

A busy week, Christmas 1979!

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Prompted by a looking out a topical photo to share on the Southend Transport Former Staff group on Facebook (a private group for ex staff only) this is a tale of a busy Christmas week for a casual part-time driver.

By way of background, I'd passed my PSV test privately in December 1978 in an ex Colchester PD2A and would have worked on Southend Transport's special Boxing Day services (the only day they could use part-timers, by Union agreement) that year had the Traffic Commissioners office in Cambridge not been rather dilatory in issuing my badge, my licence being dated 2/1/79. A subsequent chance encounter with Ensign's Peter Newman (and his sons, then at junior school but subsequently running the business) had led to a lot of casual work from summer 1979, but my day job at that time was with Lloyds Bank.

So to Christmas 1979. Here's a week or so from my diary:

Saturday December 15:

Scheduled rail replacement duty, 1905 to 0212, Leigh on Sea to Laindon, using Southend Transport Fleetline 385 (GHJ385L). Like all similar jobs, I was working for Ensign but driving a Southend bus, working to their duty card and instructions and in full ST uniform (other than the uniform trousers, which were so stiff they'd stand up on their own and played havoc with my delicate legs! I was though wearing black trousers, in case you were wondering . . .).

Sunday – rest & recuperation.

Monday December 17:

Usual day job in the bank, followed by emergency rail, 2200 to 0040, Pitsea to Tilbury. To bed just after 1am.

Tuesday to Friday – usual day job.

Saturday December 22:

Up before dawn had even begun to think about cracking, left home at 0530 with my brother driving me and two friends (Peter Squibb and Andy Meadows I think, from fading memory) to Heathrow, there to catch the shuttle to Glasgow. In those more enlightened and terrorist free days, the BA shuttle ran like a bus service and no-one batted an eyelid or security scanner at three scruffily dressed blokes complete with tool kit full of dangerous items and three sets of trade plates, although it was pointed out to us when our tickets were checked – in flight!! – that we shouldn't have got on as we only had standby tickets. No-one told us . . .

Sadly my notes are rather sketchy so I don't have flight times etc but I recall we were met at Glasgow airport and driven to the Western SMT depot at Johnstone where three FLFs awaited. A quick check over and we were on our way – only another 430 miles to go. Thankfully all had five speed gearboxes and would achieve 60 mph on the level – the speedos were a bit dodgy but timing by road signs and a watch suggested we were doing a mile a minute on the M6 – where at one point when the road was quiet (I did say this was 40+ years ago), we all ran side by side occupying all three lanes!

I'm not sure now of our route – sometimes we used the A66 from Penrith to Scotch Corner and then the A1, but this time I think we stuck to the M6 and M1. Anyway, many hours later (and without the benefit of the yet to be built M25) we reached London. Ensign then had a small unit on an industrial estate in Grays (before the large Purfleet premises were obtained) and most sales stock was stored in the largely derelict Royal Docks. But it was now late evening and we could not get home by public transport if we dropped the buses off, so decided to take them home to Southend for the night instead. In my case this was simply following instructions – the advert on the nearside of the bus (for Scotch whiskey) said “Take this one home”, so I did!!

Arrival in Southend was 2350, so we then set off the following morning to take the buses up to London, eventually getting home at 1215 Sunday lunchtime.

Monday 24th:

Back to the day job, I don't think we had early finishes then on Christmas Eve. But I can't have finished too late, as by 1830 I was at the ST garage collecting Fleetline 225 (XTE225V) for emergency rail replacement, Grays to Upminster, signing off at 2240, just in time to get to bed before Santa's arrival.

So to Christmas Day, December 25th – day off at last!!

But not quite, I still wanted to photograph the solitary ST bus running that day, on the special service 400 to Kings Cross and return. I did the complete round trip, depart Southend Central Bus Station at 0930, due back at 1326 after a 4-minute turn-round at Kings Cross. Then home for Christmas dinner.

December 26th

Finally presented the opportunity to legitimately drive for Southend Transport on the special Boxing Day services that saw them extend beyond their normal operating area. But my 14 hour 58 minute shift kept me entirely within the Co-ordination Area, working services 3, 17, 22, 1 & 7 from 0945 to 0043, all with Fleetlines – 371, 223 & 357.

And now for a change, let's drive another Fleetline the next day:

But this time, it was MLH317L, ex LT DMS 1317, on a delivery run from Ensign's Grays yard to West Midlands Travel at Quinton! This was of course long before the days of sat navs (not that I use one now), Google maps and the like – and just to complicate matters, when I'd left home I was expecting to deliver a different DMS to Cardiff and didn't have any maps of Birmingham with me!

How that trip went and how I found Quinton garage will have to wait for another day.

Oh, and then I actually had 7 days off bus driving before getting back into the cab.