

Working at Walton

Peter Dimmick

In Extra issue 2 we took a look at Eastern National's small depot at Walton-on-Naze. But depots are more than the buildings and the buses, they are about the people who worked there and those who used the buses. Here's Peter Dimmick's story of his life on the buses.

In July of 1974 after a six-month period of illness I applied for the first job to come along and became a bus conductor at the Eastern National depot at Walton-on-the-Naze, little knowing that it would be very nearly 30 years later that I would make my escape. At that time bus crews only did the Walton to Clacton and Jaywick route 107/8/9 and both the Walton to Colchester and Walton to Harwich routes were done exclusively by One Man Operation. Doing only one route meant that we got to know a large number of regulars and a lot of their idiosyncrasies and for me this enhanced the job no end.

The front office at Walton which is now the bike shop Revved Up was then an Eastern National coach office. A rather colourful young lady worked there and on occasions whilst having a meal break in the rear rest room we heard streams of exceedingly colourful language from her, to which someone would comment "someone's upset Carol then"! There was another coach office and left luggage at the old Clacton bus station. The man that worked there was rather impatient. I was there one day when a lady was having difficulty finding her left luggage ticket in her handbag when he snatched her bag, turned it upside-down and shook out the entire contents on the counter. He then quickly grabbed the ticket and triumphantly waved it in the air, saying "here we are" and disappeared to find the item whilst the startled woman retrieved the contents of her bag. This I gather was a fairly common occurrence.

In the early days it was quite common to pick up a lot of people on the way into Clacton and as there was a Butlin's Holiday Camp on the way out to Jaywick, we could have quite a load from Clacton for Butlin's and for Jaywick. There

were very many times we were fully loaded coming back to Clacton and again when we left for Walton. The holiday season was completely manic and we often left more behind than we carried. There was always a huge sigh of relief when Butlin's closed at the end of the season. I remember one occasion when a passenger got off and went into Butlin's before I could take his fare. I jumped off the bus, pushed past the man on the gate and took the fare and issued a ticket inside the camp! I must have been very keen back then.

When circumstances allowed, we would try to pinch a couple of minutes on the way back from Jaywick to Clacton and as we entered the bus station, I would yank the doors open, leap off and have the tea ready on the table by the time my driver got there. My regular driver John was a little hard of hearing having previously worked as a fireman on steam engines. On one occasion after we had had a cup of tea I needed to go to the loo on the way out and when I came out I found that the bus had gone without me. It appeared that not only did John not hear bells when I pressed them but he also heard bells when I *hadn't* pressed them. Fortunately, another driver saw my predicament and we chased after my bus in a single decker and managed to catch him up several stops down the road. This was not the only time I got left behind!

Left: Peter with FLF 2806 (BVX 682B).



Another time at Clacton bus station I came across a couple of perplexed fitters from the garage who had brought a huge ladder down to repair a couple of the bus station outside lights. They had gone to have a cup of tea before starting and had come out to find their bus and ladder missing. It transpired that a driver had mistakenly taken the wrong bus and managed to complete a circuit of the Burrs estate without noticing that all his passengers were having to negotiate this huge ladder that was filling the gangway!

On rare occasions I used to do double shifts if someone was taken ill. This was from 07.18 to 23.35 with no break between shifts. It didn't seem to bother me.

Any time that the Walton vehicles needed to be refuelled or serviced we used to swap vehicles at Clacton. We would park our vehicle in the centre of the bus station and were allocated a new one. One time I failed to spot two passengers in the front seat of the upper deck and left them on the parked vehicle. They realised that something was wrong when after a short trip to the garage they proceeded through the bus wash!

We had many memorable passengers but no-one more notable than Gypsy John. The first time I spoke to him I was having difficulty getting a fare from another passenger. John was a very big man with a badly scarred face and hands like dinner plates. He came over and put a huge fist under this man's chin and said quietly "either you pay the fare or you get off". The man paid instantly. John lived in a chalet at Jaywick Sands and was living off the proceeds of a Birmingham bank job in the 1960s. He was an East Ender and was brought up on a fairground and when big enough he became a fairground pugilist (bare knuckle fighter). He told me he learnt not to lose many fights because his dad used to beat him up if he did. He was always smartly dressed and always wore a neckerchief. He came into Clacton every day and drank eighteen pints of Abbots. I never saw him the worse for drink and he always sucked imperial mints before getting on the bus because he thought it bad form to be smelling of drink. He would not tolerate any disrespect to bus staff. I got to know him quite well and he told me that his sister had been murdered, his brother was on the run for murder and he himself had served life in Parkhurst. His wife was a small blonde bombshell called Ada. She sadly developed cancer and died. I can tell you a lot more about John.

