

Spotting Days

A story from Alan M Watkins

I came from a one parent family which was no more fun in the 40s and 50s than it is today. My mother worked full time so I had to fend for myself and find my own entertainment which in my case mostly meant travelling around by bus.

Five shillings was sufficient for a "day out" then, six or seven shillings a luxury. My first ventures were to Colchester because it had the highest concentration of independents.

The journey always started from Billericay with a 51-53 to Colchester - the half return was around two shillings and threepence. Then I would park myself in St John's Street Bus Station and just watch proceedings. An additional shilling would take me to Tollesbury and back via Osbornes or out to Crockleford Heath and back by Sage's delightfully decrepit Leyland TD - price was worth it for the engine noises alone.

Somewhere you could always find a meal (pie and mash was around 9d in most places) but I usually took sandwiches in my school satchel.

Sometimes I was lucky enough to have ten shillings for the day and then I could broaden my horizons considerably. I managed Bury St Edmunds and back (via a Chambers Guy) and Ipswich and back via Eastern Counties 221. The 221 was a wonderfully scenic route in places especially around Mistley and Manningtree, made all the better by being on the top deck of a K5G!

Of course I suppose today the thought of a 12/13 year old wandering about all day on his own might be worrisome but this was a different age.

The only restriction I had was that I had to be back from wherever in time for the 6.30 p.m. from Colchester to Tilbury Ferry as that was the last through bus to Billericay. I could get two later vehicles going to Chelmsford only and then change on to service 4 going to Pitsea but that invalidated my return ticket so this wasn't really an option.

I can only recall two miscalculations, both of which by luck I survived. During a half-term I travelled out to Stoke by Nayland on one of the back road routes of Norfolk's (it was a full fronted Austin I think which I had never ridden on before and never did again) and then discovered, to my horror, that there was no bus back for hours!

It was a blisteringly hot day, that I do remember, and so I set out to walk back to Colchester which was probably a daft enterprise but there we are. I'd got about two miles along the way - all I can remember is that it was in the afternoon - when I heard behind me the unmistakeable note of a Gardner engine.

Hurtling down the road and going like the proverbial bat out of hell was an Eastern Counties J05G with a "tin bible" indicator showing Colchester. The route number was chalked in a circle on the board (I am pretty certain it was Service 246). I ran across the road and waved frantically at it. Amazingly it stopped but it was going so fast that it stopped rather a long way down the road! I remember I had to run after it. I was the only passenger and sat on the front nearside seat all the way to Colchester. I was also delighted to receive a Willebrew ticket.

The other thing that fascinated me was that at the back of the bus were a pile of hinged tin destinations for affixing to the front. Later on I learned that these "market day" duties into Colchester on a variety of routes were nearly all operated by Hadleigh outstation. I was lucky, however, because that was the only Eastern Counties journey in the Nayland area for another week!

The other miscalculation I made was more serious. One afternoon I caught Heath's OB to West Bergholt. The service ended at their little garage (they had about three vehicles I think). I bought a return but then discovered to my horror that their next bus back to Colchester was not until 7.30 pm.

The driver said: "Go across the road and wait for Chambers bus at 5.15." How much is it I asked? "Eightpence for you," said the driver. Unfortunately I only had 6d left and when I explained that the driver delved into his cash bag, gave me two pennies and said: "Now you have eight pence, pay it back next time". We sent the two pence to them by post.

At some stage I acquired some of the local timetables that were produced in the London Transport area. Bishops Stortford looked interesting I thought and was easy to get to via the old EN Service 8 from Chelmsford through the Rodings. So one bitterly cold day I embarked on such a trip. Bishops Stortford probably had more rural services than any other EN depot but the "Bus Station" and depot were quite small compared with some.

You could also see some London Country RT's (which somehow looked strangely out of place in Bishops Stortford) and of course there were Green Line coaches going to London. I think these were some of the "new" RF's at the time (crew operated of course).

As the day wore on it got colder and colder and it started to snow. To try and keep warm I went on a walkabout and walked through some sort of shopping alley and at the other end saw a large car park which was virtually deserted.

There was, however, one bus. It was an OWB of Premier Travel, empty and with the folding door shut. On the front it said Manuden. I always carried a notebook and pencil with me and I noted down the "owner's address": 15 Market Hill, Cambridge. I can still see the snowflakes settling on the bonnet! I didn't know it then but I was later to learn that the crew would almost certainly have been in Bob's Cafe.

That night I wrote asking for their timetables and enclosing a 1/- Postal Order. I asked how many vehicles they had. A few days later I got their timetables (stage and express) together with a duplicated Fleet List! On the timetables someone had written "saloon buses usually" or "double deck buses usually" over certain routes.

The rest as they say is history and it started my interest in Premier and eventually led to me working for them.

Now here's a funny thing! In previous ramblings I recounted how I cleared the loft of discarded Premier Travel material at Haverhill. Among that stuff I found my original letter of all those years before which was a very spooky experience! On it, in his unmistakable hand Mr Lainson had written: "Timetables and fleet list sent."

[A longer version of this story is at [#31, Discovering Premier Travel](#)]

Another ramble:

When I was eight (1950) my mum and I went on holiday to a caravan site between East Runton and Cromer. One evening we caught the Eastern Counties OB up to Pretty Corner, a delightful part of Upper Sheringham where there are some wonderful walks through the woods.

