

I Shall Be Going Spare!

by Alan 'Tebzy' Tebbitt

During my years at Eastern National's Chelmsford (CF) garage, no duty was too busy or arduous for me. The harder the shift, the more I liked it. What I didn't enjoy was 'Spare Duty'. For those unfamiliar with the workings of a bus company, 'Spare' was just what it said on the tin. You would sign on at the allotted time and wait for orders. This could mean sitting in the canteen for eight hours, and not do a thing. Most frustrating, and hence the title of this piece. When I started at CF, we had Spare duties at the following times, 0530-1330, 0600-1400, 0700-1500, 1100-1900, and 1600-2400. These were all crew duties, the OMO rota was too small to justify a spare and crews would cover any one man work that came up. Spares were necessary to cover any last-minute absences, either through sickness, or oversleeping, or anything untoward that cropped up during the day, accidents, breakdowns, etc. Our most normal function was 'up and in'. This occurred when late running was encountered. All of CF's town services were of the cross-town variety. The militant union at CF had a policy that if a bus was running more than ten minutes late, the crew would be relieved, or turned. The spare crew would then go 'up' to the terminus and then to the town centre and 'in' to the garage. The late running crew would be given another bus and pick up their time at the railway station. Covering crews failing to turn up for duty was surprisingly rare. Those events were always the subject of a post-mortem. Had the person actually phoned to say that they definitely weren't coming? Is it possible that they could turn up? And how long dare we leave it before we go out?

I was early spare (0530) one day when George Anagustopolis (Anag) failed to show for the 0600 53C to Tilbury Ferry. It was already 0610 before I was called and a mad scramble to get away. I pulled up at 'The Eagle' at Galleywood and a car stopped across my bows. Out stepped Anag, trying to tell me that the Regulator Eric 'Sonny' Calver had said that I should take his car back to CF. I knew Sonny well enough to realise when the wool was being pulled over my eyes, and I left a very annoyed Anag, fuming in the middle of the road. The irony was that, because we were short staffed, if he had just gone into the depot, he would have been found an alternative duty, and the powers that be would have been none the wiser. One day Mandy Miller failed to show, but it was not immediately obvious to the regulator, Michael Grafton. By the time I got away, I should have already been at Goldenacres, the outer terminus of local service 56. The Leyland National fairly flew along, and all of the punters were able to catch their usual train, much to Mr. Grafton's surprise, and, although he had organised another driver and bus, I carried on the next trip on time.

As I recalled in EBN 606, one Sunday morning we received a phone call to say that Southend based Bristol FLF 2721 (802 WVV) was lying in a ditch at East Hanningfield on service 11. It had taken some time for the conductor to find a telephone and the return journey was nearly due from Chelmsford. My driver, Fred Smith, and I were scrambled to cover the journey, our original instructions were to operate to Southend, and return 'dead' (i. e. out of service). We had a garage full of buses to pick from, and we chose FLF 2851 (NTW 944C), a well-known fast bus,



ready for a spirited run home. When we reached the scene of the mishap, there was a mobile Inspector in attendance. He told us to hand our bus over to the original SD crew, and return to CF on the next service bus. 2851 disappeared off in the direction of Southend and was not seen for some considerable time, its turn of speed obviously being welcomed by crews on the famous 251 route between Southend and London! 2721, a dog of a bus, was recovered to CF, checked over, and we suffered it until 2851 was reluctantly returned.

On another occasion I was the late (1600-2400) spare driver. This was in 1971, and the company had just received its first batch of Plaxton bodied Bristol RE coaches, some 47 seaters for day work, and some with less seats, for extended tours. Although very attractive vehicles, we were a little disappointed, because they lacked the power associated with the ECW bodied REs. Driver Bill Limm, a tour driver based at Brentwood, had one of the new coaches on a private tour. His passengers were travel agents from across Europe, guests of ABTA, who were being shown the sights. Bill phoned from the Esso Hotel, Coventry, his first night's stop, to complain that the lack of power was causing embarrassment to him, and the company, in his own words "it wouldn't pull Granny off the toilet". I was allocated our own 47 seat Plaxton 428 (LWC 979J), my instructions being to pick up Harold (?), the fuel pump genius from Central Works. We were to hot foot it to Coventry, and for Harold to try to work his magic on the pump on Bill's coach. Failing that, I was to pass 428 over to Bill, and drag his coach home. Our outward journey had Harold tut tutting as we were passed by everything from Ribble Atlanteans, to heavy trucks. Luckily, he was successful in opening up the pump on Bill's coach, and, after a glass of coke in the hotel bar, we headed home. Harold agreed to adjust the pumps on all of the Plaxtons, so quite a result. It was now past midnight, and an exhausted Harold nodded off to sleep, and, as his eyelids got heavy, so did my boot. The RE picked up speed dramatically, although not to the standard of the older coaches, but we had a guarantee that things would improve.

