
All in a Day's Work

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When the editor selected a couple of my old photos to fill a gap in last month's magazine ('Southend Transport in the Snow'), it brought back memories of two rare occasions when I went to work driving buses in my wellies, back in 1987. As I recall (aided by my rather sparse diary entries), the weather was fine on the previous Friday night (9 January) when I covered an evening half shift for Southend Transport, shuttling back and forth between Southend and Daws Heath on service 24. This was normally an Eastern National service, but ST provided an evening and Sunday service commercially (after the initial ECC contract with UMBH Coaches was revoked due to poor performance), not that there were many passengers. I had Tiger coach 209 (BHK 209X).

I think the snow didn't start till overnight on the Saturday. [As an aside, I *had* seen snow earlier that week - but in Switzerland, not Southend, on a flying visit to Geneva for the day on business - at the time my day job was arranging finance for airlines and aerospace companies]. I was booked to help out my friends Lyn Watson and Frank Spence, co-owners of a small operator Venturer Travel, who held the Essex CC contract for the Sunday service on the 6, Southend to Eastwood Kent Elms Corner. I woke on Sunday morning to lots of snow! I should have used Venturer's ex West Midlands Fleetline ROK 453M but that was a non-starter at the Rochford depot they shared with Stephenson's Coaches. They had good relations with Southend Transport (who sometimes borrowed ROK from them) and I was able to go to the ST garage and borrow Leopard coach 203 (UTD 203T) for the day, as illustrated in the article last month.

Road conditions were very treacherous and I plodded on steadily and carefully, especially on the slope from the Cliffs Pavilion down towards Westcliff Station and then up over the bridge there with its right-angle turn at the top, and the dip down to the bottom of Hamlet Court Road. I paused to take the photo **on the rear cover, top** at the top of the cliffs close to the Cliffs Pavilion, on roads that hadn't been gritted at that stage, despite being a bus route. A small 'Venturer' board is visible in the nearside windscreen of the coach.

There were few people about and little traffic, and I hardly carried any passengers (I forgot to note in my log just how few). As well as my wellies, I was carrying a shovel and stiff broom, just in case. The broom was called for when the two-piece glider doors of the bus grant specification coach became frozen to the step! The result of people getting on and off with wet feet and the moisture then freezing. A kick to release them and the broom to sweep the step clear fixed that problem and the day passed without further drama until I was relieved by the late turn driver.

As we recorded in Essex Bus News at the time, the heavy snow falls of the 11th and subsequently led to very serious disruption to bus services, with ST not resuming a normal service until the evening of the 21st. At the worst point, there was only a skeleton hourly service on 1, 4A, 7, 8, 29 & X1. Some vehicles were stranded at the roadside and a number suffered accident damage and mechanical problems (resulting in ST having to hire in buses and coaches to maintain services once the weather improved). With hindsight, ST should have not tried at all - Eastern National didn't run as much and avoided damage to their vehicles. My diary records that I didn't go to London on either the Monday or Tuesday as the trains were also paralysed.

The snow continued to lay in places and the freezing weather continued. Then on Wednesday 21st I was to be found out driving again. [Correcting last month's caption, which said the two jobs were six days apart - they were actually 10 days apart, the snow lasted a long time]. This time was on rail replacement as no trains were due to run on the Fenchurch Street line because of an NUR guards' dispute. Since I couldn't (easily) get to work in London that day, ST asked me to cover rail replacement work. They must have set this up the day before, as I was up very early to sign on at 0530, collecting Fleetline 242 (MRJ 242W) - a decent bus - again as illustrated in last month's issue. Once again I was equipped with wellies and shovel! I was sent empty to Chalkwell Station to run shuttles from there to Rayleigh Station on the Liverpool Street line, which was still running. It seemed an odd idea, it would have been much quicker to take commuters to Southend Victoria and put them on trains there, but I think that because the Chalkwell fare was less than from Southend, BR didn't want to offer the beleaguered LTS passengers a "free" ride from Southend to Rayleigh.

I did two trips to Rayleigh, then on arrival back at Chalkwell at 1045 the staff there sent me to Southend Central to operate an all-stations service through to Upminster to connect with the Underground there. As I said, road conditions were still bad, it was also foggy, and the rail stations are not on the direct line of the road network, so it took just over two hours to reach Upminster (nine stations from Southend). The shovel wasn't needed but easily could have been. Leaving West Horndon, the road climbs over the railway bridge, turns right and runs parallel to the railway, along the unclassified St Mary's Lane. This had only been cleared for a single lane, with snow piled high either side. I was very lucky not to meet any other traffic along here!

I was sent back from Upminster to Southend, all-stations again, but this time only taking 90 minutes, and back to the ST garage empty at last for a short break at 1500. Then it was dead to Rayleigh to pick up homeward bound commuters and take them back to Chalkwell, where at 1725 I was finally relieved - by Group member Ian Dann (does he remember that I wonder?) - and returned to the garage with the crew minibus, finally signing off at 1800. I see that my 12hr 30min duty paid £29.08, at the double deck rate of £2.3264 an hour (single deck rate was slightly lower at £2.2354).

The following day saw me back at my day job in London, ready to sign a loan agreement with a major (but now defunct) US airline that afternoon. My next bus driving stint was not until the 30th, a typical Friday night half-shift for Southend Transport. Such was my schizophrenic working existence at the time!