Just before 10 pm we waited for the bus back - and waited and waited. At 10.30 in the dark we set off to walk back. It was about five and a half miles to go.

After nearly an hour we reached the main road Sheringham-Cromer road and continued to trudge onwards (no street lights). I heard a noise a way behind us and said: "Mum, there's a bus coming." She said: "No dear, there won't be a bus. It 11.30 - that's far too late for a bus out here."

I persisted: "It's a bus, Mum. It's a LEYLAND bus." (I had heard a very familiar gear change a long way away).

So we crossed over to the left hand side of the road and as we did so an Eastern Counties PD1 came hurtling round a corner at a rate of knots like some huge blazing galleon.

We both flailed our arms at it. I think we took the driver by surprise because he stopped quite a way down the road. We ran after it and jumped on board - the only passengers.

"That was a bit of luck" said the conductor. "It was" said my Mum. "Bit of luck for me," said the conductor. "I just about to do me waybill."

It was the last Hunstanton-Cromer 36 of the night running home from Brancaster - the last bus in Cromer garage (about midnight).

Of course this ready identification by a young bus enthusiast was only to be expected from someone who heard the sound of a PD1 engine almost every day.....my Mum never doubted my ability to identify engine noises and notes after that.

More tales . . .

I was 13, caught the Eastern National 4 from Billericay to Pitsea (Railway Station) at 35 past the hour after it had reversed round into Chapel Street, Billericay, with a waving conductor (after someone was killed by a reversing City Coach) andyaaaayyyy!!!discovered Campbell's of Pitsea. Then, as now, there wasn't a lot else to discover in Pitsea. Usually KSW and sometimes one of them new Lodekka things on Service 4.

PITSEA
Billericay
Wickford 4

Or if lucky a high radiator K saying
PITSEA STN
Billericay
Wickford

With no route number.

Opposite "Pitsea Stn" were J.W. Campbell & Sons. Abandoned Albions parked all over the place, some in decay. Several tipper lorries saying J.W.Campbell & Sons (Sand and Ballast Merchants, Haulage Contractors).

The "Office" looked like an ordinary red brick villa to me. I shoved open the door, anyway, and there was large wooden counter, behind which mounted on a wall was a huge wooden cabinet filled with Punch Tickets in various hues.

I had a return ticket (half fare 11d Return) back to Billericay and so I boldly asked if I could have a set of their timetables (I had three shillings left). The lady behind the counter handed over various timetables and said there was no charge for them.

I asked if I could have a set of their Bell Punch tickets. "I don't know," she said. "You'll have to ask Mr Campbell. He's out in the yard. He's about to go to Hadleigh."

Out I went and found an elderly gentleman with a shock of completely white hair peering into the engine of a double decker carrying the Albion badge with Hadleigh on the front.

"Are you Mr Campbell, Sir" I said (We were trained to do Sir in those days). "I am" he said. "How can I help you young un?"

"Please Mr Campbell I have all your timetables and could I please have one of each of your tickets? The lady in your office told me to ask you."

"Of course you can. Come with me."

Back to the "Office" we went.

Mr Campbell: "Give this young man one pack of each ticket Mrs King."

I still have the timetables and still have the tickets.

What a nutter I am!

I suppose it is possible to have a great day in Pitsea in 2008 but that one took some beating at the time.

School days . . .

I went to school from Hutton Essex to Stamford Hill (my school was happily located absolutely next door to the Grey Green HQ at No 55, we were No 53).

Each morning I waited at Hunters Chase, Hutton, Essex, for whatever vehicle the City Coach Company would throw at me going to London (Wood Green) or Wood Green in the case of most of the single deckers clutching my 5 day Scholars Ticket to be punched in the appropriate place by the punch on the top of the Insert Setright and handed back to me.

Then I settled back as the City Coach Company glided me into the London Transport world - busy Romford, up the Eastern Avenue, Gants Hill roundabout where you saw (if lucky) the LT PD1's on Route 20, then up to the Traffic Lights at Wanstead where (if lucky) you saw the LT Guy's setting off for Woolwich Ferry on Route 101 and then shortly after that you had your first chance of Trolleybuses.

I got off at Broad Lane, Tottenham, looked right, looked left and looked right again and safely crossed the road (I must have done otherwise I wouldn't be posting this) and went to the Trolleybus stop where I boarded the first thing heading towards Stamford Hill - albeit 643, 543, 649.

It was fun if a 627 Smithfield came along first or a 623 to Mansion House - because they had the road and swept round to the right. The 543/643/649 conductors had to get off the platform and change the points to Stamford Hill by pulling down on the point link and leap back on again without the trolley stopping which many did, including the girls, with some style.

Regardless: "Half to Stamford Hill please" - a white one and a halfpenny ticket torn from the rack and subjected to the fare stage "ping" by the Bell Punch and headed London Transport T&T - under the bridge and within five minutes I was at school. I still have some of those tickets.

Cross the road: Look left, look right, look right again (and actually look left again to see what was outside the Grey Green HQ where they parked on the forecourt).

Repeat process on the way home. Yes, I was very lucky. It was an early passion which has never left me.

I can even remember being thrilled when a *new* Seddon swept into Broad Lane from Wood Green going to WICKFORD - that would do me and so I was shaken to death and my ears assaulted by a combination of rattling bodywork and a Perkins diesel engine all the way home.

What joy!