

My Life On The Buses

David Edwards

Member 306, David Edwards has had a life-long interest in buses and is well-known as the owner of the superbly restored Bristol REL/ECW bus, 1516 (FWC 439H). Here he tells his story of working for Eastern National, now First Essex Buses.

I should start by saying that buses have always been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My late father, Roy Lewis Edwards, was a conductor with both Moore's and Eastern National at Kelvedon and the original Silver End (an outstation of Braintree) and the later re-incarnation when Kelvedon operations moved there in 1974. However, his employment wasn't continuous as he left several times to pursue other occupations but ended up returning when these didn't work out for various reasons.

I left school in the spring of 1976 just as the well-remembered long hot summer of that year began, prior to that I had been lucky enough to have an interview with Geoff Dodson, Operations Manager for National Travel South East at Kelvedon depot as a Junior Traffic Clerk, a grand title that was given for an office junior, i.e. the office "sprog" and general dogsbody! I remember I finished school on the Friday afternoon and started on the following Monday morning, no holiday or "gap time" in those days. Unfortunately, the job was for the busy summer season only and come September I was laid off.

After a short period of unemployment over the winter of '76/'77 in which I was given several awful factory jobs to try out, I secured an interview with R (Bob) Hanley, EN's Traffic Manager for the position of - Junior Traffic Clerk (I), based at Head Office New Writtle Street, with the possibility of progressing to becoming a Junior Schedules Clerk if and when a position became vacant, although this never materialised. I started on 7th February 1977 in the general section of the traffic department under the supervision of Peter Dodson (no relation to Geoff). I spent time working in all the various sections, fares, publicity, licensing and schedules too, as well as being involved with the "Traffic Action Plan" of 1980 which was EN's answer to the countrywide NBC Market Analysis Project.

Learning to drive

By 1981 I was getting "itchy feet" and decided I wanted to move on and follow in the footsteps of several previous members of the traffic department who had left to go "on the road". After persuading the management I wished to do this (and much to the disappointment and alarm of my parents), I was allowed to attend the driver training school during the spring of 1982, whilst taking this time "off" as my annual holiday. I duly passed my PSV test with the company examiner, Chief Driving Instructor Len Morse, who seemed to take a shine to me (although he was always suspicious of any member of HO traffic staff and treated them as internal "spies" who had been seconded to the school to see how it was being run!). By this time EN had become 100% one-man operation (OMO as it was known) and the PSV test I passed was Class 1A "Double-deck, Automatic" only - I had my training and test on Bristol VRTLL 9018 (LFS 297F), pictured **below** at Southend depot in this photo by **Brian Pask**.



However, there was a batch of manual vehicles still on the fleet - the 12xx class Bedford YMT coaches - as well as the 4 Bristol LHs based at Colchester that always seemed to be forgotten. Therefore, the following week I had to take a second test to drive these, Class 2 "Manual single deck". For some reason, known only to my Instructor, Peter Cannon from Basildon, I spent most of that week in and around the Ilford area, passing the test in Bedford YMT 1202 (BNO 688T). On receiving my paper licence from the Traffic Commissioners, I felt somewhat disappointed that it wasn't the coveted Class 1 "All Types" that had been the case with all drivers up until the introduction of 100% OMO.

Right and below: the coveted PSV driver licence and badge - in pre-computerisation days, licences were issued on A5 sized forms, hand-written. For pictures of the LH and YMT vehicles, which this licence permitted David to drive, see the back cover.



To Silver End

Upon successful completion of this I was then allowed to take a further two weeks holiday, which had been booked already (a "Fly-drive" holiday to the West Coast of the USA) and upon return I started work as an OMO driver based at Silver End depot (SE), the position having become available due to Driver Tony Mason having been "made-up" (as it was termed) to Inspector at Maldon depot. I was now working with some of the drivers I had grown up with and a proportion of which knew and had worked with my father and knew me from my younger days or working at Head Office.

The first job I was given at SE? To take Bristol LH 1103 from SE to Central Works for preparation for sale to Hedingham Omnibuses. 1103 had been allocated to SE for short while as this was immediately after the period of both the Pope and President Ronald Reagan's recent visits to the UK, buses had been sent to London for use by the Metropolitan Police, consequently many vehicles had been relicensed and allocated to different depots to cover for the shortfall. This was the only occasion I drove an LH in Company service, but that manual class 2 test was a necessary requirement as we had Bedford YMTs allocated to SE. Little did I know I would get to drive the same LH many times in later years when it came into preservation.

