

MacBraynes Memories

More stories from Alan M Watkins

Wonderful company to work for though! Wonderful team spirit - I wasn't there at the end but I wonder how long it took to disappear?

Ten vehicles on a summer's day in the Glasgow Works holiday weeks Glasgow - Ardrishaig/Campbeltown - two conductors to cover them. One or two hired in from Barton!

It seems a long time ago. 7 am start to begin loading the bootsticking off the "freight waybills", loading the steel bank boxes for little bank branches on the way, the Stage Service conductor with his numbered set of Royal Mail keys to open and clear the wayside post boxes.....

Taking fares was almost inconsequential.....

I actually think that MacBrayne were possibly pretty much unique in this Sceptre'd Isle.

Without doubt the most awesome scenery to work in and we once caught a glimpse, just a glimpse, of a Scottish Wildcat and not many people have done that. The driver stopped the bus but it was gone. Flashed across us just as dawn was breaking. In over 50 years in the area he'd never seen one either there weren't any passengers.

129 vehicles and over 30 depots, except that most of the "depots" were one vehicle dormy sheds. No vehicle left uncovered, however remote - the one at Kilchoan was built next to the driver's house, the Glasgow based teams of travelling mechanics (buses, lorries, steamers), the lorry drivers who were bus conductors, the bus conductors who were lorry drivers, the people who had spent all their life working for the company as had his father before him, the Insert Setright tickets with the highest overprints ever known (Glasgow Numerical Printing Co Ltd).

Fairly unique anyway.

MACBRAYNES FOR THE HIGHLANDS

And more tales . . .

Drivers/conductors for Macbrayne had to sign the Official Secrets Act at the time the Royal Mail was an official government department (Her Majesty's Royal Mail, anyone remember that?) and so you became a temporary employee of the then General Post Office because many duties involved you clearing roadside post boxes.

Conductors/drivers were issued with GPO numbered keys to clear the numbered rural roadside boxes and place them in the mailbag (padlocked to the nearest available stanchion and, yes, you had the padlock key as well) and also to pick up the mailbags from various rural post offices).

These were divided into three types of bags (printed in black print on the front of them and I believe at the time stitched together by other guests of Her Majesty's government in prisons).

One was marked: Letters/Small Parcels, another was marked Parcels and the third and most important was marked REGISTERED LETTERS, the latter containing either cash, cheques or banker's drafts or something of real value.

The first two went into the boot. The Registered Letter stuff went into the bag on the bus or into the Mail Compartment (if the bus had one). If it did it have a Mail Compartment it was guarded by bars also opened by a key issued to the driver/conductor.

The then Clydesdale Bank regularly used MacBraynes out of Glasgow and Inverness to send money notes to their rural branches.

Those were the days Tony! "Clydesdale Bank £10,000 in notes" the bag said. This was pre-Securicor of course.

Stuffed into the boot, dear chap, and faithfully delivered on each and every occasion I encountered same to either Inverary or Lochgilphead.

Your sign on for the 9 a.m. Glasgow-Tarbert was 7 a.m. partially so you could "organise" the boot (aka last in, first out) The driver did not turn up until 8.30 a.m.

Did anyone else have travelling mechanics I wonder?

A MacBrayne bus used to meet the BEA plane on Benbecula and transferring mail etc. First flight in was around 10.15 in the morning and both Lochmaddy and Lochboisdale sent vehicles to it both carrying mail for onward transit and collecting whatever the plane brought plus of course passengers either way - not many of those even in the Summer. They sometimes sent a lorry, too.

Unless they have improved it, it was a single-track approach road to Balivanich Airfield in those days.

The thing about MacBraynes was that it was amazingly integrated between steamers, buses, lorries, airports. On all coastal routes and the Islands it was the "steamer times" that more or less dictated the freight and bus timetables.

What they did they did extremely well in my opinion. The locals moaned about the fares I think but it was a highly respected company (and highly efficient, I would say). It really was an "institution" and there is no doubt that it provided an absolute lifeline to some very remote communities whether it was passengers going shopping or a farmer getting his potatoes to somewhere far flung (i.e. the Mainland!). Or me delivering the Argyllshire Gazette!

It's sad that it was broken up but we live in an era of change and that sort of total involvement I don't think will come again.

Macbrayne were a highly efficient company, I thought. For example, on the holiday tours a Glasgow vehicle would sometimes be exchanged at some point for a local vehicle of the same type going back to Glasgow for a major service so that the local garage were not a vehicle down so that in both cases that exchange was, it could be said, "revenue earning."

Many of the full-time conductors had PSV licences and so, in the Summer, they went on to driving the tours and excursions and the casuals were hired in to conduct.

The gangs of travelling mechanics were legend! I think there were about half a dozen gangs and on the Islands at least they dealt not only with the buses and lorries but with marine engines if necessary.

I was very struck with the efficiency of the whole operation.

