

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 5: The Eastern National Years : 1956 To 1959 Part 2

I do not feel qualified to write about other garages and so I will conclude this section with some reflections and anecdotes which I hope are interesting. All my life I have been a political being although I have never been a member of a political party.

In my late childhood the nationalisation of the transport system was taking place under the Attlee government. This was something that as a child and teenager I fully agreed with and I still believe that there should be a high degree of public ownership, or at least control, if we are to ever have a good system of public transport. Anyway, I went to work at Eastern National as a naive teenager thinking that I would be working for a nationalised transport company. Of course it *was* nationalised: Eastern National was part of the Tilling Group which had been nationalised. However it seemed to me that it was *not* nationalised. As far as I could see, it was still run as a private Tilling Group company. Every other operator was treated as a rival. London Transport and British Railways were in the same camp as Moores of Kelvedon and Osbornes of Tollesbury, as far as Eastern National were concerned!

One incident sticks in my mind. The Traffic Assistant's section wanted to know what the wording was on London Transport's RFs that warned people not to stand by the driver. The clerk in the Traffic Assistant's section was sent to ride on an RF somewhere so as to find out!

One interesting distraction was occasionally to be sent to Chelmsford Bus Station to persuade a conductor to accept a large envelope of urgent crew duties to be taken to his or her home garage. I say "persuade" because it should have gone through the parcels office. Sometimes the walk was made in order to receive a parcel or envelope.

During the 1958 bus strike it was realised that I would not be able to get to work at Chelmsford and thus I was told to report to the Southend office. Eastern National crews were on strike but Southend Corporation crews were still working. Rather than risk not getting on a Corporation bus as there were only two each hour each way (four in the peak) between Hadleigh and Southend for most of the day, I cycled to and from Southend. For me this experience was a real treat. For a week, at least, I would be working in the office that scheduled the buses that ran in my local area.

Southend Garage and Office scheduled its own buses and crews and also those of Hadleigh and Canvey Garages, except of course, for Southend Tylers Avenue. I was made very welcome by Gerry Neville, the Schedules Clerk, and given some general schedules work to do, such as copying graphs and writing up duties. It was a very enjoyable week. I was interested to note that the actual vehicle number for each car working was pencilled in at the side of the working. In the schedules that we prepared, we just scheduled the workings and it was up to the garage concerned to decide which actual vehicle was allocated to that particular car duty.

In May 1957, the new Central Works of Eastern National was opened. This was a big event and the office staff were allowed to use part of the canteen. This meant that we could see into the works and see what vehicles were receiving attention. The thing that struck me was the thoroughness with which the overhauls were carried out. Even pre-war vehicles were stripped down, refurbished and sent out as though they were new buses. There can be few operators these days that can still overhaul buses to such a high standard. Living in Blackpool now, I do know that Blackpool Transport continues to do such work on buses and trams. One indication of the care that was taken at the works with the presentation of the buses was that before brand new buses were put into service, the black band which separated the cream from the green on the body was re-painted dark green.

Occasionally I had the opportunity to see files about services and this was very interesting and informative. However the sight of such files was frowned upon unless we had a direct need to see them. On one occasion I happened to see the records for the Lodekka (LD5G) based at Walton-on-Naze (I think it was 214BPU). The astonishing thing was that it was returning 17 miles per gallon: not bad for a 58-seat double-decker! What bus companies would give for such economy today: even in the 1950s, Eastern National was doing its bit for the environment!

Having said that Eastern National was run on frugal lines, there were occasional treats for the staff. One was in 1958 when a group of us made a Saturday visit to Eastern Coach Works at Lowestoft. We travelled on a Chelmsford Bristol L6B with ECW "Queen Mary" body and were treated to lunch at an inn in Lowestoft. The visit was very interesting because we were able to see how the bodies were constructed and inspect vehicles destined for various parts of the United Kingdom including some LD6Gs for the Scottish Bus Group. They looked very nice in their very different liveries: different, that is, to the standard Tilling livery.

Another treat was that in 1958 the company decided to enter a re-bodied AEC Regal III of Tillings Transport in the Brighton Coach Rally. Eastern National had responsibility for the overall management and maintenance of Tilling Transport which operated as a coach company in London. This AEC had originally had a Windover body but had been re-bodied with an ECW "Queen Mary" body which had had an American style chromium plated grill grafted on to the front. I rather liked the Bristol "Queen Marys" with the exposed radiators and the later LL6Gs with enclosed radiators, of which Tilling Transport had a few (MXB 739-743), which were also quite nice, but this poor AEC was not a pretty sight!

Anyway about twenty of us were invited to go with the coach to Brighton and stay at a hotel if we would clean and prepare the coach for the Concours d'Elegance. This was done at the Brighton and Hove Garage. We all played our part and had a very nice weekend. The AEC coach, however, did not win any prizes. [In contrast to the previous year, when Eastern National 429, 614JPU, a brand new Bristol LS coach had won the Lister Trophy at the 1957 Rally.]

Earlier on in this chapter, I mentioned that one of the reasons that schedules clerks did not have direct contact with the garages was because of the sensitive relations with the Trade Unions and working practices. The kind of duty that a crew was prepared to work varied from garage to garage although most garages would accept a duty of eight hours in length plus a few minutes. However Chelmsford Garage was quite inflexible. The duties there had a length of seven hours and fifty minutes with only one or two going up to eight hours. There was also a local agreement that duties did not include more than three hours of town services.

Against this background of strong Trade Union input into the way that duties were compiled, it is all the more amazing that in my time at Eastern National one man

operation (and it was one *man*!) and spread-over duties (split shifts) were introduced. These achievements by "the powers that be" led by the General Manager, Mr. Richards, should be recognised for the feats of industrial diplomacy that they must have required.