We had quite a lot of property left on buses. The best items I handed in were a pram and a lawnmower! My friend Simon handed in a cloth bag which was later found to contain quite a lot of money. The police were informed but it remained unclaimed after the requisite 6 months and it was returned to the driver handing it in and Simon was the lucky recipient.

I am not sure of the year but in the early 1980s conductors were abolished and if you couldn't pass the driving test you were out of a job [Clacton lost its last crew buses in summer 1980, except on the summer open toppers]. I was sent to the driving school at Chelmsford to learn to drive a bus. The buses used there were Bristol VR double deckers [the LFS/F batch, 9016-21] with semi-automatic gearboxes. The Eastern National driving instructor I was assigned to was a bully and a very ignorant man. He just shouted at everyone, which was not conducive to good driving. He also got his words wrong and said things like "tonight I'm going to watch a viveo and sit on my patia". One day we had a new trainee who was a stocky muscular guy. The instructor was quite a big man but when he started shouting at the new trainee, the trainee stopped the bus, got out and came round and lifted the instructor right off his feet. He said very quietly "I've been in the army for 16 years and I've been driving 26-ton missile launchers. I have never been spoken to like that then and I'm not being spoken to like that now". He then threw him onto the seat and walked off. We didn't see him again. The instructor was quite subdued after that and fortunately I managed to pass.



Left: drivers and conductors had to display their licence badge, issued by the Traffic Commissioner, green edged for conductors and red for drivers; these are Peter's badges. FF denotes the Eastern Traffic Area. The font changed over time, the driver one represents the final style. Conductor badges were abolished in 1980 and drivers' in 1986.

For a good many years we had no phone in our rest room at Walton and if a bus wouldn't start or for any other problems we had to walk several hundred yards down to a phone box. After the coach office at the front closed it became a beach shop and they had a phone in there. During the summer months lots of cars were parked on our forecourt, sometimes not leaving space for us. One day I decided to call the police to try to get a car removed and went to the shop to call them. The owner Ernie said I could use their phone, so I called the police and was reading out the registration number of the offending car when Ernie shouted "that's my car". Ernie did not have a sense of humour and didn't see the funny side of me reporting him on his own phone!

We had six regular inspectors each with their own idiosyncrasies. Les was easily flustered and when pushed would lose his temper. Another driver stopped his bus by a phone box and pretending to be Irish, phoned the inspector to enquire if he could bring his donkey on the bus. True to form Les lost the plot and a lot of expletives were heard from the vicinity of the inspector's office.

Another inspector was Ted who lived in a bungalow next to the Walton garage. Finishing a late shift a tad early one night we decided to turn off the engine coming round the corner to the garage so that we wouldn't be heard by Ted – and very nearly crashed with no power steering! Lesson learned.

I eventually became the Union Representative at Walton and one of my good ideas was 'WASPS'. Every week they had to send over a cleaner to Walton from Clacton to clean the garage and rest room. Instead, we made a roster and did all the cleaning ourselves including sweeping out the vehicles, washing the garage floor and tidying the rest room. We were paid the amount of money that was saved by not having to send over anyone. Try as I might I cannot remember what WASPS stood for apart from Walton.....

Another of our regulars was Betty. She was a small Irish woman who you annoyed at your peril. She went to bingo every week in Clacton and caught the last bus home. She was usually haranguing the inspector in his tiny office whilst waiting. One evening I told them both I needed to go upstairs to the paying in room but instead ran to my bus and drove out of the bus station. I just did a very short trip round the town before going back to the bus station. The ashen faced inspector said "thank Christ you came back, she went absolutely bonkers." Betty was also an extremely nosey person. On the last bus on one occasion, she was the only passenger. On the way between Clacton and Walton we had to cross Holland marshes where there are no street lights or houses. With no other vehicle or any light in sight (I couldn't resist it) I suddenly swerved and hooted and shouted out "you bloody idiot". Betty spent the next 5 minutes staring out the back of the bus!