Among other charming non-standard use of blind was the Mighty MacBraynes for the Highlands and Islands. Goodness knows what summer visitors to lovely Scotland made of confronting a bus going to:

TOP OF REST

It would probably have been a Bedford OLAZ but certainly working to Lochgoilhead to meet up with the up and down Glasgow - Campbeltown buses and swop mail bags and fish boxes and bread and newspapers.....

Or STEAMER. That covered a multitude of destinations, particularly on the Islands.

Or whoever at MacBraynes asked the blind manufacturer to create:

AIR-PORT. Used only on Uist for the service to Benbecula.

Or GAMES. What sort of games and where were they?

After the takeover . . .

As I understand Highland more or less kept the MacBrayne timetables for a while (I wasn't around in the UK at the time) but I do know they lost a lot of staff after the takeover - lots of old MacBrayne folk did not settle down with Highland - at one time it got so bad Highland were having to draft in drivers from all over the place.

Also, for reasons I do not know, I understand that the SBG had a lot of the MacBrayne Royal Mail contracts taken away and that would have resulted in a severe loss of revenue on some routes - the RM contracts were big money for MacBrayne and in the Winter they subsidised many services. Summer was a big money maker for DM but Winter survived courtesy of the Royal Mail in many parts of their little Empire.

In the Summer it was not unknown (Steamer tours mostly) for a FW - Inverness journey to have eight duplicates and certainly the afternoon run to Campbeltown from Glasgow was sometimes seven coaches, sometimes with vehicles hired in. This would be peak season July/August.

A funny MacBrayne story: I did one week of driving on Islay for them and one August (I think it was Port Ellen but not sure) I once had 15 standing on an OB which severely weighed down the old girl.

Somewhere along the road I was hailed by a Scottish policeman and I thought "Oops".

"Have ye room for one more laddie," he politely asked and journeyed (free of charge) to some other village on his beat!

Those really were the days!

Thanks for the MacBrayne pictures everyone - lots of great memories for me. Terrific company and impressively co-ordinated before it became the rage.

Or as they used to say: + Dependent upon arrival of steamer

Ticketing:

One tiny operational point: MacConnacher's used punch tickets and were faithful throughout, like many Scottish operators including the biggies, to GNP (Glasgow Numerical Printing Company Ltd).

Sometime from the late 50s they shared "interavailability" on return tickets with MacBrayne on part of a Ballachulish route and this clash with MacBrayne's Insert Setright ticket system led to them switching to Insert Setright (MacConnacher & Sons) tickets from GNP although MacBrayne provided them with the machines - lend or lease I do not know.

The tickets for MacConnacher's role in the Grand Circular Tour were Edmondson Card because from "both ends" they originated in a train journey first and foremost. MacBrayne always used Edmondson Card for their circular tours (whether they involved a train or not) and it was my practice on after 12 noon buses out of Fort William in the summer to say: "Would any passengers with tour tickets please have them ready for inspection." It saved so much rummaging about in pockets!

You gave a quick look at the date stamp on the end (not valid outside day of issue) and in return gave them in an Inward or Outward Steamer/ Tour Insert Setright Exchange Ticket of Nil Value and clipped the ticket with a "Diamond" clipper. Not to be confused on the Fort William-Inverness service with MacBrayne/Highland where if it was a MacBrayne ticket you just cancelled it in the normal way where as if it was a Highland Return you collected it in and issued them with a special MacBrayne/Highland Exchange Ticket, carried by both companies only on that route, and then attached the Highland interlopers to your waybill. Ditto procedure for the Highland conductors.

Halcyon Days!

Some more ramblings:

Aside from carrying 21 keys to open to roadside Post Boxes life was full of surprises, like discovering as the conductor on the 8.50 a.m. from Ardrishaig to Oban that you had four Under 10s who all travelled on a "Scholars Ticket" and who you had to see across the road to their tiny school - "all hold hands now" (and not a CRB check in sight). "Okay, it is all clear, off we go boys and girls." Headmistress/Teacher waiting at the tiny gate.

Helping my Driver to fit snow chains in a howling blizzard – handing over a metal box containing thousands of pounds to a local rural bank and following my instructions to accompany him to the bank to make sure he handed it over.

Like handing in the mail at the Village Shop/Post Office and being told by the Postmistress: "I've got a message for you. Can you please ring Glasgow." (No mobiles then, folks).

A Transfer Charge call to 44 Robertson Street "When you come back you'll do a duplicate to Glasgow. Back empty." Not can you. That is what you are doing. Long day ahead!

Having to get out at the bridge near Kimelford in torrential rain to help the driver across - Maudslays onwards just a few inches clearance either side.

We had the occasional "revellers" of course who occasionally disgorged their stomach contents on a MacBrayne vehicle. MacBrayne depots had no cleaners: it was the conductors job with mop and bucket to clear that up so that whatever vehicle it was, was presentable for the next turn.

I digress as always but if anyone on here travelled on MacBrayne I would love to hear their memories and will be very happy to include same.

In the Islands they served most drivers were dual qualified with (the then) PSV and HGV licences and often switched between the two to meet peak demands on either service. (This may have happened with other transport operators and would like to hear of any that posters know about).