Several happy years passed at SE but in 1988 the management buyout team that now owned the privatised Eastern National and were always looking for ways to save money and make a profit through property sales, decided that SE depot was to close in the August of that year. I had the dubious privilege of driving the last ever service bus into SE, the 2305 Service 53 from CR to SE with VR 3055 (LJN 650P, always a favourite) arriving just before midnight on the 7 August 1988. Operations transferred to both Braintree (most work) and Colchester (all of service 53 plus a small proportion of the Witham town service 337). Staff were split between Chelmsford (5), Colchester (3 only) and the majority to Braintree, although a handful also took redundancy.

Right: that last bus into Silver End.

The Eastern Traffic Area
Torrington House
13-15 Hills Road
Cambridge CB2 1NP

Licence No. **F 128382**

THIS LICENCE is issued by the TRAFFIC COMMISSIONERS for the EASTERN TRAFFIC AREA and authorises:—

DAVID ERNEST EDWARDS
70 VALENTINE WAY
SILVER END
WITHAM ESSEX
CM8 3RX

Badge No. **FF25618**
Date of Taking Effect **5th MAY 1988**

The Traffic Commissioners
271187 NM
For the Eastern Area

*Strike out the words which follow if not appropriate
to drive a public service vehicle* of the type or types shown in the schedule below.
Road Traffic Act 1960

Licence to Drive a Public Service Vehicle

Schedule Type or types of public service vehicles which the licensee is licensed to drive.

— **Any type of PSV with automatic transmission & air single-deck** —

This licence is valid for a period of three years and will expire on **4th MAY 1991**....

Signature of licensee (See Note 1) **David Edwards**
(in ink)

Notes

1. The licensee must sign this licence in ink in the space provided above immediately on receiving it; but must not write anything else on it.
2. The licensee must notify the Traffic Commissioners of any change of address within 7 days of such change.
3. This licence does not absolve the licensee from the obligation to obtain a licence to drive under Part III of the Act of 1972. The latter licence has a plastic wallet in which this licence when folded can conveniently be kept.
4. Any inquiries regarding this licence should be addressed to the Traffic Commissioners at the address given at the top.

PSV 30

[Over]



To Colchester via Braintree

I went to Braintree (BE) and it was a pleasant and friendly place to work with great characters some of whom had been there for many years including the noted preservationist Anthony (Tony) Langley and at least three of the future (AJN) 825 Preservation Group. There were also a few of the former Halstead depot staff there who had been transferred when that location closed including another future preservationist John Day, current owner of VR 3107 (UAR 597W). BE had a variety of different types of vehicle allocated with a predominance of Leyland Nationals including the Mk.2 variant.

Around the end of 1990 I was once again getting the urge to do something different and the lure of the four day week at Colchester with its increased earning potential (CR was the only depot to operate to a four day week) and large allocation of VRs to drive, proved too much and I applied to Ken Mead, CR Depot Operations Manager, for a transfer which duly took place in February 1991 and I joined my three old colleagues who had transferred less than three years earlier. Ironically just over a year later BE depot was downgraded to minibus operation and several of my former colleagues from there then joined me at CR being transferred by the company with the reduction of work at BE and service 70 moving to CR.

Enthusiasts outside of the industry looked at the introduction of minibuses and the bus war that followed with Colchester Borough Transport (CBT) in 1993 as an exciting time, and although there was an element of this amongst staff, it was also a troubled time, with drivers who had always been friends from both companies now pitted against each other, animosity (and rightly so) from CBT staff and a large intake of new staff who were keen to give "the opposition" a bashing. Route, timetable and schedule changes were happening every six weeks (or less) as the Badgerline controlled management sought to be the dominant operator in the town. However, overtime opportunities were greatly increased and at that time money was no object.

Then the Chelmsford dispute occurred with 105 drivers being sacked overnight, morale throughout the company was affected. After minibuses had been introduced with drivers working on different (lower) payrates and to differing terms and conditions and with route timings reduced (it was perceived a minibus with its lower capacity could operate a route faster than a conventional bus) the job changed and no longer seemed to have the relaxed atmosphere it once did. However, the differing pay rates didn't last for long (and neither did the minibuses!) and although we now once again have a fleetwide set of terms and conditions, they are far different from what went before.

If all that wasn't enough there was also the CR depot fire of Christmas 1994, when around a dozen buses were lost, to be replaced by a motley collection of second-hand and loaned stock from within the Badgerline Group. The fire was apparently started by a vagrant spending Christmas "living" in Leyland Olympian 4020 (C420 HJN) who had started a fire inside the bus to keep warm! Rumours have always circulated that the fire was an arson attack by one or more of the sacked CF drivers. As far as I know no one was ever charged or prosecuted in connection with the fire.