If my memory serves me right, the first one man operators were at Southend Garage and involved the Wallasea Bay group of routes. They were worked by Bristol LS vehicles which had Setright ticket machines placed rather awkwardly on a bracket to the left and slightly behind the driver, so that he had to turn half-left each time he had to issue tickets. The position of the machine was later moved to a more sensible place on the driver's cab-door.

After the initial introduction of OMO buses, nearly every garage soon had one or two buses at least. Many were the newly introduced Bristol SC4LKs which seated 35 passengers. These were very neat vehicles but I doubt if they would have won any prizes for acceleration and speed. Having said that, I notice that some Alexander-Dennis Darts a few years ago had engines not much bigger than SCs: no doubt they are turbo-charged!

One other matter of interest is that the City Coach take-over included the Brentwood Local services. These included Brentwood to Shotgate (253), to Ongar, Warley and Dunton Wayletts (all 260) as well as a Brentwood Town Service (252). However, with the assimilation of City operations into Eastern National operations, Brentwood Garage gained some work on the 30 (Chelmsford to London Bow) and the 40 (Chelmsford to Tilbury Ferry via Brentwood). This brought some interesting vehicles into the Chelmsford area.

One Saturday afternoon a friend from the Traffic Office and I went to Brentwood to have ride on the new prototype Routemaster coach which had an ECW body and Leyland engine (then numbered CRL4, later RMC4). I imagine that this was 1958. We waited patiently at the 721 Green Line stop until the Routemaster arrived. We decided that time only permitted a ride to Stratford. Thus we alighted at Stratford Broadway and found the EN Service 30 stop for a ride back to Chelmsford. Much to our delight, the vehicle which appeared was an ex-City Daimler CVD6 with Roberts low-bridge body of Brentwood Garage (from the NVX171-176 batch). When we left Stratford the bus was well filled and we had a smooth journey to Chelmsford.

Chelmsford Garage being the one nearest to Central Works had an allocation of float vehicles to cover for buses that had run into Chelmsford for repair and overhaul. Until they were needed (typically at weekends), Chelmsford used them on its own routes. Thus one evening I saw a Chelmsford driver on the Service30/40 Stand at Chelmsford Bus Station in the cab of a Brentwood Lodekka (LD6B). He was holding up six fingers to a colleague and pointing to the bonnet to indicate that the bus had a six-cylinder engine: such was the novelty!

Another interesting and serious incident happened on the way home to Hadleigh on the 5.35pm 11A Service. We were travelling on the usual Southend Bristol KSW (of the UEV/UVX batch) and on the main road between Howe Green and Rettendon, the driver tried to overtake the vehicle in front. He must have misjudged the proximity of the off-side kerb and touched it. The bus, in a strange, slow almost graceful movement, turned onto its side and came to rest on the off-side verge. It is the only time that I have had to use the upstairs rear emergency exit door on a double-decker and I do not want to have to do so again! No one was seriously hurt. On the upper-deck we were fairly tightly packed together on the four person bench seats so that we could not move a lot anyway! This must have been in 1957 when fuel supplies were short because of the Suez Crisis. I seem to remember that Mr. Richards, the General Manager, was travelling on this

bus to his home in Southend. He was thus saving fuel by not using his company car.

In 1958 my father decided to go into semi-retirement and we moved to Holland-on-Sea, near Clacton. At the time British Railways was promoting the Clacton Branch as a good place from which to commute to London. The fares were very reasonable and the service was being speeded up with the introduction of "Britannia" Pacific locomotives. My father generously agreed to pay for my season ticket from Clacton to Chelmsford in order to facilitate the move. Coincidentally my interest in railways had been growing because from the office at New Writtle Street, we had a good view of the London to Norwich main line and I became fascinated by the procession of Britannias, B1s, B12s and B17s that we were able to see.

I had always had an interest in railways but there is no railway station at Hadleigh and my interest was only cultivated by the occasional trips from Leigh to London and the sight of trains on the LTS line as they crossed the marshes at Hadleigh and when we played as children at Hadleigh Castle. Sometimes we crossed the railway line at an uncontrolled level-crossing in order to walk to the sea-wall between Benfleet and Leigh-on-Sea. On other occasions we walked across "The Saddle-Bank" from Hadleigh Castle to Leigh Station and went on to enjoy a plate of cockles at the cockle sheds. There we could see the LTS trains close at hand.

After a year or so of commuting from Clacton to Chelmsford, it became clear that it was not fair to expect my father to continue to pay for my travel to work and I decided to look for other employment in the transport industry. Eventually I answered an advertisement from British Railways for Traffic apprentices. I applied and was interviewed by Mr. Few, who was the Traffic Manager of the Great Eastern Line, and Mr. Rowett, the Head of Central Timing and Diagramming (C T and D). It was a good interview and, although I was not offered an apprenticeship, I was offered a post in C T and D. I gave Eastern National my resignation and duly left at the end of August 1959. However, before I left, I endured an uncomfortable interview with Mr. Bryan, the Traffic Manager, who clearly thought that I was being less than loyal as far as Eastern National was concerned. He pointed out that it was I who had approached them for a job and they could have reasonably expected more from me. Perhaps he had a point, but the fact was that I could no longer afford to work for them and my prospects there did not seem very bright both financially and career-wise.

Finally, I would like to record that I am grateful for my time at Eastern National. I learnt a lot, made some good friends and enjoyed my work very much indeed. I am also grateful to two Eastern National colleagues, Bob Beaumont and Ray Boreham, for jogging my memory and helping with some of the historical facts in this chapter.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)