

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 8: The Crosville Interlude (1966 And 1967)

In September 1965 I went to St. Aidan's College, Birkenhead to begin my theological training. This was, of course, a new experience both as far as study was concerned and also environmentally. Living in a north-west town on the south bank of the River Mersey and opposite Liverpool was something completely different. It was also very different as far as the bus scene was concerned.

The Birkenhead Corporation services that passed the college were the two Oxtan Circles, numbers 2 and 6. The 2 ran anti-clockwise via Conway Street and the 6 clockwise via Borough Road. Both services began and terminated at Woodside, which is the ferry terminal for Liverpool. St. Aidan's College was roughly in the middle of the Oxtan Circle so that it was possible to get either route to and from town. Perhaps because they ran through some of the leafier suburbs of Birkenhead, they were usually operated by the newest buses in the fleet. For the three years that I was there, they were always Massey-bodied PD2s. Having bought nine Daimler Fleetlines in 1964, Birkenhead had reverted to buying PD2s with Massey bodies. The last ones were delivered in 1967 and had 66 seat bodies.

In those days the Mersey ferries were run by Birkenhead and Wallasey Corporations (not Liverpool!). Birkenhead operated from Woodside, and Wallasey from Seacombe and New Brighton. Because of the Corporation transport connection it was possible to buy "bus-boat returns" on the buses to Liverpool. This was the cheapest and usually the most convenient and pleasant way of travelling to Liverpool. It was probably marginally quicker to go via Hamilton Square Station on a Mersey electric train, but a sail across the River Mersey was preferable on most occasions.

One of the things that always fascinated me about Liverpool was the number of different operators to be seen in the city centre. There were, of course, many green Liverpool Corporation buses but there were five other liveries to be appreciated. Wigan Corporation buses, in their mainly maroon livery appeared on the route from their home-town. There was also the red and white of St. Helens Corporation as well as the red of Lancashire United on a number of routes, including the long Service 39 from Manchester. The other red buses belonged to Ribble, while there were also the green Bristols of Crosville on routes to Warrington, Prescott and Rainhill.

In July 1966, after my first year at St. Aidan's, I married my first wife, Margaret. Having been on honeymoon and returned to Birkenhead where we had a flat in the College, Margaret began her work as a therapy-radiographer at Clatterbridge Hospital. I managed to find some seasonal work at Port Sunlight as an "office-labourer" or messenger with Unilever. The quickest way to work was cycling but I did take note of the variety of Birkenhead Corporation buses that served the Port Sunlight works, which included Daimlers and Guys as well as the inevitable Leylands. The other transport interest at Port Sunlight was the railways. When walking on legitimate business around "the soap", as the industrial side of the complex was called, it was possible to see, close up, massive British Railway Standard 9Fs simmering away in the sidings. Only now am I aware of my good fortune!

In the summer of 1967, having completed my second year at St. Aidan's, it was necessary to find some more seasonal work. In good time I applied to Crosville Motor Services, who ran the inter-urban services on the Wirral Peninsula. I told them of my experience with Eastern National and, after an interview, was offered a job as a seasonal conductor at their Rock Ferry Garage. This was their main depot on the Wirral. There were also smaller garages at Heswall and West Kirby but they only operated their own local services into Birkenhead: that is Heswall to Woodside and West Kirby to Birkenhead Park Station.

At the end of June 1967, I began work with Crosville. The mornings of the first week (Monday to Friday) were spent attending the class for new conductors. As I had been a conductor with Eastern National this was largely academic. However, it was a good way of learning of Crosville practices and getting used to the depot and the canteen. Each day, after the class, which usually finished around lunch-time, I spent the afternoon route learning: something that I did not mind at all! Wearing a Crosville summer dust jacket was considered to be enough authority to travel wherever the fancy took me.

After the inside of a week, I was out on the road by myself: this time there was no Reg Turner to keep an eye on me. One thing that I should have mentioned before was that, before I had begun work as a conductor, I had a fear of changing the ticket rolls on Setright Speed machines. This was because soon after the introduction of Setright Speed machines, I think that it was in the early 1950s, I had witnessed a Westcliff conductor having great difficulty changing the ticket roll on a busy bus on the way from Hadleigh to Southend. When I did the conductors' course on the Eastern National, I discovered that it was quite straightforward, but on the road I always took advantage of a quiet moment to change the roll in good time.