In all my years, I can only remember making spares cover me on two occasions. One was a Saturday oversleep, the 0600 service 33 to Dunmow, which got driver Fred Coppen out of the canteen on a snowy morning. The other was when I was a conductor. Gardening one afternoon I was stung on the wrist by a wasp. I reported for work the next day, but halfway through my first trip, service 55, with a Bristol LD, it became obvious that I could not operate the Setright machine, nor put my hand into the cash bag, due to the swelling, and my driver phoned from Springfield for a replacement conductor. The spare crew were Paul and Sylvia Wizik, he a giant of a man, very protective of his wife. They were annoyed that she had been called out and stormed across the bus station to confront me. Luckily, when she saw my wrist, her maternal instincts kicked in.

Readers of EBN will probably be familiar with the A127 London to Southend Arterial road. Nowadays, all of the junctions are slip roads and flyovers, but it was not always so!

As a child, I remember catching service 34 to Pitsea, which crossed the A127 at a crossroads next to The Cricketers pub at Nevendon. But my worst memories are of the crossing at Warley Street on service 40 Chelmsford to Tilbury Ferry. The procedure was that when the first carriageway was clear, the bus would pull into the central reservation and wait for a gap in the traffic before completing the crossing. The front half of the bus would be in the reservation but the back half would be blocking the outside ("fast") lane of the main road.

As a conductor, I always made sure I was sitting or kneeling on the bulkhead seat behind the cab on LDs, as it was not safe on the platform end. Not long after I had passed my test, probably January '69, I had CF duty 2. This was the 0600 Chelmsford to Tilbury service 53C, and return as a 40 via Brentwood. I had one of the newer semi-automatic FLFs, with the cream interiors (including cab), which were hideous to drive at night. I approached the A127 crossing with trepidation. There was patchy fog, dense in places and, as I stood at the give way line, traffic appeared suddenly and quite fast out of the fog.

I had several attempts to pull out, but the thought of half of my bus sticking out across the carriageway was making my mouth dry and my heart pound. Wild horses would not have dragged me across the junction. I remembered from my journeys on the X10 there was a flyover to the west. But where? I wasn't sure, or how far, but I didn't care. I hauled the steering wheel to the left and accelerated up the A127 and, after what seemed an eternity, I spotted the Cranham slip road. Up and over the top, then back eastwards, until Warley Street loomed out of the fog. I had no idea how late we now were and, frankly, I was not bothered!

On arrival at Brentwood station, a gentleman jumped off of the bus and climbed onto the step we used for changing the blinds. I slid my window back expecting a tirade of abuse but he reached in and shook my hand. "Well done, young man", he said, and I could see the relief in his face. At all the other stops through Brentwood I received smiles and waves from my passengers. They obviously all lived in fear of that terrible crossroads!



The cab of preserved FLF coach 2614 (AVX 975G) showing the cream paintwork to which Alan refers.

Chris Stewart.

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Revolting Chelmsfordians!

Another Memory From A Former Chelmsford Busman.

Alan Tebbit, BEM.

These days we accept protests as part of our culture, the world seems full of NIMBYs. New road schemes, building projects, airports etc., are all prey to protesters, the green lobby and traditionalists. But who can object to a bus route passed the door? Lots of people, believe me.

When Eastern National proposed a diversion of service 351 via Shenfield Station, (350), via Oliver Road, it seemed an easy thing to do, but the locals did not want smelly buses past their doors, and let us staff know, in no uncertain terms. They accepted us, reluctantly, in the end.

The saga of Moulsham Lodge Estate, Chelmsford, in the mid 60s, was a different story. The estate was evolved as affordable housing, to encourage young business people out of developing London, and was aimed at the commuter market. When Eastern National first entered the project, they concentrated on the main road through the site, Gloucester Avenue. The 44 and 44A services were routed via Old Moulsham, across the A12 by-pass, Longstomps Avenue, and onto the estate. Arriving opposite the shopping parade (Lewis Drive), they would change to a 44B, and continue back to town via Beehive Lane and Baddow Road. The 44B would terminate at the lay-by at the shops (Lucas Avenue), and change to a 44 or 44A, a very suitable and convenient way of working. Then the Ministry of Transport decided that the crossing of the A12 was dangerous, and closed the junction. The bus company's solution was to introduce new routes 51/a/b, via Wood Street, providing the west end of the estate with an irregular service. The 44 was terminated in Old Moulsham, referred to by the company as Oaklands Park. The 44A was diverted via the 44B route, and now was a fifteen-minute headway service, terminating at the shopping parade. This created the problem of turning the buses around, the obvious route being via Brian Close and Lewis Drive, to rejoin Gloucester Avenue.

