

## Wood Green memories

Michael Parsons writes from Canada to recall working the "main road" in the 1950s

### Chapter 1 - conducting days

I left school at Christmas 1954 and started work the day after Boxing Day, in those days January 1st was not a public holiday. I started at a company that manufactured suitcases called S. Noton Ltd, their factory was at the Standard, Walthamstow, which was the old AEC works where years earlier the first buses for London General had been built. I was taken on as an apprentice to learn factory maintenance at two pounds ten shillings per week (£2.50). Down in the huge cellar which had not been used for very many years we did eventually find half a dozen old General engines covered in thick rust. Being a young lad I did not understand the history of our find; they were still there in 1957 when I left the company.

My mates were earning up twelve pounds a week and I was still on four pounds a week in 1957 and I wanted a car and girlfriends but could not afford them! However early in 1957 I saw an advert for conductors with Eastern National (EN) at Wood Green (WG) depot. I wrote in and got an interview there with Tom Newbold, the Garage Manager, which I attended in his office above the EN travel shop. It was a good interview and I felt very easy with Mr Newbold; he took me down into the garage and introduced me to some of the office staff and a few members of the WG road staff and then into the shed for a look at some of the buses. Mr Newbold gave me a start on a Monday morning a week later, giving me time to hand in my week's notice. WG was of course the former City Coach Company and latterly Westcliff Motor Services depot in north London which operated the so-called "main road" service, Wood Green to Southend via Romford, Brentwood, Billericay, Wickford and Rayleigh. The service had been allocated number 251 in 1953 in the scheme that EN instituted to accommodate the ex Westcliff and City routes and was the only route operated by WG at this time.

I duly started the following Monday with Johnny Jackson, the trainer for conductors, on duty 11 [all our duties were I followed by the duty number], which was the first one out at 0525 on the Monday morning. Mr Amott the duty inspector [jumper] gave me a pass and John introduced me to his driver, then told me to sit in the lower saloon. I was instructed to take notice of as much detail as I could and to listen to him call out where we were, as it was a two week training period and by next Monday he would expect me to be doing the job under his guidance.

What he did not tell me that on a Monday the public bought their weekly tickets, either 5-day or 6-day, so it was a busy trip. The 251 road was a two and a half hour run and I was not used to being up at that hour so I fell asleep! John woke me up just out of Wickford and was not too upset with me. We got into Tylers Avenue depot in Southend at eight and went

into the café. We did not have to operate a Rayleigh or Wickford short, so we were back in WG by twelve. When we got back I was given my uniform and told that I was with John all week; the following week I would be on late turn, again with John. The training went well and John gave me all sorts of tips to make the job flow in an easy fashion. I think that we started our late turn on Sunday afternoon. On the Monday we had a Wickford short which we did with one of Southend depot's LS or older L5G single deckers which we called conker boxes. The reason for a single decker was that the old railway bridge at Shotgate was too low for double deckers. *[The story of Blue Brick Bridge and its effect on bus services is explained on-line in the Archive Articles section of the Group's web site, where there is also an article about the 251 route].*

At WG we had a spare crew sign on at 5.15am called early showup [ESU] up and a late crew sign on at about 1200 which was late show up [LSU]. If you did not go out on either duties covering for sickness, on most of the times that I did the duty, I helped out in the transport office preparing the Setright ticket machines for the following day and counting the money coming in. On a Friday we would go down to the bank in Wood Green High Road by car with one of the garage inspectors to collect the shed's wages.

