

Musings on the seafront

some personal memories from John G Lidstone

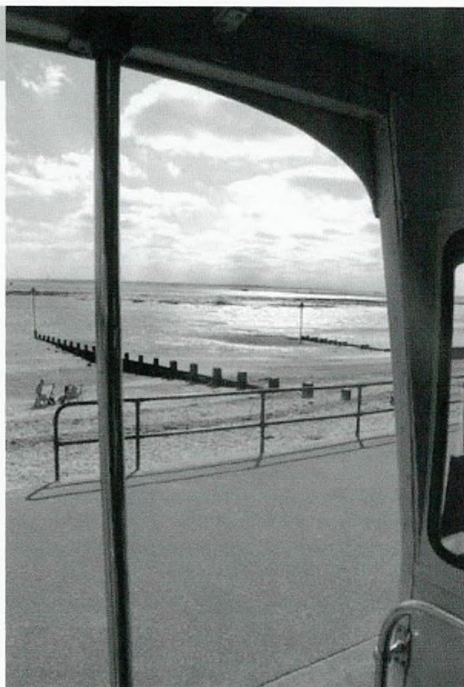
When I first worked on 'seafronts', conducting Southend Transport PD3s, my driver Peter Bray introduced me to how the seafront should be 'worked'. It was different to 'top road' in that you never went in or out of the town centre (then) and really saw inspectors other than the odd 'purge' and/or inspector who fancied a bit of seaside scenery.

The timetable was treated with a little more slack, in that you ran the service to carry as many people as you could, keeping them as happy as you could. This might mean hanging on at the Pier longer than time, to gain those extra punters (jolly banter from the platform would nearly always work). Maybe taking a minute or two extra at the Kursaal to have a fresh doughnut – but telling your passengers that, so they could have one too. Leaving East Beach a bit late to allow your punters time to finish getting their ice creams or shake the sand off their shoes (whilst you could do the same also!).

For me, the view at East Beach was always a joy to behold on a nice day, seeing across towards Margate and Ramsgate rather than just across the Thames Estuary. My parents lived at Thames Drive, so that was a handy watering point (literally on some occasions, for bus as well as driver!) and I recall 'Daddy Giles' great amusement when I told him I'd just bought a property at East Beach "it's typical of you to have one house at each end of the 68" he said!

As a headstrong youth of just 20, I enjoyed the freedom of seafront conducting – enjoying all the scenery, chatting up all and sundry and keeping them happy, whilst learning 'the ropes'. I always had free tucker, courtesy of Peter's knowledge. But summer 1976 was a nightmare for conducting – and I held the record for the largest number of tickets ever on a 68 shift (879, and I took £97!!). I was glad when I was driving for the 1977 season – and my joy was complete when we heard two EN KSWs were coming on hire as we were to cover 67s all season as EN couldn't.

So at the tender age of 21, I was trundling up and down with crashbox Bristol Ks, and I'm proud to say conductors asked to work with



me as they liked the fact I didn't crunch the gears!! I loved them (the KSWs that is) so much that I'd often see if I could do half a late shift after my full shift of 67s. Often I did – the only regular overtime I ever did – as the KSWs were so light to drive. I never once did overtime on seafronts with those heavy PD3s with double clutch springs to deter clutch-riding. Heavy traffic meant your knee and leg really hurt – and I blame my current knee weakness on those heavy old Leylands.

I did six seasons in all on the seafront – and so earned the nickname "seafront foreman". By then, I'd become fed up with Derek Giles' constant quips (he called me "scruff" as I had long fuzzy hair, which he hated), and so I went for the ultra smart look. But that wasn't before a heinous inspector 'booked' me for driving a PD3 'dead' ('car to garage' as we called it) at after 11pm at night without wearing my jacket. The next day, as I was told "you must wear your jacket" I was so annoyed that I wore just my jacket to sign on (and trousers etc in case you were wondering). You can imagine my amusement when just that same thing became a plot line in an *On the Buses* film! Then, we had to wear jackets, except the high summer

months, but were only allowed to take jackets off during daylight hours and when the sun was shining.

But in case you're thinking the Fleet News columnist is some kind of oik, I did have claim to a unique distinction. For several of my seafront seasons, I was a university student – and my regular conductor (Andrew Laycock) was also a student, so we were an all-student crew. This reached the *News of the World* who then photographed me and my conductor, spreading the story worldwide (literally, as I found my story wrapping up some crockery from an old edition of the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong some years later, to my Aunt's gob-smacked amazement) – we were 'Britain's Brainiest Bus Crew'. Oh dear, the trouble that caused in the garage.....

But back to seafronts. So in my new smartness campaign, I bought new shirts with epaulette fixings, and bought some dark blue epaulettes which I duly wore, along with a special tie, complete with SCT cap badge, which I'd repainted in the correct colours of the Southend coat of arms. No longer the SCT summer jacket, with cuffs rolled up (another seafront tradition). I used to smarten the buses too – I've never let on before, but for my pets, ST 314 (PHJ 953) and EN KSW 2383 (WNO 479), I used to bring in a tin of Duraglit and polish their radiators a few times a month, as well as the usual cleaning of cab glass and mirrors.