The residents of those two roads were not amused to have four buses an hour past their doors, whilst still having to walk to the old terminus to catch them. I went out on the first Sunday, to observe what opposition there was. Lewis Drive was a bit of a slalom, with cars parked alternatively on either side of the road, with barely enough room to wiggle through. Added to this, a gentleman in a blue Ford Anglia car, met the bus in a tight spot, and there was a long discussion as to who should reverse. On the second journey, the same chap met the bus in the same manner. By the third journey, I produced my camera, and told him that I had photographic evidence of his deliberate obstruction, (I didn't), and we didn't see him again. The protests didn't last long, and were quite good natured.

It was quite a different story when the company decided to extend the route a year or so later, to Heath Drive. Another estate, Tile Kiln, was being built to the south of Moulsham Lodge, and was beginning to be a source of income. It would be nearly 20 years before Tile Kiln got its own service, using acceptable (to the residents) Ford Transits. We road staff knew we were in for a hard time from day one, the garden fence at the terminal point had a four-foot slogan painted on it "BAN THE BUSES". It led my regular driver, C. E. Kohombham-Wickrema, (Percy), to comment that we are off to see the banshees, every time we had a 44A or B.

The protest started straight away, the usual parked cars, and the guy who lived opposite the stop wanted to get his Volvo estate out every time a bus stopped, meaning moving backwards and forwards to let him out, and he was back on his drive by the time the next bus arrived. The next phase was the pushchairs. The young mothers would cross the road in front of the parked bus, then cross back, in an endless convoy, preventing the bus from moving. We conductors made sure that we had a pack of playing cards with us, as sometimes all four of the allocated buses would be parked nose to tail in Heath Drive. It seemed strange to me that the people who did not want buses near their homes, were now collecting them. We crews were remarkably tolerant. The only reaction that I recall came from driver Monty Filby, a larger than life character, who saw the funny side of any situation. I was lucky enough to work the last three 44Bs, 21/22 and 2305 off of Heath Drive one night. Each time we arrived, the engine was cut about 50 yards short of the stop, and we coasted to a halt, the cab door was clicked shut, and a whispered conversation ensued. On departure, the cab door clicked shut again, and we pulled away on virtual tickover. At 2305 Monty shouted at the top of his voice that it was time to go, the cab door refused to shut, and had to be banged three times. The engine was reluctant to start, and needed full revs, and then the clutch refused to fully disengage, needing full power. I noticed bedroom lights coming on, and knew that our local superintendent's in-tray would soon be full of letters with Heath Drive addresses. Most of us remained calm, and just let them get on with it.

Things took an unfortunate turn one evening. A husband and wife crew were on the last 44B, and when they reached Heath Drive, a small crowd was waiting for them, and started arguing with the conductress. Naturally her husband came to her defence, keeping the protesters off the platform. Whilst he was thus engaged on the nearside of the bus, someone crept up on the offside, and emptied a bag of either sand or sugar into the fuel tank. On departure, the bus soon spluttered to a halt. The crew walked together to a phone box, the driver not wishing to leave his wife to the mercy of the mob. By the time the breakdown truck had them all back to the depot, it was well past midnight. It was time for retaliation, and the union instructed that all 44A/Bs would terminate before the estate. It was not long before civil war broke out, those people denied a bus service, set about those who were denying them. Very soon peace reigned, and the wail of the banshees was silenced. And the guy with the white Volvo, didn't need to go out in it!



Picture Bristol LD5G, 2492 heads out of Lewis Drive onto Gloucester Avenue, having run the gauntlet of parked cars, and a belligerent gent in a Ford Anglia. **Alan Tebbit**

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That Clacton KSW5G Explained – Possibly!

Alan Tebbit BEM.

Terry Challis commented on a picture in EBN675, of Eastern National KSW5G 1364 at Clacton, and expressed some surprise at a double decker being on a service that was a normally single deck run. He may possibly be right in suggesting that it was a substitute for a broken-down bus, but there is a more likely explanation. The 53 route from Clacton to Tilbury Ferry was indeed a single decker route, because of traversing the Langdon Hills between Laindon Station, and Rookery Corner, Stanford-le-Hope. The company never allowed double decks to use those hills. In 1964 the route was diverted through Basildon, and FLFs became the norm, with the occasional Guy Arab. On the old route, during the summer, it fell to Chelmsford depot to substitute a decker if loadings were expected to justify it. 1364 was a CF bus, and would have probably come onto the route in this way. Although it is screened up for Tilbury Ferry, it would be changed for a saloon on reaching Chelmsford. When the substitute decker arrived at Clacton, usually a spare saloon would be put onto the service, and the decker would be parked up, ready for the rush of day trippers at 4.30 or 5.30pm. If there was no spare car, the Regulator would leave it on the service, and phone CF to warn them to change it over, and beg that it be turned around, and worked back, ready for the afternoon rush.

