

All in a day's work – Boxing Day 1979

My first official driving for Southend Transport – for one day only.



When I started work in 1973 I made a conscious decision *not* to work in passenger transport, wanting to keep my hobby and career separate. But I had always hankered after driving a bus (in service) so in the autumn of 1978 I booked time off from my day job and arranged a PSV driving course with a company based at Kelvedon, Training Developments (Transport) Ltd, using an ex-Colchester Leyland PD2A, OVX 139D. I duly passed my test just before Christmas 1978 but the Traffic Commissioner's office didn't issue my badge and licence until January 2nd, 1979. This was very unfortunate at the time. Southend Transport had started running special services both within the Southend Coordination Area and beyond from 1971 on Boxing Day, after Eastern National decided to close on that day (as both did on Christmas Day itself). The story of those special Boxing Day services is on-line at

www.signal-training.com/ebeg/xmas.htm.

Left: my training bus – till the engine blew up; they then hired similar Colchester 44. The location is somewhere in Witham, outside the instructor's brother's house, where we had just delivered a ladder!

Now the Union agreement at Southend prohibited the use of part time or casual drivers – but the deal for Boxing Day only was that it was not a rostered day's work and was staffed by volunteers from the full-time staff. If there were not enough such volunteers, then casuals could be used – and in 1978, the numbers fell short. Derek Giles, the Traffic Superintendent, would have used me had Cambridge pulled their finger out in time, but it was not to be. In that year, Southend actually ended up arranging for Ensign Bus to cover a number of late duties on the 400 as a result – and I photographed Peter Newman driving one.

Through the winter and then spring of 1979 I didn't get a chance to use my new licence, other than when Lyn Watson and I hired a Southend Transport PD3, 340, to take a group of enthusiasts to Brighton to see the Coach Rally there that April. Then at the end of May I had a chance encounter with Peter Newman and his sons at a fund raiser at their local primary school (which I'd also attended) and gave him a copy of the photo from the previous Christmas. He saw that I had a licence and took my details. By the following Friday evening I was driving a Southend Fleetline for Ensign on rail replacement – Wickford to Southminster in this case – and there followed a lot of casual work, both rail replacement subcontracted from Southend to Ensign and also collecting and delivering sales stock. Plus a very brief spell whilst on holiday in Scotland with a friend, driving for Graham's of Paisley, a real baptism of fire, as briefly recounted in EBM 733, May 2025.

And so to Christmas 1979. In the run up, I'd been out driving rail replacements on December 2, 7, 8, 9, 15 & 17. No peace for the wicked! Then the Saturday before Christmas, I and three others (Lyn Watson, Andy Meadows and Peter Squibb if I recall correctly – all now sadly passed away) flew on the BA Shuttle from Heathrow to Glasgow, car to Western SMT's Johnstone depot and then picked up four Bristol FLFs to bring back to Essex – I had ex Eastern Counties MAH 494E. The drive took so long, despite it being a fast bus, that I ended up parking it in Westcliff near my home on the Saturday night and took it to the Royal Docks, where Ensign rented storage space, the next

morning. The following day, Christmas Eve, was an early finish in my office and in the evening I was to be found covering a Grays to Upminster rail replacement – probably no guard, a common issue at the time, so I didn't finish till 2240. Christmas Day was a day of rest, thankfully.

Then came my first official driving for Southend Transport – for which I was issued with a winter uniform jacket and trousers and staff/payroll number 187 (later that changed to 541). I copped a long shift on town services, 0945 to 0043 (14 hours 58 elapsed), of course the regular staff took the more attractive shifts! The special services included routes normally operated by Eastern National, although of course within the Coordination Area, either operator could work any route. So what did the long duty comprise?

I was instructed to sign on at 0945 but then hung around at the garage, presumably as spare cover, until taking over Fleetline 371 (WJN 371J) outside the garage at 1041 on service 3 to Canvey Leigh Beck and back, handing over to another driver outside the garage at 1245. I then appear to have had a further break (spare again, I think) before going to Central Bus Station to take over a newer Fleetline, 223 (XTE 223V) for a short trip to Temple Sutton on route 17 (1404 out, 1420 back) then changing to service 22 to Hullbridge at 1439. Operating the 22 was clearly a last-minute decision as it had not been included in the printed timetable leaflet, just on a loose duplicated slip showing a two-hourly service.

Right: ENEG member and officer **Peter Snell** was on hand at Benfleet War Memorial to catch my first trip, heading for Canvey Leigh Beck. At that time, the 3 was normally operated by Eastern National buses. 371 subsequently became an open topper.