One time some vile stinking effluent was spread on a field on the Holland marshes. It stank for weeks and you got to know the exact spot when you would smell it. I had an irate woman one day who had come up from the back of the bus five times to have a go at me. Just before "that field" I saw her on the way back up to me to have another go. I turned away from her and surreptitiously made a farting noise and said "I do beg your pardon" just as we got to the awful smell. She immediately went to the back of the bus and didn't bother me again! I never saw her again. Maybe she avoided the driver with the horrendous guts.

Eventually they closed Walton depot and we all had to go to Clacton. Life was never the same after that. I do, however, remember driving to Maldon one dark night with lashing rain. At Heybridge we had to turn off to go through a small estate [Oak Rd/Wood Rd] before coming back to the main road. I only had one passenger on board who was asleep at the back. Somehow, I missed the turning into the estate so I decided to turn in where I should have come out and go the wrong way through the estate so I could at least see if anyone was waiting. As I was driving the wrong way this guy at the back woke up and started shouting "Stop the bus, stop the bus. I've got to get off." I stopped and opened the doors and as he stepped off and disappeared into the darkness and lashing rain I heard him say "I wanted Maldon", I thought I haven't got there yet! I proceeded to Maldon and on the return I journey spotted this saturated figure plodding towards Maldon.



Left: A fleet of 25 Mercedes L608D minibuses were introduced at Clacton and Walton in May 1986, offering increased frequencies and allowing buses to finally access Frinton south of the railway line. In summer that year, Peter poses with 0201 (C201 HJN) outside Walton depot. Note the white on red destination blind, explained below.

Right: another of the CoastLine branded minibuses, 0221 (C221 HJN) displays the rarely seen WN depot code plate as a group of elderly ladies queue up to board in Clacton. Six were based at WN initially, 0219 to 0224.

Richard Delahoy collection.



Initially we didn't want the Mercedes minibuses but got used to them and I quite enjoyed driving them and the varied routes they introduced, such as into Frinton. Later we received the larger 709D versions and they were not bad to drive either.

I recall one minibus that was called the 'Hoppa bus' which was apparently built to an Eastern National specification. As Union rep, I looked it over and made a long list of modifications that would be useful to make it suitable for us, and sent that list to the local Area Manager but he went mad, how dare I criticise the bus! However, it was my job as Union rep to provide an honest opinion.

I liked driving the Leyland Nationals, a lovely bus so long as you remembered to watch the long rear overhang, but they could be a bit of a handful in slippery conditions such as on compacted snow. I remember one occasion where I braked but slid instead, ending up just a fag paper's thickness away from a parked car. We had an early Leyland National that didn't have an anti-roll bar on the front axle and if you went hard round a roundabout rather too fast it was possible to ground the front corner! Bristol REs were also notorious in the wet when it was easy to experience a loss of steering.

I also found the Dennis Darts, introduced towards the end of my time with the company, to be good buses. I also managed to do a couple of coach outings using Leyland Tiger coaches 1130 & 1132 (C130/2 HJN, with Plaxton Paramount 3200 bodies). Thinking back to earlier days, we also had a coach (DP) that had been converted to bus work which the staff nicknamed as 'Concorde' - this was 1608 (GVW 978H), a Bristol RELH with semi-auto gearbox. As enough years have now passed, I can confess that I was once conducting on it and we were on a dead run back to depot, so the driver suggested that I have a drive. I was doing OK but then we were flagged down by an Inspector! Thankfully he didn't realise that I wasn't qualified to drive the bus!