Once I had gone through my training with flying colours I was put with an elderly ex-City driver by the name of Bill Eves, I think that he was in his late sixties and not in the best of health; his breathing was not too good, he always had the driver's blind down at the back of the cab and his wife always came with him and sat in the seat behind the cab. When I started with him, he told me just to look after the bell and the wombles and he would take care of the rest. He knew every time of the services, such as whether the 11 duty should be in front of or behind us. On one week we were doing the last bus home, the 9.25pm out of Southend. We should have had a Southend crew three minutes in front of us [we called them swingers] working up to Brentwood to clear the short runners [rabbits], leaving us with the through passengers. The jumper at Tylers Avenue would push this particular crew out on time and we would go on ours, by the time we had got to the Southend Road we were past him and for the first three nights we never saw them again. On the fourth night, I think that Bill might have said something to the jumper, Bill told me to just get going on the bell, I did and we went up to Kent Elms Corner at Eastwood like a rocket, so that by the time we got to Rayleigh High Street we were well early. Bill flashed the saloon lights and called me round to him and told me that he was going to pull into the speedway car park just beyond Rayleigh Station and sit quietly there for a short while. He did so and out went all the lights. I told the rabbits what it was all about, then we watched our swinger go past quite fast looking for us! Bill pulled out and we pushed him along, staying a couple of stops behind him all the way up to Brentwood - he was busy and not very happy!

Bill died a few months later and Tom Newbold let us take one of the Leylands to his funeral with a crowd of us and his wife. There was a clippie by the name of Maureen working with Harry Winsor, another ex-City driver, I did ask her out but she would not have any of it. She decided to leave the job, so I got a transfer to work behind Harry as his regular conductor. He was another driver that knew the job well, but I used to lose him when

he did some private hire and station transfers with the Bristol MWs. We had a driver by the name of Tom Day who would do all the overtime going - in fact we called him "double day" - the overtime was two Southend rounder's which amounted to about a fifteen hour day for a driver. The Rayleigh and Wickford shorts normally on the duties were instead covered by Southend staff, to keep within the driving hours. I also did a lot of doubles but as a conductor I had to do the shorts as well, but the money was good and it enabled me to buy a 1951 Austin A40 for £250 and pass my driving test in late 1957.

Road staff at WG were represented by the Transport and General Workers Union and John Jackson's brother Bill, a driver at WG, was the union rep. He quite soon got made up to an inspector; now we had two jumpers, Bill and Mr Amott. They were quite fair if they found something amiss, most of the time they would just quietly advise you and that was that. A prank that we used to play on the punters was if you had a Leyland such as BD 1139 (FJN 205) - once we had left Wickford and climbed up Runwell Chase [at that time there was a mental hospital at Runwell], we did a right turn onto Hawk Hill to run down into Battlesbridge. Just after the turn there was a railway bridge under the Southminster branch line and from our position on the road you could see over the top of it. The seats on the upper deck of the Leyland's were the standard lowbridge pattern of four across to the nearside - we would stand at the top of the stairs and call out "mind your heads please" and it was amazing how many people did duck their heads as we went down the bank and safely under the bridge!

Wood Green in the summer months did a few extras on nice sunny days, the idea was to work the bus down as normal mixing in with the service buses and you could have a domino load [a full capacity load of punters] by the time we had reached Walthamstow The Bell public house, then it was three bells until someone alighted and we would arrive slightly early in Tylers Avenue, but no notice was taken of that. We would drop our punters off and run up to Southend shed dead and park the bus up, then make our own way back to WG, most times we would get a lift up the Southend Road to the Waterworks Corner in Woodford and then catch the next service back to WG. Our name for this bit of overtime was a slash and we would get a couple of hours for nothing.

We had one duty that signed on at 6.10am and ran down dead [private] to the King's Head at Great Bursted and we worked back to WG as a swinger to a Southend crew, normally working the stops one for one and although it was busy job it made an easy job. One bus we had was WG 1489 with the Cave-Brown-Cave heating system which was a good motor but in my time as her conductor it used to get very hot up on the top deck as the front windows were fixed non openers. At this time 236 LNO, BD1541, appeared - a seventy seater which we called Big Bertha. She was a superb bus to conduct as she had a good turn of speed (6 cylinder engine and 5-speed overdrive gearbox) and was a good motor to have on late turns out of WG when you caught all the runners finishing work from Gesteners, Lebus and Ever Ready's factories going out through Tottenham and Walthamstow. At the time the minimum fare was six pence (2½p) as against London Transport's three pence, so on a late turn back into WG we would try to get behind a 625 trolleybus somewhere through Walthamstow

and scratch him back to WG. That way we could do our waybill and takings en route, so that when we got outside WG all we had to do was run our box and Setright into the office, unlock our cubby hole, put the box in and drop our takings and waybill into the night safe, while our driver took the bus round the back and parked it on the fuel pump for the night staff - then we were gone.

