

Richard Haughey recalls conducting days in the 1970s with Eastern Counties

This was an article I penned for Cambus, the monthly journal of the Cambridge Omnibus Society some years ago. It had been posted on the Busman in Cambridge website which is no longer operational. So I have posted it here for your enjoyment!

Many years ago, my first job on leaving Her Majesty Arm Services entailed the wearing of another uniform. That of a humble bus conductor with the Eastern Counties Omnibus Company in Cambridge. Hopefully the following article will give some an insight to the job of a bus conductor for those too young to remember them and perhaps jog the memories of some of our older visitors. This article first appeared in print some five years ago in the Cambridge Omnibus Society journal "Cambus".

I first came to East Anglia in 1971 to do my army basic training at Bassingbourn nr Royston. Being somewhat off the beaten track most of our transport was provided in-house. There was the odd occasion, when transport was contracted out and a local firm by the name of Premier Travel provided vehicles in the shape of Alexander bodied AEC Reliances.

By July 1978, I had returned to Bassingbourn, to await discharge, and decided that there was very little chance of getting a job back in Wales, I managed to obtain accommodation in Cambridge and commuted to Bassingbourn daily before leaving the Army in the October. It was One afternoon while looking through the doors of the Hills Road garage, that I thought now that's a job I could do and plucked up the courage to ask if there were any jobs going. I was granted an interview the very same afternoon and within the week I had ceased to be Private Haughey to become conductor Haughey. The first two days was spent being introduced to the "Setright" ticket machine and learning how to fill in a waybill etc under the watchful eye of conductor instructor "Jock Macintyre" Other formalities include the issue of a National Bus Company uniform which included a cap as well. Next on the agenda was a trip to the traffic commissioner's office which was just down the road from the garage to get my badge. For the rest of the week I had to work with a crew, who showed me the ropes Ted Runham was conductor and our driver was Richard Major a former academic who I seem to remember like reading text books while drawing on a French fag, during the layovers I hasten to add! At the end of the first week I passed out of the conductors school; and was allocated a slot on the crew rota with a driver. As soon as I saw my driver I thought to myself I know that face from somewhere! It turned out to be Ken "Tick-tock" Wilcox, who used to be the Drum Sergeant Major at Bassingbourn on my first visit to the camp. To all and sundry Ken used to look and walk like a clock work soldier with his pace stick open, woe betide anyone who stepped out of line! I got on rather well with Ken and like most crew drivers he progressed onto the OMO rota before leaving the company.

At this time the crews worked the "BLOCK" 185/6 (King Hedges Road - New Hospital), the Station 180/1, 191 Cherry Hinton- Girton Road Corner and the 195 Golden Hind- Trumpington (extended to Sawston & Pamsford in the evening) for months I had often wonder what Sawston looked liked!, We later gained some workings on the 103 to Sawston. There were also the odd workings on services 109/10/3/2/8/84/92/3/50. These were in the main X duties and worked either as overtime or as spare crew.

It should be noted that at this time I did not consider myself as being a bus enthusiast as such and that working on the buses, was not only just to earn a crust, but as a means of finding out where everything was in Cambridge But I suppose I always had an interest in buses which dated back to my childhood days, I can just remember riding on the local trolleybuses (But only just,) Childhood was spent in a place called Barnehurst , which is between Erith and Bexleyheath Kent.

As the family did not own a car, we went everywhere by public transport. Which entailed riding on lots of lovely London Transport RTs, red as well as green ones. We had an art teacher at School who must have been a bus enthusiast, because if my memory serves me correctly there were always loads of Buses Illustrated magazines in the classroom to read. Contemporary art in those far off days of the swinging sixties involved sticking ones hands or feet in a tin of paint etc and dabbing them everywhere. Sir as I remember was very much into all that flower power stuff with cow bells etc. So perhaps, he was not an enthusiast after all! Somehow it seems I found Buses Illustrated to be more interesting than any tin of paint.