Right: Fleetline 223 at the Hullbridge, Anchor terminus; this was another route normally operated by EN buses. My mother came for the ride and is the sole passenger here, I hope the bus heaters were working OK! And I'd add that I was not responsible for the creased panel to the left of the number blind. The bus was only 4 months old at this stage.



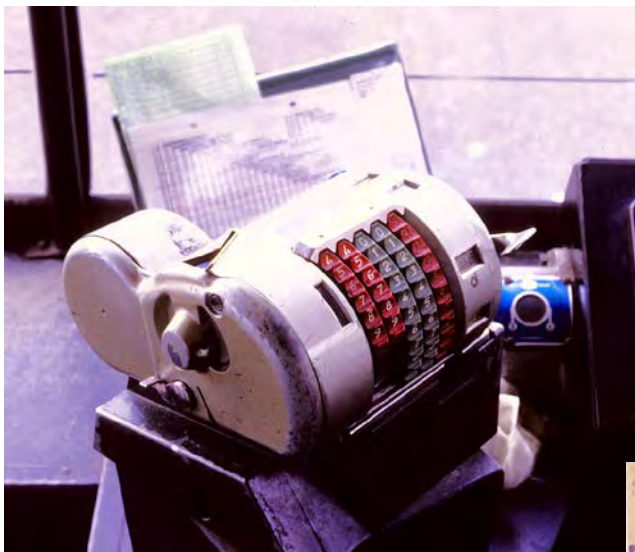
It was a pleasant trip out to Hullbridge via Rayleigh, reversing in the car park of the Anchor Inn, and I was back in Southend at 1617 and time to head back to the garage for a meal break. After sustenance, I took over Fleetline 357 (WJN 357J) outside the garage, a bus I was to use for the rest of the duty, comprising:

1701 to Rayleigh Station, service 1; 1743 back to Central Bus Station; 1827 service 7 Central Bus Station to Victoria Circus, hand over to a fresh driver there and walk to the garage. That driver went to Hockley and back, then started off a service 1 to Rayleigh Station which I took over outside the garage at 2001, in the same bus as before. I then went to Rayleigh and back, followed by the 2127 service 7 to Hockley and back, followed by the last service 1 of the day, 2255 ex Southend, 2342 ex Rayleigh. Take bus back to depot, through the fuel line and park up, sign off at 0043. Sadly I didn't record the number of tickets issued or cash taken on my Almex ticket machine, but I don't recall being overly taxed by hoards of passengers!

So, a long day but with various breaks, the actual driving time was about 9 hours 21. Was it worth it? Well, I certainly enjoyed my first official stint driving Southend Transport buses and it was paid at a premium rate equal to time and a half (less meal break), so I was paid for 21 hours at £1.3725. As I was already working elsewhere, tax and NI were deducted in full, leaving me a net £18.55, which I collected in cash from the garage a week or so later.

The next day (or rather, in view of my post-midnight finish, later the same day – December 27th) saw me taking ex LT DMS 1317 to West Midlands PTE at Quinton garage – a story for another day, as when I turned up at Ensign's then yard in Grays, I was expecting to go to Cardiff, not Birmingham!

I drove many Southend buses and coaches thereafter but always on hire to other operators, principally Ensign, other than Boxing Day 1981 when my services were again called upon. That was until bus deregulation in 1986 when the Union agreement was amended and I was able to become an official part-timer, mostly Friday nights and all day Saturdays, from December 1986 to December 1989. After that I found myself spending my "spare" time driving for Stephenson's.



And to conclude, **left**, here's a standard Southend short-range Almex A ticket machine, for fares 0-99p, taken on a different occasion. The left hand two red bands are for the fare stage number (44 – Central Bus Station), the two green bands are the fare and the right hand red band is the fare class selector (single, return, etc). Behind is my farechart book and, sticking out of the top, a green Almex waybill, to be completed after every trip. They were simple and quick machines to use, but changing ticket rolls could be fiddly.

Right: an example of an Almex ticket. Across the top are shown the boarding stage number (52), fare (80p), class (R – return) and ticket number (316 – issued sequentially). Below is the date of issue and the ticket machine number (0129) and then the operator details, which were on a plate fixed inside the machine. Note that the route number is **not** shown.

These were quite flimsy tickets, 39 mm x 43 mm (1.5" x 1.75"). Reproduction here is fractionally larger than real life.

