

I'll Be At The End Of The Bar!

More recollections from a former Chelmsford Busman.

Alan Tebbit BEM.

No, that is not a night out with the boys, or a clandestine meeting with an attractive lady! The bar referred to was a solid iron pole, with a ring at each end, for attaching a poorly bus to the recovery truck. When being towed, the most important thing was to keep that bar straight, as it was usually the only way to stop the bus. If you got the bar at an angle, the results could be disastrous. The old wartime Ford Canada truck, that had spent my schooldays parked in Chelmsford depot, had been replaced by a smart AEC Matador. The old RAF body had been refurbished with most of an ECW Queen Mary coach body. Running on trade plates 739 TW, the beast spent most of its time awaiting the call to action, alongside the wash bay at CF. During my time as a driver at that depot, I had several memorable journeys on the end of that bar!



The Chelmsford recovery lorry was built by EN in 1959 using an ex RAF AEC Matador with a new body built from part of the 1952 ECW coachwork from MXB 738, a Tillings AEC Regal rebuild. These two photos, from **the late Bob Beaumont's collection** and believed to have been taken by him, show an unrebuilt Matador at Central Works (almost certainly the one in question, from the age of the photo, the other later Matador not being acquired until 1965) and on display at the Essex Show in or about 1964. Research by **Chris Stewart**.

The first run out was with Barry Cameron when Frank Bowen broke down at Moreton with an MW DP. I had just finished for the day, but was asked to run a spare bus out, and await recovery. By 8pm we were heading back to town, but Barry decided to stop for his meal break at the Maltsters Arms in Willingale. Here we two young bachelors met a couple of local lasses, escorted them home through the darkened village, and made it back to CF as the early buses were being run out!

My next run out with Barry proved to be a traumatic experience. Having arrived back in the depot just before midnight one Sunday, Barry asked if I could help him in a recovery. I was in my white, private hire, dust jacket, which was not so white by the morning. An Eastern Counties Bedford VAM coach, on service to Ipswich, had collided with a broken down Austin A40 car, on the A12 at Kelvedon. Both vehicles burst into flames on impact. The coach driver and his passengers all escaped, but the lady passenger in the car, was trapped in the burning vehicle, and died. What was left of the coach had to be suspended towed to the Police garage at Stanway. On return to the scene, we stopped to check that we had not dropped any tools in the dark. There we found the deceased lady's handbag with its contents scattered, and we handed it in at Chelmsford police station.

A planned journey, a nice rest day, was to go to Northampton with Dennis Parish. United Counties were suffering maintenance problems, and as a result had hired in some of the coach FLFs. One of these had failed, and as the UCOC fitters were busy with their own problems, our FLF had been abandoned. Dennis was a very steady driver, a joy to follow, but we did have one incident. Vision is very restricted when on tow. You are sitting only 8 feet behind a high, wide vehicle, and concentrating on keeping the bar straight. Rounding a bend in White Roding, the old A414 being the main route in those pre-M25 days, Dennis encountered a parked car, and had to swerve to avoid it. My first view of the offending vehicle was when the rear of the lorry cleared it, and I had a split second to react. I hauled on the wheel, no power steering, and just missed it. It took a good half mile to get the bar back in line.

Ted Patience was good at making excuses. An expert fitter, but fond of finding reasons to avoid doing jobs. After my 14-hour day as vehicle output, I was not too keen to go out to recover a bus. The breakdown was at Henham. One of Bishops Stortford's converted MW coaches of the OO batch, had suffered a small fire, soon extinguished, that rendered the brakes inoperative. Ted, a giant of a man, and me, slightly built, set off in the Matador (cont.)