Crew vehicles used at this time include Bristol LFSs 54/5/63/70/1/73/98/107/9 and 126 while the Bristol FLFs included 425/7/30/1/49/50/53/59/64/5, 425/7 were both former Eastern National examples while 430/1 had come from Lincoln Road Car. These came to Eastern Counties as part of the Scottish VR/FLF swap in 1973. It seems that we had sent more half cabs than the VRs which were received and so to balance the books, we received other companies cast offs. The OMO rota had Bristol VRTs, Leyland Nationals, various members of the Bristol RE family and LH/LHS types. Eastern Counties also worked a number of National Express services and to this end they were known as the Antique Road Show. This being due to the high percentage of ECW bodied REs used on these services.

Having passed out of the training school, I was allocated a slot and driver on the crew rota. My first day's duty was on the Block (185/6 King Hedges Road - New Hospital). For some unknown reason, the BLOCK always attracted a lot of hype, does anyone know why it was called the BLOCK? The peaks would be busy and standing loads not uncommon, with little chance of a sit down. These were always worked by the "fluffs" During the day services would run into the Hospital grounds and if time permitted, crews could grab a cup of tea from the nurses' canteen. During the evening on the way to the Hospital, beef burgers would be purchased from the Wimpy Bar and placed on the manifold to be kept warm until eaten at the Hospital Island

The station routes were equally busy with standing loads being the norm into town, this often gave the conductors a chance to get the tea money in for the day. The company did not mind the odd cup of tea being made. We did have one conductor who introduced a new concept to bus travel. Having seen how successful PAYE worked he introduced PAYL (pay as you leave) it did not take the company long to catch on to this. One day we swapped shifts with each other and I ended up being jumped 3 times during the shift. They were out to get him! We were subject to regular spot-checks by the inspectors, most were quite affable, while others were only interested in meeting their targets and would booked you for the slightest misdemeanor.

One inspector once he had boarded the bus just would not get out of the way and allowed the conductor to get his fares in. Having left the station with a standing load, we picked up this inspector who was making his way from the garage down to Drummer Street. He started to go around checking the tickets and just would not get out of the way. By the time we got to Sidney Street I had only managed to collect about twenty fares, so ended up taking the money and ringing off the tickets as the passengers left the vehicle. Before our inspector left each ticket was scrutinized. Sometimes Head Office would send down an undercover inspector, who would pay his fare and observe the conductor. I had one such character ride with me, while on route to the hospital. As we pulled up at the Station Road Corner bus stop near the garage, I noticed in the corner of my eye as we pulled away, someone running out of the garage to catch the bus, he went straight upstairs. I was soon after him for his fare and he was very insisted that he did not want a ticket and why don't I get myself a cup of tea with the money. Noticing that he was also wearing a standard NBC tie, I said thanks and turned away from him quietly ringing out his ticket, then stuffed it in his top pocket. Having been sussed he went white as a sheet. I learnt later that he caught someone else out that day.

The station routes were the domain of the LFS types. The Fen Estate (180) was nearly always worked by LFS54, this was by request from a Fen Road resident, who would then chase after the bus on his bike! If Leon was in town, he would ride up & down to the station, buying the crews a cup of tea for letting him change the blinds. Service 195 (Golden Hind- Bishops Road) was not such a busy road and if I remember was quite boring, in those days we used to go via Kings Parade in both directions. This was always LFS operated the preferred car being LFS126 which gave a good turn of speed along Trumpington Road. At the start of an early shift, you were allowed a ten-minute booking on time, for the conductor this enabled him to prepare his paperwork etc and for the driver to collect the allocated bus and ensure that it was road worthily. The crew vehicles were parked in the over spill area in Station Road, On a good cold winters night the interior of these buses could put any home freezer to shame, and take hours to warm up. Having collected his bus, the driver would bring it into the garage to top up the water and collect his mate. One very cold morning a Leyland National was brought over by its driver to top up the water. Once inside the garage while the driver did his chores the brakes seized up and proved to be unmovable (the LNs were prone to this in cold weather).

The 191s were operated by both LFS/FLF types and in the main was not a busy route. Most of route was shared with 189/90 workings with the 189 going onto Oakington and the 190 to Bar Hill, and were saloon operated. Other main City routes were 192/3 serving the Newmarket Road estates and Cherry Hinton estates, the little used 194 ran between Newham and Brooks Road and was LH operated.

