

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 3: Times of Change (1951 to 1956)

There were some other major developments during the early part of this period. In 1951 **Benfleet & District** and its sister company **Canvey & District** were nationalised and taken over by Westcliff as was the City Coach Company in the following year. Both acquisitions involved the addition of many non-standard vehicles into the Westcliff and subsequently Eastern National fleet.

The Benfleet and Canvey take-over was of more immediate interest to me as it involved routes and vehicles that ran near to where I lived. Most of the vehicles were utility Daimlers with AEC engines and pre-selector gear boxes: quite luxurious buses (in engineering terms) for a Tilling fleet! Some of the Daimlers were ex-Birmingham City Transport while the others had been acquired new, as described in Chapter 1 of my story. They had a variety of bodies by Duple, Park Royal and Brush. One ex-Birmingham bus, FOP340, was originally a CWG5 but my memory of it is that it had an AEC engine when it was with Eastern National; it seems extraordinary that Westcliff/Eastern National should have replaced a Gardner 5LW with an AEC 7.7 engine!

This takeover also involved some elderly AEC Regent 1 buses. Some had been re-bodied with utility bodies by Northern Coachbuilders; the others had Weymann bodies which had been heavily re-built by Beale of Westcliff-on-Sea after Benfleet had bought them second-hand in 1947. Needless to say, the AECs were eventually fitted with 5LW engines. There is some archive video footage of one of these AECs involved in rescue work on Canvey Island during the 1953 floods.

One result of this take-over was that the old Westcliff Motor Services garage in Hadleigh at the junction of the London Road and Oak Road was vacated in favour of the larger and more modern ('art-deco') Benfleet & District garage near Victoria House Corner, still used by First today. Hadleigh garage continued to operate the ex-Benfleet share of service 3 and soon received an allocation of four brand-new Bristol KSW5Gs for this purpose (FJN 156 to 159). These were the last buses delivered in the red Westcliff livery and, at the time, I thought they were magnificent. However, with their 5LW engines they were not up to the job of keeping time on the busy Southend to Benfleet service and before long they were replaced by the pair of KS6Bs (DJN558/9) and the only KSW6B in the Westcliff/EN fleet (DJN560). However the KSW5Gs (FJN156-9) stayed at Hadleigh for many years.

The former Benfleet/Canvey Daimlers did not last long after Westcliff were absorbed into Eastern National; all had been withdrawn by the end of 1955 with seven passing to Southend Corporation (six for service, one as a scrapper). Westcliff/EN however also acquired post-war Daimler CVs through the City Coach Company takeover and these went on to perform a variety of tasks, such as regular use on the Leigh Station services by Hadleigh Depot. I can remember travelling home from school on service 24 from Leigh Station on one of these Daimlers on many occasions. My brother also told me that they were quite often used on Service 84 (Tarpots Corner to Grays).

The Brush bodied Daimlers, which were built to relaxed utility specifications, were, to my mind, very good buses and gave a livelier and smoother ride than most of the rest of the Westcliff/EN fleet at the time. I believe that WW2 utility buses get a bad

press these days. For anyone living in an area served mainly by a Tilling company, Daimler CWA6s were "buses from another planet"! Incidentally, all the buses taken over from the Benfleet and Canvey fleets were of the high-bridge design.

The other take-over was in 1952 of the **City Coach Company**, whose main service was from London Wood Green to Southend Tyler's Avenue. City had had advertisements on their buses saying 'DON'T LET NATIONALISATION "TAKE YOU FOR A RIDE" YOU WOULD FIND IT VERY EXPENSIVE'. Birch Bros had similar advertisements on their buses ([note 1](#)). All this was to no avail and both companies succumbed to the nationalisation band-wagon eventually.

The take-over of City by Westcliff did not affect me directly, as none of the City routes ran through Hadleigh. My only experiences had been on trips to visit relatives at Shotgate which involved a ride on one of the magnificent Leyland three-axle Tigers from Rayleigh. At that time the City double-deckers ran via Rettendon instead of the more direct route between Rayleigh and Wickford because of the low-bridge at Shotgate ([note 2](#)). The City double deckers were not allowed to pick-up or set down on the diversionary route between Wickford and Rawreth Carpenter's Arms: such was the protection to established operators that existed at that time. Thus when Westcliff/EN took over City this restriction was abolished and the people who lived in Battlesbridge gained a vastly improved bus service (at least until the bridge at Shotgate was lowered in 1961 and deckers were able to use the direct route!).