We had only got as far as Duke Street traffic lights, when the thick fog proved too much for Ted's suddenly failing eyesight. He climbed across the engine, and lifted me into the driver's seat. Learning to drive that beast, in the dark and fog, was interesting. Upon arrival at Henham, Ted was aghast to find what he was dealing with, the fleet number meant nothing to him. He had a cursory look into the equipment box, and declared that he hadn't got a towing dog to fit this type! Climbing up into the lorry cab, eyesight improved, he called down, "Well, mate. One of us will have to drive it into Stortford with no brakes". I was successful in this, but on the way back home, Ted's eyes proved inadequate again.



Bob Lockwood was probably our most conscientious fitter, normally placid, but he was known to 'lose it' if anyone crossed him. I remember a PL whistling to attract his attention, then jumped to avoid the sledgehammer skidding towards him. Bob and I were called out to Graces Cross, Sandon, where FLF MN 2823, had failed to stop when the vehicle in front did. The passengers had travelled in on a 36 bus, and the return 31 journey had been covered by CF. The damage to the front of 2823 was such that the cowl had to be removed to insert the towing dog. Bob had several attempts with spanners, but decided that a hacksaw was the only alternative. He was busy sawing away, when a black Austin car, company car, pulled up. I was able to warn Bob that the chief engineer, Rodney Hawkins, was on his way. The spanners came back into play. Just then a policeman came from the back of the bus and said "I thought you were cutting that off". I was able to put my foot on a lump hammer, before it was used as a weapon. We managed to recover 2823 without further incident.

My final tow in was from Billericay. I had been taking Leyland National wheelchair coach CF 2200 to Basildon. It was to be shown to the council and disabled groups, to prompt some funding for a similar vehicle to be allocated to BN. It was a freezing cold day, and a fuel line froze up. A young fitter, I can't recall his name, came out to recover me. We were travelling so fast, that I left the driver's seat crossing the humpback bridge at Stock Brook, the only time I ever achieved this. Fortunately that was the last time I was towed by that gentleman, and the only time I felt any fear at the end of the bar, apart from odd occasions in licensed premises.

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Tebbit's Tipples

Alan Tebbit, BEM

A Slow Recovery!

Another in an occasional series of a former busman's recollections.

I was just knocking off shortly after 7pm one night when a phone call came in from Frank Bowen, who was returning from Matching Green on a service 46 bus. He had broken down between Moreton and Fyfield. This would have been 1969/70, when I was still in my early 20s. I was sent out immediately with a spare Bristol MW, to hand over to Frank and await the breakdown truck. The duty fitter that night was Barry Cameron, a lad of about my age.

By just before 8pm, the bus (I believe it was 1406, MW DP) was hitched up and we set off. When we got to the Maltsters Arms at Willingale, Barry decided he was due for a meal break, so we went into the pub for a cheese roll and a "shandy". There were two of the village maidens (!) in the bar, so we engaged them in conversation. By the time they left, it was dark so we two "gentlemen" escorted them home for a coffee, or at least something hot!

We arrived back at CF to find the early turn out and fitter searching for an AEC Matador lorry and an MW DP! No questions were ever asked. Barry slunk off to get some kip. I cycled home, washed, shaved and changed and cycled straight back for my 0715 start!

We never saw the young ladies again and avoided the Maltsters Arms for a long time!



As well as being on the Chelmsford to Harlow 46, Matching Green was served by a Thursdays and Saturdays only 348 from Bishop's Stortford until 11 December 1965 (a journey now only possible via Harlow, using ECC contracted route 47 of Regal Busways). A dual purpose MW5G, 1408 (1256 EV), had just arrived on the last outward journey that day and was photographed before its return to BS by the late **Bob Beaumont**. New in 1959, this MW 'luxury' (to use the ECW terminology) was from the same batch as 1406 referred to by Alan. It was withdrawn in 1976 and passed to Robinson of Appleby for spares. The AEC Matador he mentions was presumably what became 0101, the one rebuilt with parts of the ECW body from an MXB-registered Bristol LL. Bob took some interesting photos of this and the donor coach at Central Works and hopefully we'll find room for these in a future EBN. [notes by **Chris Stewart**]