

National Travel and The “Eastlander” Robin Jenkinson.

When the National Bus Company was formed and the Eastern National coach section was joined with Samuelsons, Tillings and Timpsons to form National Travel – South East in 1974, there were many vehicles needing repainting and lettering.

The former Moores garage at Kelvedon was handed over to National by Eastern National and I, as a self-employed signwriter and coachpainter, was given much work, not only on the coaches which mostly had transfers, but also on signs at different places. I started part-time driving and was taught the 183 route which went from Ipswich to the famous Cheltenham coach station via Harlow, Luton and Oxford, a former Black & White Coachways route named by them the “Eastlander”. I thoroughly enjoyed driving this route.

At Cheltenham, express services from all over the country connected. The departure times were the same for all routes and no coaches were allowed to leave until all the incoming coaches had arrived. When the famous Bell rang there was a mad rush!

Sometimes I did the daytime run from Ipswich getting there in time to have a short break and then return at 1430 hours. No “tachos” in those days. I mostly did the Friday evening run leaving Colchester at 1700 hours and arriving at Cheltenham at 2320. Then I would stay the night and the next morning do the 1130 hours return journey. This was slightly different, returning via Ware and Braintree destination Clacton.

Generally, we had Bedfords on the “Eastlander”, some with Plaxton bodies, some with Willowbrook 007 “Spacecar” bodies. Presumably we had Bedfords rather than the more powerful Bristols and Leylands because of the lack of high-speed motorway driving on this route.

On one occasion, I was incredibly lucky. I was allocated a new Bedford/Plaxton VYH 501H but just out of Chelmsford it lost all its water and seized up! I walked to the nearest house and phoned up the depot who bought out 11 DLY, a Bristol MW coach. I set off again and arrived at Aylesbury where the bus-station was under a multi-storey car park, was supported inside by massive pillars in the middle, buses circled round these coming to the stop on the other side. Unfortunately, in my anxiety to catch up I forgot that I had been warned that the bus station floor was extremely slippery when it rained and I slid sideways across the bus station right between two pillars! It took a lot of shunting backwards and forwards to extract DLY. It was so embarrassing!

Later, I had another unfortunate experience at Aylesbury. One Saturday, I pulled up there for an official toilet stop and slipped off to use the facilities as did several passengers. On return I carefully counted the number of passengers and tickets which agreed and I set off. The next time I had work to do at Kelvedon, I was told I had left a young girl at Aylesbury resulting in them having to hire a taxi to bring her all the way to Essex! I insisted I had carefully checked the number of passengers against the number of tickets and upon investigation it was found that while I was in the toilet a passenger had boarded and failed to hand me their ticket, which made my count invalid, so I was not to blame.

Many years later I moved to Co. Durham and driving through a village called Quarrington Hill there was “NDY”, a coach-dealer; in his yard, up for sale was my old friend VYH 501M. When National Travel SE ceased operation in 1978 it had gone to Cumberland Bus Co. who later sold it when it presumably ended up with small local operators.



Picture When Robin nearly had a disaster with 11 DLY, it was in white National livery. In its earlier days, as Eastern National 390, it had a particularly attractive livery as this rear end shot shows! Bill Cansick/EBEG collection.