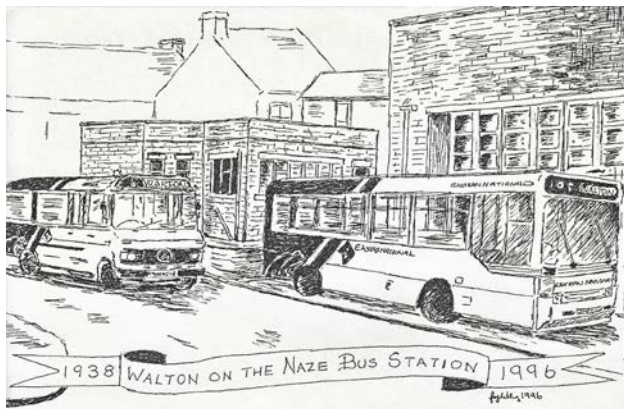
CoastLine branding - "More buses, more often, calling at more places"

The pictures above show the coloured destination blinds that the minibuses used. The colours were:

1/1A	Yellow	Great Clacton and Point Clear
2	Brown	Jaywick Sands
8/9/10	Red	Holland and Walton
11/12	Blue	Bockings Elm
13/14	Orange	Great Clacton and Burrsville
15/16	Green	Holland.



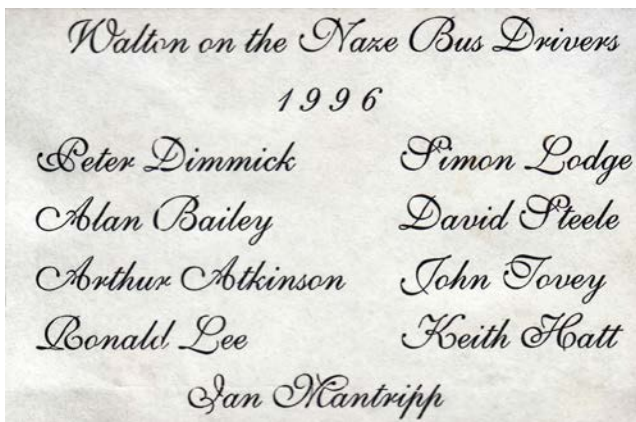
They replaced the traditional routes 101, 108/9, 110, 111, 112, 113/4 and 116, with higher frequencies.



Left: this attractive sketch was drawn to mark the closure of Walton depot in May 1996 and commemorate the final group of nine drivers based there. A copy was presented to each of the drivers. The end of an era.

I became the Union Representative for Clacton and represented people on disciplinaries amongst other things. It was never the same with the running times cut to such an extent that you virtually had to speed to stay on time. On one occasion I was threatened with dismissal because I refused to drive an unroadworthy vehicle. I stood my ground and was begrudgingly given another vehicle but I decided that after 29½ years it was time to move on and I left First at the end of 2003.

I then embarked on a complete career change, working for Thames Coastguard, rising to become Watch Officer for an area from Southwold in Suffolk down to Reculver Towers between Herne Bay and Margate on the north Kent coast. This includes 631 miles of coastline and tidal rivers and 3,500 square nautical miles of sea. Quite a change from my life 'on the buses'!



Eastern National Limited
Deficiency Note
To Mr. Dimmick
Date 16.10.95

You are hereby advised that the undermentioned discrepancy dated _____ has come to light.

a. Error in cast	_____	short
b. Error in calculation	_____	short
c. Tickets/Vouchers not handed in	_____	short
d. Continuity	_____	short
e. _____	<u>0 1</u>	short
Total Shortage		<u>0 1</u>

You are also instructed that you are required to pay in this amount to the Cash Clerk within 48 hours.

If you wish to query any of the above shortages, you are at liberty to inspect your documents at the Traffic Audit Office at any time during normal office hours.

G Wilson
Company Secretary

No. 30367

EASTERN NATIONAL

Conductors and driver-operators were required to account for every last penny of the fares collected, as recorded on their ticket machine. But here's one penny that Peter never settled up! Any driver 'shorts' would be advised by a form like this, saying how much the paying in was short by and with a tear-off slip to submit with the amount due.

The coin attached to this slip is a Canadian one cent, rather similar in size and feel to a British 1p, found in Peter's paying in back in 1993.

Are the company's accounts are still carrying a 1p difference after all these years?!

Received: The deficiency note is numbered (right)

No. 30367

EASTERN NATIONAL

Time _____ a.m./p.m.
Date _____
Signature _____

EN Form 5500
(3/70)