One sad event happened to a driver by the name of Harry Brocklebank, known to us as Brock, he was a very smart guy - collar and tie, white shirt and he wore gloves to drive. One morning at Kent Elms Corner in Eastwood he knocked a child down with an LD Lodekka in the pouring rain, the child finished up underneath the bus. Brock got underneath the bus on the wet road and gave comfort and held the child while the fire brigade jacked up the bus and got the child out and as luck would have it the child only suffered from shock.

*On the next page, Michael explains how he became a driver.*

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## Wood Green memories

### Michael Parsons recalls working the "main road" in the 1950s

#### Chapter 2 - driving at last!

After a couple of years conducting, as described last month, by now it was going into 1960 and I had a car driving licence and I wanted to "go on the front" ie get a bus driver's licence. I asked the Garage Manager, Tom Newbold, and it turned out that I was one of three conductors with the same idea. Tom arranged for us all to go out with Tommy Flavell, another ex City man, and he would teach us to drive a bus.

We started with the Leyland deckers as they had a synchromesh box and were therefore a bit easier to drive than Bristols. Tommy took us all around Wood Green and Tottenham [there was no driving school at WG] then we slowly went onto Bristol LDs to learn the art of a smooth change with a crash box. The LDs had a five speed box where 5th is an overdrive ratio, selected out of 4th rather than from the main gearbox gate. Therefore it was essential to make sure you did not stop in 5th because it is near impossible to get 4th out of fifth! Six months later we had our test around the west end of London with a Leyland PD2, BD 1139 (FJN 205) and we all got through. Now I was on the front and by this time the Bristol FLFs had started to arrive - the 251 had all the TVXs from 1571 to 1590 (80-99 TVX, later renumbered 2700-19).

When the first FLF arrived at WG in 1960 it was in the middle of the week and it was parked up by the canteen stairs on the left hand side just below the main garage doors, this is viewed from the office. As we had never seen a FLF before and being totally different from the rear platform style, all the shed staff were told to have a good look round her. The bus was WG 1571, 80 TVX, and she went to work on the following Saturday. Beyond this look round, there was no type training, we just went out and found by our own mistakes. We did find that due to the camber on the road at times the doors on the FLFs would not close, or we forgot to close them, so we would get a frantic knocking on the small cab window. *[From notes kept at the time by David Lang, webmaster of the fabulous [www.sct61.org.uk](http://www.sct61.org.uk) site, it appears that the initial batch of 20 FLFs were allocated 10 to WG, 8 to SD and the remaining 2 to BD)].*

One morning at about 1100 in the summer by this time we had a good few FLFs and we were working back to WG with one. I got into Rayleigh and pulled into the lay-by for the bus stop; I just sat and watched the traffic in my mirrors, waiting for the bell. The bell went and I eased out of the lay-by and into the traffic to turn left down Crown Hill to Rayleigh station. As I straightened up down the hill I got a mass of bells so I pulled into the nearside, opened the doors, got out and went round and onto the bus, when I got on there was a lot of laughter on the lower saloon. My conductor was at the back of the bus so I made my way to him, a woman

was stood by the rear emergency door, covered in white as were the punters sitting on either side of the door. By all accounts as I had eased away and turned left down the hill, the woman who had got on at the stop was holding a large cream cake in front of her had got into a slow trot and ran into the back of the bus with this cream cake in front of her. The cake promptly exploded and covered all around her and herself in thick cream! The punters were in fits of laughter as I was! She was laughing and said it was just one of those things and in a way it was her own fault as she should have sat down at the front of the bus. I went on down to the station and phoned Brentwood from a public phone box. They gave us a replacement bus in Brentwood High Street which was an LD. There were comments made about the state of the rear of the bus, so my conductor said when we spoke back in WG. We never heard any more about it and the punters were laughing for a long time about it.