On another occasion while working the Station with the late Ernie Garlic, we both had to answer the call of nature when we returned to the station. We both walked into the station and made our way to the little boys' room. Myself deciding to sit down for the performance. Having concluded the paperwork I then made my way back to the vehicle outside only to find that both Ernie and the LFS were missing! Strange I thought and in the true British tradition when in a crisis went and got a cup of tea while I waited for Ernie to reappear. The minutes ticked by the next service arrived. Have you seen Ernie Garlic I asked the crew? No they replied. Time to ring the office. So I phoned in to report that my driver and bus had gone AWOL. Sit there and wait I was told and so I had another cup of BR tea. Shortly afterwards Cliff Day the operation foreman of the day arrived with a VR. Better have a look down the town he said and set off we did. We went as far as Woolworth's and around the block via Trinity Street and back up to Bradwells Court. No sign at all of our Ernie. So we made our way back to the station, still no sign of Ernie so back to the garage and waiting inside was Ernie and the LFS. What had happened was that when Ernie returned to the vehicle he dived into his newspaper and some wag rang the bell as he or she boarded the vehicle. Ernie on hearing the bell puts the paper down and fires up the engine. It was not until he stood outside Woolworth's for a number of minutes waiting for the bell that he realised that I was not there. Having transferred his passengers onto the next service car, he then came looking for me.

Each garage it seemed had its own rogue car and for the crews this used to be LFS55 (55CPW) which was booked up at every conceivable juncture by the crews and was substituted in service more than any other vehicle. One cold snowy winter's morning, my colleague and I had to run light out to the Wilbrahams and run back in as a 110 service. Our car for the duty, the fore-mention LFS55. We got there with no problems, but coming back up Fulbourn Hill, on the return with a load of about 40 passengers proved too much. The Council workers (can't remember if it was the City or Country were out on strike at that time) and the hill had yet to be gritted. As we started to climb the hill the LFS started to slip & slide back down the hill at an angle, it had no purchase on the road. Having asked my passengers to move to rear of the vehicle, in an attempt to get some extra weight over the rear wheels (it's astonishing how quickly people suddenly become deaf) no one moved. I then suggested to my mate that he turned the engine off, get out and have a smoke as we were not going anywhere, to which he replied I can't the hand brake's not holding! So we sat and waited, when, within some thirty minutes or so flashing amber lights

could be seen coming along the road from Balsham, it turned out to be a gritting lorry, after throwing some salt under our wheels we were back in business getting in somewhat late. Just in the nick of time, as my colleague's leg was starting to go numb. Someone had the cheek to phone up complaining about our late running!

Another oddity I did a few times on overtime, was a 111 from Bottisham, this was the only time that I had to issue return tickets, possibly something to do with the fact that Burwell & District also working the road as well. The late-night 195s were an absolute bore running between the Golden Hind and Sawston. If you left on time, you can guarantee that you'd be waiting for time at each bus stop. So we would hold back a while, sometimes in the pub, there being one at each end of the route. The day two drivers were promoted to Inspectors, we had one of these duties, unknown to us, we were being shadowed by them in the inspectors' van. Waiting for time at the White Horse Sawston, we left some 12 minutes late for the run into town and onto the Golden Hind. The service then returned to Pamisford, before running back to the garage via the City Centre. It was usual practice that if by the time we hit Brooklands Avenue, if no one was on board, it was three bells and we would run up Brooklands Avenue into the garage from the wrong direction. On this night our ever keen new inspectors were waiting inside the doors of the garage checking in the buses and witnessed our arrival from the wrong direction! Such was the jubilation that they had been able to put someone's name in their new books, that when they filled in the charge sheet, it was alleged that we had left Sawston some twelve minutes late and arrived in the garage some fifteen minutes early all on the same journey! Not bad for a twenty-five minute run!