One difference on Crosville, at Rock Ferry garage, was that the crew members changed every week. The drivers went down the rota and the conductors went up the rota. This meant that at the beginning of each week I had to find out who my driver was. It also meant that, to put it bluntly, we all had to accept our fair share of "the rough and the smooth". In some ways the standards were very different to those on Eastern National: but then this was industrial Merseyside and not Clacton-on-Sea.

The main routes that Rock Ferry operated were those from Birkenhead Woodside to Chester. The C1 was the direct route while the C3 and C4 operated via Ellesmere Port. Together the three routes provided a frequent service along the New Chester Road: indeed the frequency was such that, at times, it was virtually impossible for two buses not to run together. There were also short journeys on the C3 around Ellesmere Port that provided a kind of town service. There was also the C2, which was an occasional service to Chester Zoo.

Rock Ferry also operated many other routes to the southern end of the Wirral and into North Wales. These routes were always a bit of light relief from the Chester services. They were numbered in the "F" series: however I cannot be sure that the route numbers that I quote are accurate. The Wirral routes took us to Burton-on-Ness (F18), Neston and Parkgate (F17). These are nice residential areas and the passengers were of a more discerning nature than on the other routes! These routes passed the farm owned by the late Lord Leverhulme, the founder of Lever Brothers, at Thornton Hough.

The North Wales services took us, via the Welsh Cross-roads, to Mold and then onto Pant-y-mwyn or Llanferres (F8 and F9). I think that we covered all of these

services but when we got into Wales we mixed it with Chester and Wrexham Depots on the Chester to Wales routes.

There was also a route from Birkenhead to Holywell in North Wales which was very irregular. I worked on this route once. It was a long route of about thirty miles, which went down the Wirral Peninsula, along the Welsh side of the Dee Estuary to Greenfield and then up the hill to Holywell. Holywell is a place of pilgrimage to St. Winifred, the patron saint of North Wales. It was an evening journey and it would not be very busy. The driver who was my partner that week decided that it would be a bit boring for both of us if we used the bus allocated: a Bristol LL5G with, of course, a half-cab and rear entrance. Thus with strong persuasion he got the regulator to agree that we could take an LS6G dual-purpose vehicle. In this way we could talk to each other and enjoy the ride on a summer evening! It was a very quiet journey there and back.

I must confess that as an Essex-man working from a Birkenhead garage where the dialect was mainly Scouse, I sometimes found the Welsh names difficult to understand. When in doubt, I said, "What did you pay last time?" And I charged them whatever they said!

There was also a very irregular route to Ellesmere Port which ran via the "back roads". I worked on this on one Saturday in one of the few LL5G single-deckers at Rock Ferry. Indeed, I think that these were the only vehicles with five cylinder engines in the garage. Another route that I only worked on once was the F42 (I think) that ran from Rock Ferry via a circuitous route across the Wirral to West Kirby. Both of these routes were not demanding on the buses or the crews!

There was also an early morning journey through the Mersey Tunnel to Liverpool. I never worked on this route. Something at the back of my mind tells me that this service was maintained by an LL5G single-decker. This was, at that time, the only bus through the Tunnel, which is all the more amazing when compared to the fact that today there are buses through both Mersey Tunnels every few minutes. *[Bill Barlow adds: the services through the Mersey Tunnel were actually contracts for the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Capenhurst, Wirral, many of whose employees lived in Liverpool. The establishment was in the middle of the peninsula and was not on any of the main bus routes, so had to have its own network. As well as to Liverpool there were buses to Chester and to many points in Wirral. The journeys were timed to suit shift changes at 0600, 1400 and 2200 and were not available to the public].*

Crosville also ran the express coach services from Merseyside to London. Rock Ferry put out the coaches on the Birkenhead service. As far as I can remember, these were black and cream Bristol MW6Gs, but the RELHs would have been making an appearance at this time.

What about the buses? My first re-action was that "I never thought that Bristol buses could go so fast!" I suppose that this was the result of my Eastern National background. The Rock Ferry allocation included every type of Bristol Lodekka available up until then with both Bristol and Gardner (6LW) engines. There were LD6G "back-loaders" and FLF and **FSF** front-entrance varieties. The newest buses at that time were "D" suffix registered FS6Gs of 1966. These were fine vehicles. All the rear-entrance Lodekkas had platform doors, which were seldom closed in my time because it was summer. The front-entrance Lodekkas tended to be kept to the Chester services.

