

A rail strike tale

Richard Delahoy

This short story is from the rail strikes of the early 1980s. Many big employers hired coaches to get staff into London to work. Living in Southend, I was a London rail commuter myself but was asked by Ensign to help out with some of the work, as I could easily pick up a vehicle locally in the early hours – the idea being that I drove it in to London, parked it somewhere suitable (eg along The Highway or the streets off there – in the good old days when you could park freely in London), went on to my day office job and phoned Ensign to tell them where the vehicle was, so that one of their staff could collect it that afternoon for the return run. Meanwhile, I'd get home by Southend Transport X1 – or sometimes by train as some were running.

Anyway, on this particular occasion, the contract from one of the banks (not the one that employed me, I'd hasten to add!) was with Harris Coaches of Grays, the vehicle was provided by Southend Transport – a bus-seated Leopard – and the driver (me) was paid by Ensign!

The telephoned instructions were to collect the bus from the ST garage, to go to the first pick up at Chalkwell Park and collect the marshal – a bank employee who co-ordinated the passenger list etc – and proceed “as directed” to Tower Hill. All good so far. I duly arrived at the pick-up at the stated time, and one passenger boarded.

“Are you the marshal?”

“No”.

“Where's the marshal?”

“He's gone sick”

“Do you have the pickup list?”

“No”

“Do you know which way the coach went yesterday?”

“No”.

Now I know my local patch very well but there is more than one potential way to go, even sticking only to the obvious routes (for example, do we go via Basildon or not?). Anyway, my first passenger did have some vague recollection of where the next person had got on the previous day, and so on. The problem was that many passengers had got on and promptly gone back to sleep (it was still quite early in the morning) so were unaware of the route previously taken.

So we did safely arrive in London but I'm pretty sure without as many city workers as were expected! Of course, no mobile phones, e-mail or any other way to communicate on the move.

In general, the rail strikes proved a fascinating time but very fraught as well. Crossing the A13/M25 junction by the Dartford Tunnels on one day (no bridge then, just the two tunnels) I did see a driver from a Midlands' coach firm who was not so familiar with the area get into the wrong lane where he duly had to go through the Tunnel instead of carrying on towards London – so faced either turning round on the Kent side to get back, or continuing via the A2. I gathered that a number of those coaches from the Midlands had actually left their bases in the very early hours (maybe 0100/0200), drove straight to south Essex empty, picked up and straight on into London, then had their daily rest sleeping on the back seat during the day before doing the same again in reverse in the evening.

The really challenging time came on the 2 or 3 days toward the end of the disputes when both BR and London Underground came out. I experienced the worst traffic chaos ever – in this case, I had

an ex-London DMS (working for Ensign again) and picked up in Southend at 0600. I then drove the 40 miles to Tower Hill and arrived there 6 hours & 5 minutes later! Luckily I'd taken a paperback book with me, I read the entire book at the wheel stationary in traffic jams at many points along the route. Elsewhere the Police were stopping coaches in the suburbs at places like Gants Hill (Ilford) and telling them to turn back as it was pointless trying to go further.