I had the opportunity to go for my PSV licence and was placed in the driving school for two weeks, the first three days being spent in the classroom doing all the theory etc. As the Leyland National was such a weird beast to drive it had its own driving manual. Following a medical with the company doctor, we were then taken up to Bourn airfield in the yellow peril (X64) and let loose on the runway, as this was my first time behind a steering wheel, I found that I was quickly running out of concrete, as I weave in and out of the cones trying to master the fundamentals of driving a bus and having someone bellowing in one's left ear all the time, found it very off putting indeed! The Cambridgeshire Police were also present with some of their drivers learning to drive their new coach (Bedford YMT Plaxton WCE 95T, now with Dews). Having grasped the basics I was allowed to drive the LFS back to Hills Road for lunch, which was reached without mishap.

Following a few days driving around Cambridge and reversing around umpteen corners, we were tasked with driving up to the Plaxton's factory in Ware to collect some windscreens and take them onto the Lowestoft garage. I had to drive up to Ware in thick fog and later on the return from Lowestoft, which enabled me to get in some night driving on the way back. As the company were in the process of purchasing the Burwell & District business, we had to drive out to Burwell to collect a number of things from their office, by the time we had arrived there the changeover of vehicles had been effected. The once familiar Brown & White buses being replaced by standard Eastern Counties' stock, (I must admit at this time I had no idea who B & D were, or where they were based, but I do remember seeing their buses in town). The Burwell drivers did not seem too happy with their new charges which include the last operational Bristol MW in the fleet (LM640 or 641).

The following day was taken up driving around the Ely and Newmarket areas, with a lunch break being taken at Newmarket garage. The Beach was full up with rows of Burwell & District vehicles, awaiting their fate and looking somewhat forlorn & sorry for themselves, most being adorned with slogans proclaiming an end of an era and that it was. An end of yet another family run company. Most of the buses were sold for scrap, but four vehicles were spared. One being Jim Neale's 9 DER with three others being sold for further PSV use. If only I had a camera. Following a few more days of driving in and around Cambridge, which also took in the formidable Mill Road, came the big day. The driving test, as I did not have a car licence, I had to

be tested by a man from the Ministry, I not sure if having the examiner joining me in the cab during the emergency stop clouded his judgement, but he failed me!

Next day it was back to the ticket machine and a trainee conductor to look after for a few days, You got extra money when you had a trainee with you and they did all the leg work as well. One of my shifts that week contained an afternoon of spare conductor. While up in the canteen, we were summoned down to the foreman's office, we were required to work a 155 service to St Ives, with an OMO driver. His Leyland National had failed and the only spare car was LFS107 (this LFS also doubled up as a training vehicle and the window behind the driver was therefore removable). Still being fairly new to the area, I always thought St Ives was in Cornwall! and wondered if we would ever make it. Off we set, with me pondering how can you advise a trainee on a route I have never done before! As it turned out the punters were quite helpful. So it is possible that I may have worked the last crew journey to St Ives.

On another occasion, while working a bit of overtime one morning, we had to do a relief from Coton and then from Linton on the 113, our chosen car being a rather tatty LS in National Express livery, which had failed near Cambridge and had been pulled in and repaired over night and was put to use before returning to Norwich. Some of the X duties were quite interesting, with runs to Hadstock, Toft, Saffron Walden & Waterbeach thrown in. Sunday duties in the main were quite boring, the main crew working being service 185/7 (Arbury- New Hospital), one being clockwise the other anticlockwise via Chesterton. Other Sunday duties include round trips on the 184 and 109, another duty was spent on the 191s for which OMO cars would be provided. During my time there I only did them once. On the 191s, lunch break had to be taken at Gonville Place. As the day that we worked the service, was a summer Sunday both my mate and I arranged that our wives would join us on route with our lunches, sadly my wife remembered to pick up the shopping bag, but forgot to put the sandwiches in! Whenever the crews worked an OMO vehicle, it would usually be one of the older vehicles. Leyland Nationals from the LN550-4 batch being quite memorable if only from their lack of stabilisers and gave an appalling ride. This batch of Leyland Nationals would have made good simulators for the cross-channel ferry crews.

In early 1980 before computers became commonplace all paperwork was done by hand and following the introduction of new schedules, we went to take over a bus on the 191 in Emmanuel Street only to find that two other crews were waiting to take it over as well! We all then went around the corner to find an inspector to sort the problem out, meanwhile another crew came along and they took over the vehicle. Teapot ups like this were very few and far between. On another occasion, the duty foreman had not recorded our booking on, one morning and after we departed with our bus on the 181s, dispatched the spare crew to work our duty. We were overtaken in a cloud of dust by another crew on our way though Chesterton on route to the station and found that the road ahead was being cleared for us. It was not till we got to the Station that we found out why.