All too soon it was all over. First, my dear old KSWs came to an end (Daddy Giles having banned my overtime stint as he had to pay 3p a mile 'hire charge' to EN, so he said it was PD3 or nowt for my overtime. Even though I offered to pay the mileage charge, he wouldn't have it!). I was honoured to drive the last one in September 1979, duly adorned with a plaque (which for once Richard didn't make!) which was fixed to my favourite 2383.

Then in 1980 our PD3s bowed out, and as my favourite 314 had already gone for preservation, so I had a rather less attractive 311 to finish them off with – with my then regular conductor, the late and missed Andy Meadows.

Uncharacteristically, I actually preferred the Fleetlines (370-3 variety) to the PD3s, as they

were so light and easy to drive. It was bliss not to have those horrible clutches to hold down in traffic – and you could chat to your conductor and supervise the platform. We had some fun with the PA systems too (in a controlled non-annoying way) – we'd advertise Peter's haunts for punters and so earn those free ice-creams, doughnuts, chips and burgers. Whereas I heard some crews doing daft things (eg playing radios into them) which must have driven punters mad, I only ever had appreciative comments for the "helpful and amusing comments"....and some tips!

The Fleetlines would happily burble along at the better 20-25mph, whereas PD3s wouldn't dawdle like that below 25mph without dropping to 3rd gear (which reminds me of the bet I won with my conductor, when I literally drove 313 all the way from Leigh to East Beach only using 4th gear – and we picked up two passengers too!). The awful things we used to do (and no, folks, no PD3 was harmed by that stint, I was very gentle with the clutch, which meant we took about 5 minutes to leave the upward-sloping Thames Drive terminus). Oh how my secrets are all flowing out....

On the positive side I remember getting a round of applause from my passengers at East Beach when 313's starter failed. Its engine had stopped on a dodgy spot for its worn starter ring gear. (313 was a real cow, a total slug compared with 311/2/4, and I hated it, but it never failed so you couldn't ever get rid of it). It made a hideous scraping noise. I knew that I could fix it, so told people I'd get them on their way (they looked worried by the noise which it had made). I upped the bonnet, pulling the fanblades of the radiator round as much as I could (a trick I'd learnt from the Duty Crew). Back in the cab, and it started perfectly!

On another bad day, an August Bank Holiday, 314 ran out of fuel – right in the middle of the road, right under the Pier Bridge (we were instructed to move toward centre road). My favourite just would not re-start. The solution? First gear, use the starter and very gently ease it to the kerb using the clutch. I called the garage from a cafe (no mobiles or radios in the late 70s) – the road was then clear. The passengers had snacks from the cafe (they were delighted) and we were on our way 15 mins later after the Duty

Crew had popped down and bled the fuel system after filling the tank from their van. No buses had fuel guages then, and buses didn't run out of fuel as they were always brimmed full each night on running in.

Two breakdowns they couldn't sort were with 311 and 312. Pulling away from Leigh Church towards Thames Drive on a 68 on 311, I pressed the clutch to engage 3rd gear. The pedal fell to the floor and there was a humungous bang from under the floor - instantly, as I stopped, bits of metal were rolling out from under the bus. Its clutchplate had shattered, forcing bits of clutch out through the bellhousing itself, blowing a huge hole in it. Miserable old git Harry Yolland on the Duty Crew duly reported me to Daddy Giles as he'd seen me taking a photo of 311 with bits of clutch all down the road. 312? I was poodling along one sunny morning in top gear at 25mph when it sounded like someone was suddenly pile-driving into the engine (a kind of brrrrr-bang-bang-bang etc). Stopping instantly, it was apparent the big ends had totally failed. I phoned the Garage "can you carry on...." they said. I hopped in, started the engine and called back. "Hear that hammering" I said? "yes"....."that's 312" I said. "Oh, we'll get the Duty Crew and a bus to you then...." came the reply. 312, fastest of the open-toppers, then gained the engine from withdrawn 344 and was never the same again. I was saddened by both mishaps (not of my making in any way) as it was a matter of pride not to 'fail' with a halfcab.

One of my favourite Fleetline seafront memories was that, in their first season (with small drain holes in the top deck) they'd fill with water at East Beach if there was a downpour. Arriving at some speed, from East Beach, after a downpour, a couple ran out from the Shoebury Common stop. As I slowed down quite fast, a huge whoosh of water came down the stairwell (straight from the top deck, missing the stairs) like an upturned bath. As I opened the doors, the (accidental) timing was exquisite, a huge wave of water whooshing out of the doors across the people as they boarded. "@#%\$ me, (said the lad) you've got more water in there than we've got out here !!!".

