

Confessions of a DMS Delivery Driver

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Much has been written over the years about the much-maligned DM/DMS class of Daimler Fleetlines that London Transport operated, largely unsuccessfully. But one aspect rarely mentioned was the movement of these buses around the country to new owners after LT cast them aside. So here are some recollections - confessions, perhaps - of a "DMS Delivery Driver".

I'd been a life-long bus enthusiast but had chosen initially not to work in the industry - that was to change later in my early 40s - and instead made a career in banking. But I hankered after driving buses so took lessons privately and finally passed my test in an ex-Colchester Corporation Leyland Titan PD2A, OVX 139D, in the week before Christmas 1978. The Eastern Traffic Area didn't issue my licence and badge until January 2nd, 1979, which was a shame as Southend Transport would have used me on their special Boxing Day services, that being the only day in the year when their union agreement permitted the use of casual staff. Through the winter and spring of 1979 I didn't look for any driving work, although a friend and I hired a Southend PD3 for an excursion to see the British Coach Rally in Brighton that April.

I had intended to put out feelers for driving work at the start of the summer, but by one of those extremely fortunate chance encounters, I met Peter Newman of Ensign Bus at a fund-raising event at my old junior school in Westcliff, where his sons Ross and Stevie were then pupils. Discovering that I had a licence, he took my phone number, but nevertheless it was a surprise when the phone rang just after 6pm the following Friday, asking me to cover a rail replacement duty with a Southend Transport Fleetline. I did and that's a story for another day, but that quickly led to more rail replacement, both emergency and pre-planned, always using Southend buses. By August I was asked to help at weekends with the collection, delivery and shunting of some of Ensign's extensive sales stock. The first such job was actually on a Friday evening straight from work, taking an ex-West Midlands PTE "jumbo" Fleetline to Youngs Coaches of Rampton, near Cambridge. Luckily I just made it by the skin of my teeth back onto the last train to London and then on to home in Southend. At the time Ensign only had a relatively small but modern unit on an industrial estate in Grays, with buses stored in the Royal Docks and repaints contracted out to a variety of operators. Their massive site at Purfleet close to the Circus Tavern on the A13 (their original site in Purfleet, now under the path of High Speed 1, not the current premises) was just coming on stream, so my jobs included ferrying buses between these three locations, in one case driving 7 different DMSs in the space of a morning.

I mentioned that work was being farmed out far and wide. So on September 16 I found myself hunting round the Royal Docks until I found DMS1308, which I drove to Brighton Corporation's works to be painted for West Midlands PTE, bringing back DMS1269 freshly painted in WMPTE colours. I recall being stopped by the Police on the A23 near Pease Pottage on the way to Brighton, because they didn't expect to see a red bus so far out of London and thought it was stolen! They were interested in the story of why such modern buses were being sold off, but the inside lane of a busy dual carriageway on a sweeping left-hand bend was not the safest place to conduct that discussion. Thankfully no-one hit us and I was allowed to continue; they didn't seem to notice the odd bits missing from the bus.

Not all deliveries were ex London buses, I had some weekend jaunts to Scotland to collect Bristol FLFs, Daimler Fleetlines and Leyland Leopards, mostly from Western SMT, but again, those are stories for another day. All I will say is that being decanted from the night sleeper at about 0500 on a cold winter's morning in Dumfries is not top of my list of experiences to repeat. But back to DMSs. My first delivery to a client was one of the more interesting, perhaps surreal, experiences. When I reported to Grays on December 27th, 1979, I was expecting to take one to C K Coaches of Cardiff and duly had a street map of Cardiff with me. However the job had changed at the last minute - something about needing to pay for the buses they bought - and instead I was taking DMS1317 to West Midlands PTE's Quinton garage. Now I can find Birmingham without the aid of a map, but not what was to me an obscure depot somewhere in the suburbs! No mobile phones, on-line mapping or the like to help, of course. I decided to head for the City Centre and seek directions. The weather got progressively worse as I headed north and coming down the A38M into the City, the rain was so heavy that water was coming over the front step of the bus. The streets were deserted due to the torrential downpour but eventually I found a bus inspector sheltering in a shop doorway and got some directions. When those ran out, I found a fire station and they helped, but eventually I was close yet still couldn't locate the garage. I had no choice but to stop at a bus stop and ask the waiting wet passengers for directions, only to then have to explain that I couldn't carry them as, despite the WMPTE livery, the bus was not yet theirs and was running on trade plates! They must have thought it was a set up for *Candid Camera*, but sadly they didn't feature on TV. The train ride home was a lot easier and less stressful, as was the subsequent delivery the following March of DMS1318 to the same Birmingham depot.