As previously mention Drummer Street bus station used to be an absolute nightmare (and still is despite two facelifts with countless thousands of pounds being thrown at it. It surely must rate as one of the worst in the country) As well as the country services starting from Drummer Street almost everything else had to come in there. The National Express services used to load at the bottom in the stands by the sweetie caravan thus preventing any other bus from swinging around "Premier Island". Other operators to use Drummer Street were Premier Travel, operating cross-country services as well as some local workings and often had vehicles on lay over, Percivals of Oxford and Yelloway were both regular visitors. Summer weekends were even worse with many extras being required to work reliefs on the express services. I think Whippets, were the lucky ones, all their services used the bays, which are now known as the express stands. Of all the operators mentioned so far, Whippets are the only one still going in this area.

Damage only PSV accidents were quite common, especially in the narrow streets of Cambridge, one driver I had was known as "Basher" as he was always "bashing" into something with his bus. On the day he passed his test, he tried backing a coach out of the garage and up the lamp post on the other side of the road. Other feats to his credit include hitting a dust cart, nearly bringing down some scaffolding in Sidney Street and clipping no end of cars. Some years later, I saw him working as a driver instructor for the British School of Motoring! Two accidents which come to mind including one driven by Basher. He was running light back to the garage with a Leyland National from Drummer Street, the fuel line worked loose in Emmanuel Street as he swung into St Andrews Street and as the rear wheels ran over the leaking diesel, he lost control of it. The front end of the bus somehow ended up on Emmanuel College's wall, while the back end was up against the shop fronts on the other side of the road. Amidships the remains of a Ford Corsair could be seen. The fitters who happen to be following him back to the garage very quickly manage to fix the fuel line before the Police arrived, trying to make out it was driver error. It was Basher's lucky day because someone else had seen something leaking from under the vehicle.

The second accident involved two buses and a police car at Gonville Place, a Leyland National working a 192/3 service was waiting to enter Gonville Place via the left-hand filter from Regent Street, in the queue of traffic waiting to turn right out of Gonville Place into Regent Street was the police car. Our bus driver was aware that his rear overhang might hit the police car if he pulled out and beckon for the car to move forward a little. The car would not move and our driver did not wait and hit the police car with the rear overhang. Our driver pulled over while PC 99 got out of his car. Meanwhile as the traffic started flowing out of Gonville Place an officer sitting in the passenger seat decided to get out and open his door just as a VR was coming up on the inside to crossover into Lensfield Road, taking the door with it!

The conductor was also responsible for time keeping, which in normal circumstances was not a major problem until I had a new driver, whose name escapes me. Having just passed his test he was put to work with me, on the first day he had not manage to find 3rd gear and as a result we ended up being lapped by the other crews on the block. By the end of the shift we had lost almost two trips. It was with this driver that I did the Chivers' contact and we reached Histon some forty-five minutes down. Two days later I was summoned to the office for a dressing down. Having stated my case the interview ended. Strangely nothing was said to the driver!

We had our good days as well as our bad days, sometimes it would only take one cantankerous punter to spoil it. The skills that a bus conductor requires to carry out his duties are many, none of which I was informed of at my interview! Not only did he have to be an agony aunt, he had to be a mobile tourist information centre, mind reader and was expected to perform magical tricks with £20 notes at 0800 hours on a Monday morning to non-English speaking language students! There were times where one could have a laugh and joke, with the punters, on one occasion, one of my drivers, Dave (an ex LT driver who was just coming to terms with using his left foot for the first time in years, having been used to semi-automatic Routemasters and was a dead ringer for Tommy Steele), suggested one day while waiting for time up at King Hedges Road that we swapped roles and that I would become the driver. Once we had a number of passengers on board, I would announce that my hangover was so bad that he had better drive the vehicle, to which he replied he hasn't driven anything bigger than a mini car. As he got in the cab the tittle-tattle started from our passengers and went into overdrive as he tried to start the engine while in gear and then pulling away with the hand brake on! It took quite a while to convince the passengers that everything was above board and that the real driver was sitting in the driving seat. There are two things which I have yet to work out, one being how this blind passenger we used to pick up always knew where the door was on the bus as some times the service was operated by either LFS/FLF types and secondly why do people run for a bus that is running late?