I did earn good money with my double days and on a Saturday night if the office could not get a WG crew to cover a late run in, they would get a Brentwood crew to do it and as I had not long passed my test, they would give me three hours to run the crew back to Brentwood in my car, which gave me a bit more experience in driving. I remember the names of some of the staff - Tom Newbold was garage manager, Mr Amott and Bill Jackson traffic inspectors, Tom Flavell driving instructor/driver, Harry Winsor driver/private hire driver, Johnny Coulton, Tom Day, Harry Brocklebank, Bill Eves and Tom Worrell all drivers, Maureen Askem clippie, John Jackson conductor/trainer, John Clevleys conductor [who every Friday afternoon went up to the canteen and managed to lose his wages playing cards, as you might gather he was hopeless at cards], Pat clippie [did not like late turns] and Charles Jukes garage foreman; he used to come up that garage in a bus like there was no tomorrow! Jim Blazeby did the refuelling and washing of the buses and always wore a black beret. The wash was just inside the exit door on the right and lifted up and down over the bus from the roof of the shed.

The buses that I remember were the 1500s (Bristol Lodekkas, in both LD & FLF versions), the Leyland PD2s, the LSs which we would get now and again from WG and on the shorts from Southend, the L5Gs or as we called them "conker boxes" on the Southend shorts, and the old ex City Coach Company Daimler double deckers. The latter had pre-selector gearboxes which have a change speed pedal in place of a conventional clutch. As many drivers have found to their cost, if you did not move your feet quickly enough, they would give you a kick from the sprung loaded pedal. Woe betide the driver who forgot and tried to ride the pedal like a clutch! (Later when on LT, I discovered that their pre-selectors were air operated and didn't kick back).

Every year WG would send two or three open top deckers ex Southend to Epsom for the Derby and although I never got to go, by all accounts it was a fine day out sitting on the top deck watching the racing and eating the freshly prepared food. I think that my favourite bus was 236 LNO [BD 1541], the 30' long LDL model and I am glad that she is still with us in Canvey Museum and I do thank Craig Mara and his father for doing a good job in looking after her. It is a shame that 320 GPU [WG 1489, illustrated last month] with Cave-Browne-Cave heating never got into preservation as

she also was fine motor. I do think that the Lodekka's were a good tool and well built even with their crash boxes and a lot of what I learnt in those years with EN lasted me for the next fifty years.

To end with, a couple of short stories that took place in my time on EN. A Brentwood fitter was out on test with a Bristol K, having done some work on it, and he took it down the bank through Harold Wood but he knocked it out of gear and eventually the prop shaft came up through the floor and did a reasonable amount of damage, it was a good thing that he was running dead! What the outcome of this was, I do not know. We could not catch the RTs on the Greenline service up through Harold Wood - they would pass us like we were standing still, it was not so bad with 6 pot (6 cylinder engined bus) but with a 5 pot it was quite embarrassing. On one early afternoon start out of WG we had so much layover time in Brentwood that I can remember going to the pictures to see Elvis Presley in G.I Blues and then on another day, spending time window shopping up and down the High Street, but times have changed.

It always seemed a long way home on a dark foggy, rainy night in the middle of winter up through Battlesbridge into Wickford and very few wombles [passengers] about but it was a good job and I did enjoy it. I left the National in about 1962 as I wanted to go long distance HGV driving. I ran for Harry Lebus out of Tottenham and used to do Aberdeen, Inverness and up to Wick and Thurso. That lasted until 1969 when I went up to Manor House [the London Transport Recruitment Centre] as by this time I was married and my late wife June was nagging me about being away too long driving lorries. But that is another story, told on the Red RF site.