An interesting by-product of the City take-over that affected me in Hadleigh was that in the Summer of 1952 some impressive new coaches appeared on the Westcliff-on-Sea excursions that passed through Hadleigh every morning on their way to various destinations on the south coast (via Tilbury Ferry of course - no Dartford Crossing in those days!). These coaches were Bristol LS6Gs with handsome ECW bodies. There were also some other magnificent Leyland coaches the like of which I had never seen before. They were Leyland Royal Tigers with Burlingham Seagull centre-entrance bodies: an unusual purchase for a Tilling company! I later learnt that they had been ordered by City but were delivered after the take-over. There was also a story at the time that the original order was for bus bodies and this had been changed to coach bodies, but sadly it appears now that was not true. Anyway, in a small way the City take-over had made my life as a bus-enthusiast a little more interesting.

Supreme Coaches

In 1951 our family moved from Castle Road, Hadleigh to a house on the corner of Branch Road. This meant that we now lived within a few minutes' walk of the old Westcliff garage at the corner of London Road and Oak Road which had recently been taken over by **Supreme Coaches**. Like many a school-boy bus-spotter I soon started to hang around the garage hoping to get to know a driver or a fitter. This mission was soon accomplished and I was allowed to inspect the coaches and buses at first-hand. The highlight was when I was allowed to sit in the driver's cab of an ex-Huddersfield utility Daimler CWA6 with a Duple low-bridge body: it must have been of the same batch as CCX777 which has been preserved by Quantock Motor Services and recently masqueraded as London Transport D130. To sit in the cab of double-decker bus was my dream and I assisted the fitter by depressing the accelerator pedal while he tuned the engine. Why Supreme Coaches bought this Daimler, I never discovered ([note 3](#)).

Supreme also had some fine coaches. The star of the fleet was a front-engined Maudslay Marathon with a Burlingham Seagull 35 seater body. Maudslay had been taken over by AEC in 1948 and the Marathon III model used an AEC engine and gearbox, although I am sure that it had Maudslay axles at least. There was also a

Bedford SBG with a Gurney Nutting body. These were both fine vehicles and both were fairly new at the time. The livery of Supreme Coaches was blue and grey.

On most days the garage was visited by two or three other coaches from the associated coach firm of Superior Coaches of Tottenham. They used to lay-over at the garage while working excursions from North London to Southend. Sometimes they received servicing or maintenance. These vehicles were two 30 foot long Crossleys with Burlingham Seagull bodies similar to the Maudslay of Supreme Coaches but seating 37 passengers, and a re-bodied pre-war AEC Regal I also with a Burlingham Seagull body. The livery of Superior Coaches was red and grey.

It is interesting to note that there is still a firm called Supreme Coaches in the Southend area and I would not be surprised if they are owned by the same family ([note 4](#)). On a personal note, in the 1990s my son was a pupil at Canon Slade School in Bolton; I was amazed, when I went to see him off on a school journey to the Continent, that the coach taking the school party belonged to Supreme Coaches! It really is a small world!

During this period of my life, my bus interests were broadened on occasions by trips to London. Sometimes it was just a Sunday afternoon trip to Romford and back on the 2A from Hadleigh Church. Longer visits involved a week's holiday at my Aunt Nell's home at Forest Gate where, with my cousin Mary, I was taken into Central London by bus: the Number 25! There were no artics then: it was an RT or an RTL. There were also rides on 685 and 687 trolleybuses to be enjoyed. One year we had an amazing round-trip on a utility Guy on the 101 from Wanstead Station to North Woolwich and then back on a 669 trolleybus to Stratford. Another year a visit to a relative involved a trip from Wanstead Station to Woodford on a post-war STD on service 20. Perhaps the ultimate "London Bus Holiday" began with a Sunday morning journey on the 2A from Hadleigh Church to Romford. It continued with a ride on London Transport 86 from Romford to Forest Gate "The Princess Alice" where I was met by my cousin Mary. Happy teen-age years!