One task the early spare crew always got lumbered with, after fetching the teas for the foreman, was the bank run for which an Alexander (Belfast) bodied Ford A series was used, the extra

muscle was not to stop anyone from robbing us but for carrying the bags of coin into the bank each day. MD997 had come to Cambridge for the Cambridgeshire Pick Me service, which was operated in the Huntingdon area, it being replaced in service by a larger ex Luton Corporation via United Counties (but never operated) Bristol LHS, (LHS936, WNG 105H) which used to be palmed off to the crews whenever it was in station, being fitted with a Perkins engine it used to shake everyone to the bone. It was also unique in having a Chinese gearbox, which caught a lot of drivers out. In time it too was replaced on Cambridgeshire Pick Me Up services by a Bristol RL. The early flat screen Bristol LH's must surely rate as the worst product to have been churned out of Brislington and Lowestoft! The later types of the WEX---S batch were a far more superior vehicle. The REs were also subjected to the Lowestoft rattle and again it was mainly the flat screen variations which were the worst, but they were good work horses. I must confess that I preferred working on the back of an LFS to that of a Fluff, at least on the LFS you don't have everyone staring at you all the time and watching every move you made. Also with the LFS, you could have the door open and get some fresh air. It was within the first few weeks while working on an LFS, that my ticket machine went out of the back door and under the car behind, luckily I was not wearing it at the time. When not using them the conductors would take them off and place them behind the handrail on the emergency door and as I placed my machine behind the rail we hit a pot hole in the road.

One of the advantages of working for the National Bus Company was the bus pass, which unlike most staff cards was accepted on all poppy red or Lincoln green buses. I had thought about travelling down to Swansea on the card one summer, but her indoors was not too keen on the idea.

The National Express drivers started to receive new vehicles in 1979 in the shape of Leyland Leopards with a mixture of Duple, Plaxton and Willowbrook coachwork. The early ECW bodied Bristol REs were then withdrawn from service to have their bodies removed, with a view of placing new bodies on the chassis, most of these chassis being stored in Ely garage. The Dual purpose RELHs, some of which bore National Express colours, were downgraded to town work. How these ever got on to National Express work beats me! Also a start was made on withdrawing a number of vehicles which had been acquired from National Travel (South East), these included a number of Bristol RELHs and early Leyland Leopards, most with Plaxton coachwork. There was also I believe a pair of former Ribble machines (836/7) as well, which went into the service fleet once withdrawn from service.

In those far off days almost everyone connected with running a bus company had one thing in common. They all started on the bottom rung of the ladder, either as a conductor or crew driver and slowly progressing up it. There was always a touch of snobbery, within the ranks of the platform staff. The Express drivers, some who had spent most of their working life on the buses thought they were the bees-knees and looked down on everyone. Some of the OMO drivers thought they were special, some even refusing to go anywhere near a vehicle with a crash gear box and then we had the humble conductor. Two of my former managers have done very well for themselves, with Ben Colson following a few years with United Counties becoming managing director at Stagecoach Manchester and now owns and runs Norfolk Green, and Dave Hurry is now a director with Sovereign. I have often wondered where I would be today if I had not left when I did, possibly running up and down the Arbury still!

During the later part of 1979, I started to get disillusioned with life on the buses. The company it seems were having trouble attracting staff and too this end found it more cost effective to cut out the odd bus and leave the crew in the canteen, which meant that the crews on the road were not only having to work harder but were getting all the flack from the waiting passengers. By March the next year I moved on to another job.

It would seem by observing some of the young, harassed drivers, of these minibuses that even in 1997, something's have not changed. One wonders how this new generation of platform staff with their computerised gearboxes and ticket machines would ever cope with a shift on the BLOCK, some may have never had to use a Setright ticket machine in anger! It is only 14 years or so since Cambridge bid farewell to its last conductors.

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