

Driving the X1 and Culturebus

Trevor Ryall

Trevor recalls his work as a part-timer for Ensign Bus, which included both Culturebus and some trips on the X1:

July 25th, 1986 was my first day driving for Ensignbus. I was told I was to drive on the Culturebus circuit [this is before Southend Transport took over]. To me, it seemed like diving into the deep end, not knowing how deep the end was. The route looked a bit daunting at first, but following a route familiarisation run, I then took over MLK 620L, a DMS class Daimler Fleetline and drove it without incident around the two and a half hour Culturebus circuit of central London. This DMS was numbered C202 in Ensign's dedicated Culturebus fleet.

These DMSs (plus ST's Van Hool Astromegas and hired Cardiff Olympians) had tape-recorded commentaries to describe and entertain passengers as the bus or coach passed various notable London landmarks. The driver activated each section of the tape using a foot switch, which was hit with his (or her) left heel. There was also a mute function where the driver could fast forward to a later section in the tape, where, for instance, the bus or coach had to divert from the prescribed route due to roadworks. That mute function came in useful as I will explain later.

I also drove various trips on Southend Transport's X1 service, and variations of it, as Ensign often loaned its drivers to ST to cover various coach duties, as well as on Ensign's London Pride tour which utilised open-top DMS Fleetlines.

Ensign had a close working relationship with Southend Transport, so it was that one day, after I had done a rounder on Culturebus, I reported to the St. James's Street office and was asked to take over a Southend Transport coach parked at Green Park. The job was to drive the coach empty to Aldgate Minories bus station, pick up commuters there and drive on the A13 to Southend.

The coach turned out to be a Duple Dominant bodied Leyland Leopard, fitted with an air-pedal operated semi-automatic gearbox. So I drove the Leopard across central London to Aldgate and pulled up at the bus stand, at the start of the evening peak. The coach soon filled with commuters: city workers returning home to Essex. What struck me was that the empty coach was quick to pull away from traffic lights. Now it was full of passengers, its progress could only be described as slow and stately. We pulled out of the Minories bus station, turned left to enter the clockwise one-way system and made steady lumbering progress along the Commercial Road. The journey itself was uneventful. The coach's performance improved markedly as more passengers left the coach at Basildon and Benfleet.

We arrived at Southend's bus station on time and the last passengers left the coach. Then I drove it to ST's garage and parked it on the fuel line behind some other coaches. These coaches turned out to be a mixed-bag of second-hand Leyland Leopards with Plaxton or Duple bodies, which I photographed as the opportunity was there. On later dates, I did the same duties, driving a Leyland Leopard to Southend. Sometimes the first pick-up was at Green Park, other times Aldgate.

I also clocked up some considerable miles driving ST's hired Cardiff Leyland Olympians. My notes record that on the 10th May 1987, I drove Cardiff Olympian B553 ATX on the Culturebus circuit; then on the 25th May, I drove sister vehicle B555 ATX on another Culturebus duty, then drove it empty to Southend. There were a number of Culturebus duties where I had the opportunity to drive an Astromega. On one occasion, I was getting a little bored with the repetition, so instead of crossing Lambeth Bridge northbound from the Imperial War Museum, I turned left onto the Albert Embankment and headed to Vauxhall Cross then around Vauxhall's one-way traffic system onto Vauxhall Bridge and resumed the usual route to Belgrave Road and Victoria. Just for the variation you understand. There were only a couple of Japanese tourists on the coach at the time who were none the wiser.

My notes also record that on the 28th March 1987, Ensign operated its roofbox RT3062 on the Culturebus circuit, immediately before Southend took over. And to close, my notes record that on 19th December 1987 at Leicester Square I photographed the last Culturebus journey worked by Cardiff Olympian B559 ATX.

This short story is featured in the book *X1 Southend to London: the rise and fall of a deregulation phenomenon*, by Richard Delahoy