Left: one of the buses transferred in after the Colchester fire was 3225, AYG 850S, seen entering the bus station, in Yorkshire Rider livery (and with Leeds advert) but with EN names. It was one of ten Bristol VRs so acquired.
Travel Lens Photographic

NightRider

In 2006/7 I volunteered to operate the "NightRider" service in Colchester. This route was introduced to run a circular service around the town between 2345 and 0315 on Friday and Saturday nights predominantly to take late night club goers home. Initially it had operated on other nights too and was at first two different routes. I had my own special rota line (still 4-day) where I worked a normal late shift on a Tuesday and Thursday (Monday and Wednesday were rest days), then on Friday I would be spare from 1800 until 2230, followed by an hour's break, then operate Service 999 (as it was numbered) from midnight until sign off at 0350.

On a Saturday the duty would consist of a complete first half doing the first part of what at that time was the ECC evening service 78 (North Station - Brightlingsea), break again from about 2235, then the NightRider until 0350. Sunday was the third rota'd rest day, but I usually volunteered to work it and got a late duty after having the regulatory 8hrs 30mins minimum break, so I always said I worked twice on a Sunday! The Nightrider operation was interesting to say the least, but I think it is best to shroud in secrecy what actually happened on some occasions, as per the Official Secrets Act, file not to be opened to the public for 50 years! I was allowed to choose which vehicle I used on NightRider, the proviso being not to use a double decker, however I managed to have a Northern Counties Volvo Olympian on at least one occasion! I always liked the Dennis Lances, 1506 (P506 MNO, 67006 as it had by then become) being a particular favourite so it was this I chose whenever possible.

Leaflet **above** courtesy of **Geoff Toon**.

Coming up to date

Since just before the COVID pandemic struck I had been virtually on permanent loan to Chelmsford depot as they have always struggled to get staff and cover work particularly at weekends. I spent the majority of 2022 working at CF. In that time I operated a variety of all routes including the X30 (Southend-Stansted Airport) with the new Scania/E400 double-deck coaches, nice buses. Now back at Colchester I'm pleased to be part of the new X20 team, working to Stansted Airport from Colchester.

So, to the present day, now into my 47th year of continuous employment. I've seen numerous changes to the management and structure of the different incarnations of the company from international level (Firstgroup plc) down to local level (now for the second time First East of England), all of which we are told are for the greater good and in the name of efficiency. Hundreds of people have come and gone and sometimes returned, both at management level and as fellow colleagues (I wonder how I manage to remember all the names), but I'm still here, the last remaining member of the former SE depot staff.

Above right: David receiving his latest long-service award from First Essex Managing Director Piers Marlow.



The ultimate drivers' bus?

We asked David which bus, over his near 50-year career, was the best - not from an enthusiasts' point of view, but as one to spend 7 hours or more a day in the driving cab of. His answer might surprise you . . .

"I have always had an affinity with Bristol/ECW but by the time I became a driver only the remaining REs and VR fleet were left. I have mentioned Leyland Nationals at BE and the numerous VR allocation at CR as one of my reasons for transferring there. I liked both types, the LN had been designed as a drivers' bus with cab ergonomics to the fore, so you'd think an Olympian, somewhat of an amalgamation of the two would be the best, but no, I preferred a VR! Olympian performance improved when it became a Volvo but at the expense of cab design which was cramped (and the ex Glasgow Alexander ON's were awful all round).

"Also stated is my liking for the Dennis Lance, quick, warm and with a very spacious cab. I was also quite taken by the step entrance Dart, the Alexander Dash bodied batch being very solid buses. Latterly I've had a preference for the Volvo B7TL, but not so for its saloon counterpart the B7RLE, although the revised "Mkl" version was an improvement. I think the best all-rounder to have in service with a spacious cab, everything close to hand as well ease of driving, an automatic gearbox but with "holds", has to be the Scania L94UB with Wright Solar body, the YS03ZKA-M batch being the absolute best. Everything produced since is fitted with too many built-in design safety features which frankly are a hinderance to doing the job".

Below: David's favourite drivers' bus. Scania L94UB/Wright Solar 62410 (YS03 ZKF) approaches Colchester North Station in the evening peak for commuter service 15, on 22 June 2011. It was one of five delivered new on loan to First Hampshire & Dorset for use on the X53 Jurassic Coast service, pending delivery of new deckers there. Whilst there it was allocated number 62410 in the First corporate scheme (the batch was 62406-10).

They moved to Essex in spring 2004 and had been nominally allocated numbers 676/7/9-81 in the First Essex scheme but never carried those numbers and instead retained the corporate scheme numbers. The others of the batch new to Essex, 678/82-7, meanwhile became 65686-92 when Essex implemented the corporate scheme in March 2004, creating one of a number of anomalies in the national scheme. **Richard Delahoy**