I loved seafronts - every day, the sea and sky would look different. I loved the route and the people (even some of the conductors

too!). But one bad day stands out as an all time Bad Day. Carnival Day. I started the day with FLF 2300 (RWC 608). Its clutch was hopelessly out of adjustment and was slipping like blazes by the time I'd reached Victoria Circus. Back to the garage and a bus change. I got 2302 (MVX 885C), a favourite. Diverted via special route (Crowstone Road into First Avenue), as I turned the corner there was a horrible bang from underneath and the steering suddenly had slack in it. A nearby policeman took off his helmet, dived underneath the front (the engine was still running) and produced some sheered off bolts and said "are these yours?". To be honest, I didn't know, but said "probably". Looking underneath, it was clear 2302 was going no further and the PC was right. I then got Leopard 216 (MJN 216F) and how I hated having these on a hot day. Before I handed it over, it started boiling, leaving trails of water every time we stopped. In the afternoon, I had 2303 (RHK 348D). Going up Chalkwell Avenue, the engine developed a hideous knock, as bad as 312. Told to carry on or else by Daddy Giles, I limped the FLF to Cluny Square and back to the Kursaal, but refused to take it up the hill again, fearing the engine would literally blow, and take my legs with it. Another hateful Leopard turned up, 218 (MJN 218F) I think. That completed my shift without breaking down (they said there wasn't another bus left in the garage that would fit under the Pier!!!). But then I had overtime (which I rarely did). On the pumps on the way in, the pump man said "put it on the pits will you" (we usually didn't). Putting 218 as bid, the said Miserable Old Git Harry Yolland then sprang out of the pits like a fire cracker, F'ing and B'ing at me "what the @#%\$ are you doing putting a bus on the pit....". I suggested I'd rather not do any overtime as I'd had more than enough. My thanks - Daddy Giles said "thanks for wrecking half the fleet on the one day in the year when we need all of them".... but I'd done nothing to deliberately harm any of them. It was a hard life, then.

Which reminds me of another Very Bad Thing I did do, when working as a crew some time earlier on the PD3s.

The last trip from East Beach at night on 'lates' was always known as "The Kursaal Flyer" (after the carnival float), as you never, ever, picked anyone up and you ran only to the Kursaal (this was after 11pm!). Back in

PD3 days, I'd learnt that you could hit a big flood puddle and get a whoosh of water to go right over the top deck, and watch it in your offside mirror coming down the offside. (I promise you this is true). I'd only give this a bash if there were no passengers aboard and if there was no traffic (as all forward visibility was completely obscured too). Often, water would whoosh in between the bell housing and floor too.

On the Kursaal flyer night, I'd been passing a huge lake carefully all afternoon (where the HM Customs & Excise computer hall was being built). But on the last trip – no passengers – no traffic!!! My conductor and I had been walking on the beach as the sky had cleared and it was now a bright starlit warm evening. We came back to our bus (312 if I recall). My conductor braced himself for the bow-wave and whoosh. A fantastic splash! Such satisfaction.

As we approached the Cambridge the bell rang. I asked my conductor "surely, there's nobody on – there wasn't was there...?". We'd seen nobody at the Beach at all, not a living soul. I passed by the stop, as we thought it must have been water in the bell circuit (stranger things had happened). The bell rang again. "Go upstairs and make sure we've nobody up there – they'll be soaked if they weren't at the front, too!!!" I said.

Soon enough, two bedraggled teenagers appeared, covered in mud and leaves from head to foot, dripping wet. I was so shocked – as we genuinely hadn't seen them – I jumped down to personally apologise and see if there was anything I could do to make amends. The lad said "I knew the tide was coming in but not THAT @#?% HIGH...." (oh dear, I thought). To my amazement, he (and she) then burst out laughing. "We sneaked on when you two were strolling along the beach, and then we kept our heads down for a bit of a kiss and cuddle. It's all right, we'll be laughing about this tomorrow" they said. My conductor and I crossed ourselves, thanked God, and retired 312 to base without a word, parking up without further ado.

But that wasn't the end of it! Seafronts were the only buses not to use the buswash each night on run in (so the seats wouldn't be wet etc).

Next day, I had spare duty. "Driver Lidstone"

200 [my pay number] to control, please, Driver Lidstone" came the tannoy call in the garage. "Yup, what do you want" I said. "We've had an extraordinary call from conductor (can't remember the name) he says the top deck of his seafront is covered in sand and mud and says it's too dirty for service – can you go and change it over with 311 please....". (OOOPS I thought, the secret's out....). Pulling up at the Kursaal, I was immediately taken upstairs by the amazed crew early in their shift. "Look at this bloody lot – never seen anything like it, have you....?". True words. The whole top deck was literally brown with mud from my building-site pass-by 'whoosh' the night before.

With trepidation, I crept back to the Garage. "There'll be a to-do about this, I thought". The solution: run 312 through the buswash en-route to the garage. "Just thought I'd help clean it up a bit....it was a dreadful mess – wonder how all that mud got all the way up there" was the phrasing I recall using when reporting 312 back to base. "Yes, it was far too dirty for service" said I....

Anyway, enough of all this, as I'll probably get retrospectively booked and sent up to see Mr Giles at this rate.

I hope you enjoyed reading just a few of my seafront musings (an Essex Bus News exclusive first appearance!) – they'll all be in my book one day, if I ever get the time to write it!

John G Lidstone