Other operators undertaking work that I visited included Smiths Coaches in Reading, Hedingham & District and London Country at Northfleet. The latter was another "interesting" drive. I was asked to take DMS1362 the relatively short distance from Grays to Northfleet to be steam cleaned, but just one problem, it had no offside windscreen! I was wearing a Parka coat, the type with elasticated cuffs, and had it zipped tightly up to my neck. As a result, at speed the wind blew in the bottom of the coat but couldn't easily escape, blowing me up like the Michelin Man. The drive wasn't too bad, although the dust in the Dartford Tunnel (singular in those days and with two-way traffic) was unpleasant. This was actually my second "dodgy" drive that day (on April 1st, 1980 - I know now who was the fool!), as earlier I'd collected DMS1456 from West Ham LT depot. This was urgently needed at Grays - the story being that a few days earlier, we had been to Holland for the Tulip Rally, organised by the indefatigable Mike Kay (of Friends tours fame), with Ensign's demonstrator DMS1414. On the way back it had had an altercation with an overbridge and there was damage to the front dome. Whilst Ensign had a number of DMSs available to remove a dome from, they were all PRV bodied examples and the dome differs on the MCW versions like 1414, but MCW-bodied 1456 was awaiting collection from West Ham. So I was duly despatched to get it, only to find that whilst it was driveable in theory, it had no mirrors anywhere at all. WH were in a real state at the time and buses were being cannibalised to keep others on the road and they couldn't even offer me an offside one. I convinced myself that, a) it was urgently needed, b) it wasn't very far to Grays, c) I could stay in the inside lane on the A13 and d) I could look over my shoulder through the first offside passenger window, so it would be OK. Well it was, just about, but not something I'd do again; life was a bit more relaxed in those days. That particular bus never ran again and went for scrap at just 7 years old.

By way of a complete contrast, the only other time I collected one directly from an LT garage couldn't have been more different. And it was only two days later. I duly presented myself at Uxbridge garage to pick up DMS608. It was in excellent condition, complete, no damage and I was

told it had been in service until the night before. Only the blinds and fire extinguisher had been removed and it probably wasn't going to need much work for resale, to China Motor Bus in this case.

Generally Ensign did all the rectification work and single door conversions where required but one different sale was the batch taken by Chesterfield Corporation. Their engineers came down, examined various buses and picked the ones they wanted and then they were to be delivered to Chesterfield in as withdrawn condition, to be refurbished there. So I found myself taking DMS1434 to Chesterfield on the next day, April 4th. Or rather, trying to. Once again, it was not to be my day. Setting off from Purfleet around 9 am, I headed up through north London, the M25 still being under construction then. One section that was open, as the A1178, was the section westwards from the present-day junction 24 near Potters Bar to South Mimms. As I came round the roundabout above the yet to be motorway, I was flashed a number of times by a car driver. I knew I'd not cut him up so initially ignored him, but as I dropped down the slip road he passed me and flashed me in, so I pulled up on the hard shoulder, to be advised that I'd dropped a load of oil on the road as I went round the roundabout. Checking underneath I could see it still running slowly from the gearbox drain plug. I was going nowhere fast. Of course, no mobile phones, so it was a long walk to find a call box, phone Ensign and then wait and call back to see what they had been able to arrange by way of assistance. I walked back to the bus and eventually some LT engineers from nearby Potters Bar garage appeared. They'd stopped first to drop sand on the mess on the road and in so doing found the missing drain plug that had fallen out. Only it wasn't from the gearbox as I'd thought but from the transfer box, which uses a different grade of fluid, which they didn't have with them. So a longer wait whilst they went back to PB and returned with the correct supplies.

