

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

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

Chapter 9: Relations with Eastern National "Renewed Yet Again!" Part 1: A Learning Experience

In September 1967 I returned to St. Aidan's College in Birkenhead, to begin my final year of theological training. Among other things, I thought that it would be good to be among friends who knew me and cared for me. And so it turned out. The staff and students at the college helped me through the most difficult period of my life.

I was due to be ordained in 1968 and as I was from Chelmsford Diocese I wrote to the Bishop of Chelmsford. In one way and another it was decided that I should be a curate in the parish of Billericay. However as I would not be ordained until September 1968, it would be necessary for me to find a seasonal job for the summer of 1968. My other home, besides college, was the home of my late wife's mother in Clacton. My own mother had died in 1967. I therefore wrote to Eastern National at Clacton and offered my services as a conductor (having worked there in summer 1965, as recounted in the September magazine): but I also mentioned that I had spent some time on the Crosville driving school at Rock Ferry (in 1967 - see the November magazine). As a result I was invited to join the driving school at Clacton during the Easter vacation.

On the first Monday of the vacation I reported to Clacton Bus Station and joined the 'learner-bus'. It was a Bristol KSW5G registered TNO 685 (2331). Like the Crosville Lodekka I had learnt on the previous year, it had a wooden framed, removable bulk-head window behind the driver. The driving instructor was an Inspector. He drove the bus to the sea-front on the Holland-on-Sea side of Clacton and I was invited to climb into the driver's cab. It was more of a climb than the Lodekka because the KSW has a higher driving position, which I grew to appreciate.

The instructor, a rather brusque Inspector who hailed from Yorkshire, explained to me that 2331 had a five-cylinder engine. As a result, it had an 'odd beat' and it would be a little more difficult to obtain a smooth gear-change than with the 6-cylinder Gardner in the Crosville Lodekka I'd driven previously. By taking my time, I managed to perfect good gear changes. The second piece of advice that the Inspector gave me I have always remembered. It was when I was driving along a main road in North Essex which had high hedges, he said: "Don't sit up there taking your time! Look over the top of the hedges and, if there is nothing coming, cut the corners." It was good advice and speeded up the progress of the bus considerably.

There were about half-a-dozen of us in the driving school and we took it in turns to have a drive. When we were not driving most of us lounged around on the bench seats upstairs on this low-bridge bus. The area that we travelled around was roughly bounded by Clacton, Elmstead Market, Manningtree and Harwich. When it was time for one of us to have a driving test we ran into Colchester. However, as often as not, those not involved were dropped off somewhere convenient and made their way home. Some days, we had a coffee break at the cafe at the service station at Little Bentley Corner on the A133. We tucked 2331 away out of

sight in the corner of the car-park under some trees. Well, as far as one can tuck a double-decker bus away out of sight!

Of course there was a lot more to the driving course than riding around in a double-decker bus, as picturesque and delightful as the North Essex countryside is. We also had to learn and practise the other skills associated with normal driving, such as reversing and parking. We were encouraged to reverse using only the driving mirrors, although I believe it was allowed for drivers to look through the open platform of a rear entrance bus. Anyway, the trick was to identify the nearside wheel arch in the mirror and focus attention on that. We were also told that the examiner would ask us what kinds of obstacles we should be aware of when driving a double-decker. These are low-bridges, overhanging trees and shop-blinds.

We were also given experience in driving Bristol FLF double-deckers and LS or MW under floor-engined single-deckers. This happened when the regulator at Clacton Bus Station was able to spare the FLF learner bus. Like 2331 it had a wooden-framed removable bulk-head window. Due to the front entrance and staircase this was, of course a lot smaller than that on 2331. I sometimes wonder whether the regulator ever thought that 2331, a KSW, was a fair exchange for an FLF. The FLF experience was so that we could have some experience of driving a thirty-foot long double-decker with a front entrance with electrically operated doors. It was also so that we could learn how to use the five-speed gear-box and, in particular, how to find the fifth gear. The secret was that there is a second 'gate' near to the fourth gear. One held the gear-lever towards one's body, slid it forward to the 'gate', double-declutched and slid the gear-lever into the fifth gear. Like most things, 'it was easy when you knew how'. However it was important to remember to pull the gear-lever towards yourself when going for fifth and to hold it away from your body when changing down to third. Later on, one of the drivers in the school told me that he had forgotten the correct procedure when changing down to third on the rise between Holland Road School and the Roaring Donkey. He got fifth instead and the bus almost ground to a halt!

Having discovered how to find fifth gear, the object was to use it for the purpose for which it was fitted, that is cruising at speeds of 30mph and over. The only place to do this in those days (1968) was the A133 between Weeley and Elmstead Market. This we did. However on one occasion the unfortunate member of the driving school in the cab came to a halt at some temporary traffic lights at Elmstead Market with the FLF in fifth gear. He tried to change it to second gear to re-start the bus but he could not move it. The traffic lights changed but he could not move the bus and we waved the following traffic past us. In the end the instructor got in the cab and managed to pull the gear-lever out of fifth with two hands and a lot of effort. Thus we learnt another lesson: do not stop in fifth gear if at all possible!

Another purpose of the FLF experience was to introduce us to the air-braking system fitted to the FLF vehicles. This braking system is a lot more powerful than the vacuum brakes fitted to the other buses and it was good to have some instruction about how to use them without throwing the passengers around the bus when approaching a stop.

We were told that, in theory at least, the gear-box on LS and MW single-deckers was of the synchromesh type and therefore should be easier to use than the constant-mesh box on the KSW. However, I personally never noticed the difference. To me, it always seemed that one was searching for a gear in a bowl of porridge! This was probably due to the fact that the gear box was half-way down the bus with a lot of linkage mitigating the directness of a gear box situated next to the (front) engine. The gears on the newer MWs were marginally easier to find

than those on the LS single-deckers. I never really came to terms with these single-deckers or enjoyed driving them. I imagine that if you drove them all the time, like the OMO drivers, you got used to them and probably got to know the characteristics of the individual buses.

I spent a happy two weeks working all day at the driving school. And, what is more, I got paid for it! This was some very welcome extra income for me as a student. Then I returned to college for my final term. There I finished my studies and passed my final examinations. At the end of June 1968 it was time to leave college, be ordained to the ministry of the Church take up my post as a curate in the Parish of Billericay. But first I had to return to Clacton, complete my driver training and work as a driver for Eastern National for three months.

When I returned to the driving school another Inspector was in charge. He was a very patient and encouraging person and a good teacher. On the afternoon of the Friday of my first week back we had to go to Colchester for a driving test for one of the learners. There were three of us on the bus with the inspector and the third man asked for permission to go home when we got to Colchester. I therefore went upstairs and made myself scarce while the remaining learner driver took his driving test, which he passed. Then he went off somewhere. When he had gone, the inspector came upstairs and said to me: "The examiner says that he will give you your driving test now if you like". Of course I agreed and, at the shortest possible notice, on a Friday afternoon in June 1968 I took my PSV test in Colchester. And much to my surprise and relief I passed. I was now authorised to drive every kind of Public Service Vehicle in the United Kingdom: whether they were fitted with constant-mesh, semi-automatic or automatic gear-boxes, or whether they were single-deck or double-deck and up to the, then, maximum length of thirty-six foot. I then drove 2331 back to Clacton with a new degree of confidence.

(Edited by Richard Delahoy)