The substitute bus from CF would usually be one of the oldest, laying over between the peak hours. I recall when I was 5 or 6, travelling to Clacton on a pre-war K, and in Wivenhoe we met a "Tilbury" bound car from the same batch. CF would have as many as 3 foreign saloons parked up for the day, and it was not unusual for them to cover the peak hours workings of the deckers that were sunning themselves at Clacton. It could be as late as 8.45pm, before the last one took up its regular duty back on the 53s.

CF would bring on a couple of crews in on summer days as WAR (work as required). They usually signed on about 9am (0900 in modern parlance). The 9.15 am 53 to Clacton would often have two double decker reliefs, one marked Clacton (53), and the other Walton (105). Through bookings were available between services 53 and 105. The crews were instructed to "work just in front of the service car, until you are full, then go for it. When you arrive, report to the Regulator for instructions". The conductors would call out "Clacton" or "Walton only", and once loaded, the driver would choose the quickest route to the seaside. Most would follow the Avenue of Remembrance (A12) at Colchester, then the A133 through Weeley. My Dad would always cut through Colchester, past St. Johns bus park, and the Corporation depot, crossing the Colne at Hythe Quay. Then from Wivenhoe Park Corner, he would take the new road to Arlesford, and the Toosey (St. Osyth) by-pass into Clacton. He also knew the back road into Walton, missing all of the traffic jams.

On the journey the conductor would canvass his passengers about their return journeys, and, arriving at the destination he would tell the Regulator that their orders were to return at whatever time was best for the majority of their people. He would have forgotten the words "report for instructions". Once when we arrived at Walton, Inspector Rose, the I/c, asked if Dad, and his conductor Walter Bye, would mind running a relief to Clacton, as there was a long queue waiting, then hot-foot it back to join your families on the beach. He added the warning "Don't hang about in Clacton bus station, or that old beggar will have you running out to Jaywick and back all afternoon". Rosey was a lovely bloke, who lived in a thatched bungalow, right next to the depot. He had an immaculate garden, which I believe he tended to in the company's time. In an emergency everyone knew where to find him. When it was time to come home, the crew would know where their last pick up had been in the morning, so the shout was "first stop Hatfield Peveral" or wherever it would be, and it would be toe down all the way.

Back in those days, late '40s, early '50s, there were no concessionary fares for staff, apart from journeys to and from duty, all trips had to be paid for, but on 5 occasions per year, Dad could apply for a Depot Day Pass, for all of the family. We would go to Southend for Christmas shopping, and Clacton, Walton, West Mersea and Dovercourt in the summer, hopefully when Dad was on WAR. My favourite was Dovercourt, but this always meant catching the 9.15 service bus, and changing at St. Johns bus park in Colchester. It was an advertised connection. On one occasion, due to heavy traffic through Marks Tey and Stanway, the 51 had already left by the time we got to the bus park, so Mum went to enquire the time of the next bus. The Regulator apologised for the missed connection and phoned through to the depot. Shortly a Bedford OB coach appeared, driven by a spare duty driver. We were shown on board, and set off post haste for Dovercourt, our own family transport. Would we have had such great service if the Inspector knew that we were on a freebie? The driver found it most amusing. By taking the direct route, we arrived before the service bus. Normally we would get off in Fronks Road and walk down to the boating lake. On this occasion we were dropped right by the lake, and Mum bought our saviour a cup of tea at the cafe. As he pointed out, there was no point in rushing back, he might get caught for another trip.

The other concession was a Holiday Pass, 8 days for the entire family. We used to take a self-catering holiday at Jaywick Sands, it was a lovely place back then. We would travel there and back free of charge on the 53. Although we made good use of the pass in the week, my siblings, and parents, wanted to spend time on the beach. I would happily have spent all day riding the Bristol G05G open toppers between Jaywick and Holland on Sea, but I had to have an adult with me to use the pass. We did go to Harwich one day and took the Ferry across to Felixstowe dock. On the ride to the town centre on an open top K, the conductor admitted that his eyesight was bad, and he couldn't see if it said National or Counties on the pass, so another free ride, they obviously had an identical system (nearly). A few years later it didn't work on a Hants & Dorset FLF in Bournemouth!

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