There was also a small batch of "high-bridge" KSW6Bs dating from, I imagine, 1951. I had never been on a high-bridge Bristol of any kind before except the old open-toppers at Southend and Clacton, although I knew that Eastern Counties had

some at Cambridge and Norwich. As a conductor at Clacton I had not worked on a KSW, as in 1965, I think, that the only KSWs in the area were at Walton. Thus the rear platform seemed much bigger than usual and, as the Crosville KSWs had no doors, I also felt very vulnerable! As I have written elsewhere, filling in a way-bill on the open platform of a KSW doing 40mph along the New Chester Road is an experience not to be forgotten! The Rock Ferry KSWs earned their keep working alongside the Lodekkas on the Chester services. However they seemed to be kept mainly to the C3 and C4 via Ellesmere Port.

I also spotted an early post-war Bristol K in the garage at Rock Ferry: I think that it was a K6A (DKA class). However I never worked on it and never saw it in service. Perhaps it was a refugee from Liverpool Old Swan Garage! The single-deck allocation at Rock Ferry consisted mainly of Bristol LL5Gs with the standard ECW rear-entrance body. There was also at least one Bristol LS6G dual-purpose vehicle. There was no one-man operation at Rock Ferry garage.

The destination equipment on the Crosville buses was minimal: ultimate destination at the front plus route number. At the back it was a case of route number only. Older buses that had originally had the full Tilling style of destination equipment had the top ultimate destination masked out with metal panels and the rear ultimate destination and passing point aspects were also blanked out with metal panels. The rear display looked a bit lop-sided! However the general presentation and reliability of the buses was good. I never saw one a failure on the road.

Both Eastern National and Crosville were former Tilling firms but, in my experience, they were very different from each other. However that statement must be made with the qualification that the garages that I worked at were in very different parts of the country. Clacton is a medium size Essex sea-side town, while Birkenhead and the area around it is a large north-west mainly industrial area. In 1967, Cammell-Laird ship-builders was still busy and there was plenty of other work available at places like Port Sunlight and Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port. At other Crosville garages the culture was, no doubt, very different to that at Rock Ferry and Liverpool.

An obituary to Reg Varney in the Essex Bus News of December 2008 included this sentence about "On the Buses":

"Not in the least bit politically correct, much exaggerated for comedic effect - but despite what has been written in some places, many of the goings on had more than a touch of reality about them - and there really were 'Blakeys' around."

First of all, I think that the early series of "On the Buses" used Bristol KSW5Gs and, pertinent to this chapter, one of the spin-off films used a Crosville open-top Lodekka [*actually DLG817 (XFM229)*]: this was called "Holiday on the Buses". For a bus enthusiast it is not a pleasant film to watch, as the poor Lodekka ends up on the beach and is overtaken by the incoming tide! Second, and more importantly, the more outrageous goings on in "On the Buses" are perfectly believable in my experience. Perhaps a few examples will support my case.

In my first week as a conductor with Crosville, one day the first journey on our duty was a schools' service. The driver was late signing on which meant that we would be late arriving at the school. I did not know the route so I left it to him. As a result, we cut out part of the route and left two children to their own devices, with the usual repercussions at the garage the next day. When we arrived at the school, while the school-children (students) were alighting, I went to the front of the bus and, in good Eastern National fashion, changed the destination blind to

"PRIVATE". The driver asked me what I was doing. When I told him, he said to me in a broad "Scouse" accent: "You're a furry (fairy) man!"

On another occasion, with the same driver, one evening we were working a service from Ellesmere Port back to Birkenhead and then into the garage. I think that we had been on some of the short journeys around Ellesmere Port on the C3 or C4. The driver, who I believe was a married man, told me that "his judy" would be getting on at the first stop after Ellesmere Port and that I was only to give her a ticket if an inspector got on. In that case he would reimburse me later. His "judy" duly got on and he pointed her out to me. When we ran into the garage she got down below the window line so as not to be seen. After we had parked in as remote a part of the garage as possible, I went to the canteen for my break. After my break of half-an-hour or so, I returned to the bus for the second part of our duty. I got on the platform and shouted a very loud "Hallo", whereupon the driver and his "judy" appeared from upstairs. There are no prizes for guessing what had been going on upstairs while I had been in the canteen! Then we went on our way back to Ellesmere Port.

Rock Ferry garage is ten minutes running time from the then terminal, Woodside. All change-overs were made going into Birkenhead. There was also an agreement that if there were no passengers on the bus when it passed the garage and it was "running in", the crew could run straight into the garage. Thus they could sign-off twenty minutes early. There was also a restriction on setting down and picking up between Birkenhead Woodside and Eastham. This was to protect the Birkenhead and Wallasey Corporation services along the New Chester Road. Wallasey ran jointly with Birkenhead on the Number 10 (New Brighton to New Ferry Garage). As a result, especially in the evenings, there was no incentive to pick passengers up at the last few stops before Eastham if there were no passengers already on the bus: enough said!