Setting off again, I was now very late but had to plod on - a DMS would barely do 40 mph flat out. The M1 seems very long at that speed and every so often I'd glance in the nearside mirror to alleviate the boredom. Then I noticed what seemed to be some white smoke at the rear of the bus, but I couldn't be sure and as I was only a mile from Newport Pagnell services, I decided to stop there, on the hard shoulder where it would be safer to have a look. Yes, where there is smoke there is fire, but in this case relatively minor - it transpired that where the exhaust goes across the back of the bus under the floor, there is - or should be - a heat shield. This had evidently failed and had been replaced by a piece of hardboard painted silver - so much for LT engineers! There was no fire extinguisher on the bus so I drove across to the filling station (not the best idea in retrospect, although I kept well clear of the pumps) as I knew they'd have some handy. I couldn't find one but a bucket of water did the trick and I quickly put the fire out, although it had caught the floorboards under the rear seat and burnt through the electrical cables to the gearbox, meaning that whilst I could start and stop the engine, I couldn't engage any gears. The service station management were unimpressed as I'd stopped in a very awkward spot. They commandeered a local wrecker to pull me across to the lorry park; the wrecker driver was impatient and in his haste to get the job done, snatched the tow and stripped the thread off his towing eye, but just managed to get me out of the way, at a cost of £7.48, my notebook reveals. It was agreed that the bus could be left there until the next day, and I hitch-hiked my way home - in those days, trade plates usually meant you didn't have long to wait for a pick-up.

But that was not the end of the story. The next day the Ensign wrecker, a converted Leyland Titan PD3, went up with my friend Lyn whose job it would be to steer the bus on a solid bar tow back to Grays. If I thought my drive up the M1 was boring, Lyn found the steersman role vastly more boring on a straight road - until, that is, he unexpectedly jumped forward out of his seat - a lorry had run into the back of the bus, not realising their slow speed. Luckily there was not much damage, but the towing bar was now decidedly kinked. The following month I was on an enthusiasts' coach trip to

the Chesterfield depot and regaled my fellow passengers with this tale, explaining why they wouldn't find that particular DMS there - only to be confronted by it as the first one we saw as we drove in. A quick look inside and lifting the rear seat revealed a lot of new timber, confirming that my ill-fated bus had been repaired. I wonder if Chesterfield ever knew the full story?

Not all trips were that eventful thankfully, but some were very long, none more so than for four of us delivering three DMSs (1679/83/6) to Western SMT at Dumfries. It's a long way from Purfleet to Dumfries (around 360 miles) and the silly domed accelerator pedal that LT had specified would bore into the sole of your foot - hence we used to put a piece of wood over it, with the underside hollowed out to match the shape of the pedal. We took turn and turn about, so I drove all three buses for different legs of the journey. We eventually dropped them off at 8pm, thirteen and a half hours after setting off. An overnight stay in a local hotel then saw us bring a selection of Leyland Leopard buses back the next day, in my case via Black Prince of Morley, near Leeds, who bought my bus on the spot. That's how to turn over your stock.

I'll end with perhaps the two longest delivery runs - not that I could claim credit for much of them. On February 28, 1981 I took DMS735 to Felixstowe Docks, en route to KMB in Kowloon, where it became their 2D22. Three years later whilst on holiday in Hong Kong, I particularly sought out that bus but couldn't get a photo of it, but was more lucky with China Motor Bus XF19, the former DMS426, which I'd taken to Brighton for repaint in February 1980.

In total I drove 38 ex-LT Fleetlines for Ensign and, later, another 5 in local service for Southend Transport who, after deregulation, found themselves able and needing to use casual part-timers like me. Not all my drives were as fraught as those described above, thankfully! To conclude, I commented at the beginning that a lot has been written about the DM/DMS debacle, but has anyone actually produced an objective, reasoned, factual analysis of what went wrong, what LT could/should have done differently and how it was that buses apparently unsuitable for London could - stripped of the unnecessary interlocks and the like - perform perfectly well in places such as Birmingham and Hong Kong? I'd like to read that analysis one day.

[published in LT Museum Friends magazine # 147, Autumn 2021]