Postscript:

I was fortunate enough to take part in an Omnibus Society tour on the last day of the **Campbell's of Pitsea** operations (1956). The highlight that I remember was to ride on the last journey operated by Campbell's, from Pitsea to Shellhaven and back on their ex-Barton unfrozen AEC Regent II. At Shellhaven it stood alongside a London Transport Country Area RT from Grays Garage: for me it was an amazing sight!

Mention of the Omnibus Society reminds me of how I got into the transport scene in the Southend area. A friend of mine at Westcliff High School for Boys used to go to a church youth club at (I think) St Michael's Church on the borders of Leigh and Chalkwell at the Chalkwell Park end of Leigh Road. This youth club was run by John Taylor who was also a bus enthusiast [and is still a member of the OS and EBEG today!]. I joined this club, although I also went to youth club at Hadleigh Parish Church, and through John Taylor I met Derek Giles and joined the Omnibus Society; however, I am no longer a member. Derek Giles was, at that time, a schedules clerk at Southend Corporation Transport and was a great encouragement to me. He later became Traffic Superintendent. I well remember one Bank Holiday after Christmas (1955?) when Derek invited me to the Southend Corporation depot and shunted the various types of buses so that I could take photos of all the different types. I was also allowed to set the destination indicators as I wished. I have a photo somewhere of one of the AEC Regal I rebuilt single-deckers showing London Victoria: Express D', as if on hire to Eastern National! Derek was very ambitious for the development of Southend Corporation Transport and I imagine that much of its later expansion of operations was due to him.

Another Omnibus Society visit which I took part in was to Associated Motorways and Black and White in particular. One of the most memorable aspects was to watch the famous 2pm massed departure from Cheltenham Coach Station. The other was that we travelled from London to Cheltenham on a new AEC Reliance with a Willowbrook coach body. At our request, we returned to London on a Guy Arab UF with a similar body which was a couple of years older. The General Manager of Black and White asked us to let him know which we preferred. A vote of passengers, revealed the surprising conclusion that the Guy Arab UF was the more comfortable vehicle, partly because its Gardner engine was not as noisy as that in the AEC!

Note (1): a fantastic colour photo of City Daimler D2 showing this slogan painted on the side above the lower deck windows appears in *The Heyday of the Bus - The Postwar Years* by C Carter (Ian Allan Publishing, 1997), along with a shot of Birch Bros HLY483 with an identical banner above the lower deck windows and a further message above the upper deck side windows saying IF THIS BUS WAS NATIONALISED TO SUBSIDISE BRITISH RAILWAYS FARES WOULD ROCKET! Other superb pictures of local interest in the book - all in colour and reproduced larger than postcard size - are Westcliff AEC Regent JN2800 on the cover, a Hicks Guy Arab, Eastern National Bristol GO5G, a Benfleet & District FOP Daimler CWA6 and Westcliff open top Dennis Lance.

Note (2): A short article about Blue Brick Bridge at Shotgate and its rebuilding in 1961 to permit double deck buses to pass under in safety appeared in Essex Bus News issue 442, February 2001, and is also available in the *Archive Articles* section of our web-site, www.essexbus.org.uk.

Note (3): The utility Daimler (actually CCX698) acquired by Supreme was one of six double and two single deck buses bought to transport workers to the huge petro-chemical complex being built at Thames Haven in the 1952-54 period. The Oak Road premises were actually owned by Benfleet Garages Ltd, owned by the Bridge family as the Benfleet and Canvey bus companies had been latterly, and at least one of the contract buses used the "Benfleet Garages" fleetname, after the sale of Benfleet to Westcliff.

The complex story of all of these various bus and coach companies is comprehensively covered by Peter Clark and Frank Simpson in the 1983 Omnibus Society book, *The Bridge Family and its Buses*, now out of print. The book has proved invaluable in clarifying certain points in this article.

Note (4): the present day Supreme Coaches (Greenhill Transport Ltd) is indeed still [2009] owned and controlled by a member of the Bridge family but is not the same legal entity as the business that Terry knew in the 1950s.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)

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