had been part of the tramway until 1942), extended at one end every 20 minutes to Highlands Boulevard and at the other end every 15 minutes to Thorpe Bay via the seafront and also every 15 minutes to Thorpe Bay via Southchurch Road].* They also made my journey to school even more interesting. However the Eastern National/Westcliff operation was also introducing new vehicles as in 1954 the first Bristol Lodekkas appeared. They did not venture to Leigh Station at that time, as there were too few of them and they tended to stick to the trunk long distance routes such as the 2A. This meant that they were regular visitors to my home town of Hadleigh; indeed, my first ride on one was one evening when I travelled from Hadleigh to Leigh Elms simply to have a ride on a Lodekka. However most still had 5LW engines which, although slow, were now a lot smoother because of a change in the mounting of the engines. Indeed, I believe that the change in engine-mounting had begun with the last of the 'K' series.

The Co-ordination Agreement also affected the bus services on the main road through Hadleigh in an interesting way. From the very beginning of the agreement, Southend Corporation started to operate service 1 from Southend to Rayleigh High Street via Hadleigh and Thundersley, previously this was a Westcliff route. For most of the time this service operated daily every half-hour and left Southend on the hour and half-hour. It was later increased to every fifteen minutes in the peak hours. The Co-ordination Agreement brought such interesting vehicles as AEC Regent IIs and IIIs and Daimler CVA6s and CVD6s through Hadleigh. Interestingly, Southend Corporation could not use some of their new Leylands on this service because, although low-bridge, they were too high to pass under Hockley Railway Bridge on service 7 which was linked with service 1. Thus a number 1 which left Victoria Circus at say 0900 would arrive at Rayleigh High Street at 0939 and then form the 0943 service 7 to Southend via Hockley, Ashingdon and Rochford, arriving back at Victoria Circus at 1025; neither service went down Crown Hill to Rayleigh Station as they do today. Subsequent batches

of Corporation Leylands were built with bodies which were three inches lower and became regular performers on this service.

One day my mother made an entirely unsolicited and telling comment about Southend Corporation buses. She said that were a lot smoother and more comfortable to ride in than the Eastern National ones. This was, no doubt, because they all had six-cylinder engines! There were, in fact, two AEC Regal Is that Southend had re-built themselves, which had 5LW engines but they rarely ventured to Hadleigh! Although they were fitted with destination blinds that included 'London Victoria' as an ultimate destination and the letter 'D' on the number box blind.

Whether either of them ever ventured as far as London as a relief car on Eastern National Express Service 'D', I do not know! However I did see one of the Southend Corporation Dodges, normal control single-deckers, pass through Hadleigh as a relief-car on service 1. The Corporation had bought eight Dodges in all, ex Royal Canadian Air Force but acquired via the well known dealer, Norths. Extensively rebuilt by the Corporation, four entered service as buses for peak hour reliefs and school contracts.

In the next part of this story, we will take a look at the take-overs of Benfleet & District, Canvey & District and the City Coach Company, which considerably expanded Westcliff's fleet and territory.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)

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