Having been brought up on schedules and timetables and with the experience of Eastern National, time-keeping is important to me. My problem was that with some drivers early running was normal rather than the exception. Some weeks I had to negotiate with my driver as to which degree of early running was acceptable. This was more of a problem in the evenings than during the day. With one driver, I agreed that if we left Ellesmere Port on time he could run as fast as he liked to Birkenhead: a journey of about 45 minutes in the timetable. We were at least five minutes early by the time we got to the terminus.

Chester Garage also had some turns on the Birkenhead to Chester services. One week my driver said to me, "These Chester crews have got no idea of how to come along the New Chester Road!" He probably meant that they ran on time! However they could not sign off twenty minutes (or more!) early if they had no passengers when they passed their garage on a "running in" turn.

One evening we were booked to work a journey from the Vauxhall Works at Ellesmere Port. My driver gave me some advice, "Just keep your head down and do not try to control the passengers or they will throw you off the bus!" The passengers were in the main, mainly female, cleaning and canteen staff. Most of them (about twenty) sat downstairs and as soon as possible 'lit up' their cigarettes. (In those days smoking was allowed upstairs). I had no trouble collecting their fares but I took the driver's advice, kept my head down and stayed on the platform for the rest of the journey.

However, most of the drivers were good and conscientious. I remember one senior driver that I had one week whose work was a testimony to years of experience. He would sit in the cab, puff away at his pipe(!), give the passengers and myself a smooth, seemingly unhurried ride and still arrive on time.

Two apocryphal stories, which I can well believe to be true, are worth repeating. These were told to me by a driver. First, on one occasion, a driver took a spare steering wheel to the cab of his bus at Woodside and kept it hidden until the bus was going along the New Chester Road. He then lifted steering wheel up and showed it so that the passengers could see it through the bulk-head cab window! This resulted in a certain amount of alarm!

Incidentally in recent book about Birkenhead Corporation, mention was made about a war-time practice of removing the steering-wheels from buses at Woodside when they were not in use. Perhaps there is something about steering wheels and Birkenhead!

On another occasion, at Woodside, the conductor of a bus led his driver, who was wearing dark glasses and carrying a white stick, to the cab of the bus. He opened the door for the driver and guided him to his seat. This also caused a suitable degree of alarm among the passengers: for a while at least.

Two minor differences come to mind about different practices. First, in the south with half-cab rear entrance buses it was usual for the driver to only use the cab blind on the bulk-head window at night, if at all. In the north, most drivers kept the blind down all day. Second, passengers in the north-west were not used to ringing the bell to stop the bus. Even if they were on the platform or near a bell, they would call to the conductor that they wanted the next stop.

Finally, after a few weeks, I discovered that, with permission from "the powers that be", conductors with driving licences could go out on the learner-bus in their own time. The bus left the garage at about 11am each day for two or three hours. It was up to the individual conductors to re-arrange their shifts if desired. Otherwise you just went out on the bus when you were on "lates" or on a rest day. I got the necessary permission with a view to working as a driver during the next summer (1968), if not before. The learner-bus was an early LD6G Lodekka with a removable bulkhead window behind the driver. This was a normal arrangement in those days. The instructor was a very patient senior driver. *[Bill Barlow adds: The bus with a detachable window for driver training was DLG 792 (XFM 203) and it later became a full-time training bus numbered G792 in the ancillary series. As such it had an extremely long life and was still in use when I saw it in Parkgate Square on 18-07-84].*

When I had originally learnt to drive in my late teens (I passed my test at the age of nineteen in Colchester), my greatest difficulty was clutch-control. The first car that I drove was Morris 'Minor' 1000 but I passed my test in a Wolseley 4/44 with a column gear change. When driving this Lodekka, my problem was with the constant mesh (crash) gear-box. I am sure that I was not alone with this problem! I soon learnt how to change up the box but I just could not get the timing and foot-work right when trying to change down the box. However with much patience and perseverance from the driving instructor, I eventually mastered the gearbox and my potential life as a bus driver looked as though it would become a reality. However this was not to be: not yet any way.

On August 18th 1967 my wife, Margaret, was involved in a traffic accident on her moped on her way to work at Clatterbridge Hospital. The accident was not her fault. She never recovered consciousness and died on August 23rd at twenty-five years of age. Thus my time at Crosville was brought to an abrupt end. And so began the saddest period of my life.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)

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