MacBrayne ran very few Sunday stage services although the private hire department remained active. For some years, they had three vehicles on timetabled Church Services in South Uist to churches at Daliburgh and Bornish. These later ceased to be included in the public timetable but continued for some time under "contract" to the church authorities.

Summer services (and their extensive range of summer holiday tours) were obviously their main money maker (along with the year round Royal Mail contracts which were their biggest earners) and seasonal road staff were hired at Glasgow, Fort William, Inverness - some of them being allocated out with extra vehicles to depots such as Ardrishaig and Kinlochleven. They held for many years a seven day a week contract to convey staff between Ardrishaig and Lochgilphead Mental Hospital (as then called) which ran to the shift time starts of 6 a.m., 2 p.m. and 10 p.m. including Christmas.

They held contracts with other holiday companies including Scotia Tours and the Holiday Fellowship Club and also provided some "Island" vehicles for Scottish tours of Barton Transport enabling the larger Barton vehicles to remain on a "mainland". In peak times in the Summer MacBrayne also hired in Barton coaches/drivers to operate duplicates on Glasgow-Fort William-Inverness and Glasgow-Ardrishaig-Campbeltown. Which arrangement came first I do not know.

Many of the "Island" allocated buses were allocated to the same driver and they were also responsible for keeping them clean and tidy. (So far as I know MacBrayne employed no vehicle cleaners at all).

Technically the Road Staff were forbidden to accept tips but it was strictly "technical" and according to older employees had been ignored from about 1935 onwards at least. A stage carriage conductor could get tips by pointing out places of interest to tourists en route and if he worked hard enough at it!

The permanent staff were contracted to do x number of hours per week but there were no extra payments for the late night working necessitated by the steamers serving the Inner and Outer Islands. In the days before tachographs it was a disciplinary offence to refuse to undertake additional work "when necessitated by the requirements of the service." Draconian, today, perhaps but it was made clear at the interview and if you nodded and signed.....

MacBrayne had a worthwhile Private Hire business. By no means the cheapest, their smart, well turned out vehicles were attractive to those who could afford to pay and, for example, they had regular contracts to convey officials/judges etc to the various Highland Games.

The last vehicles to operate in MacBrayne colours with the Highlander were on Islay which were handed over to Highland in January 1972 ending 65 years of a very special bus operator.

All MacBrayne vehicles (buses and lorries) carried snow chains from September until April. (And used them if needed).

Buses and lorries meeting MacBrayne ships were not allowed to leave until the vessel arrived and unloaded. In the worst winter weather this could be hours late with the delays at earlier ports building up. Only the local manager could dismiss vehicles if a sailing was cancelled. In the case of lorries this sometimes meant that material unloaded at the quayside had to be reloaded and taken back to the consignee. In the event of road passengers they had to be returned to the place from which they had journeyed (unless they had made local hotel arrangements on being informed of the cancellation).

The original ticket system was punch tickets for the buses and Edmondson (railway) cards for the boats. While the steamers retained the cards, buses converted to the Insert Setright system with a range of overprinted values to cope with the very high fare values on some MacBrayne services. Some steamers also carried Insert Setright machines for modest intermediate fares.

In the peak summer months the popular Ardrishaig-Oban bus with duplicates could take over £200 on the journey out of Ardrishaig. In January or February it was not unknown for the fare takings to be less than two pounds.

According to local (Fort William) legend the nightly Fort William-Kingussie mailbus had never been known to exceed carrying 20 fare paying passengers in any one year. It was a crew job for security reasons (lot of registered mail to and fro the train) and because of the vast amount of mailbags to be shifted. At Christmas it was not unknown for this service to be duplicated (with no passengers) to cope with the Christmas post. It was basically a Royal Mail contract with the bus service almost an afterthought as it turned out. I suspect that most of you would turn up for a ride from FW to Kingussie returning at 4 a.m. but you weren't about then! Or, if you were, missed it.

No MacBrayne stage carriage bus was left outside, however remote the outstation. All had a garage, some one vehicle and tiny.

Their services on the remote but spectacular Ardnamurchan Peninsula included a curious Monday Only working from Acharacle at 6.30 a.m. to the Ardgour Ferry. There was no balanced working. It was to take the children of the area back to their mainland Secondary School for yet another five days away from home. Well, actually there was a balanced working. The 4.40 p.m. from Ardgour (Fridays Only) when they all came back again.

Then there were the gloriously anachronistic MacBrayne destination blinds but hats off, I think, to the chap who came up with:

AIR-PORT.

Bet he was a steamer bloke originally.

Yet more thoughts and memories:

Conductors and drivers on some routes also cleared roadside postal boxes and to do this were equipped with the same enormous selection of numbered keys as issued to the usual Royal Mail van drivers. A large Royal Mail sack (padlocked to a suitable stanchion) was used to accommodate collected letters.

Because they operated steamers as well as buses their "Conditions of Carriage" were, possibly, some of the most comprehensive, which is not to say convoluted, of any transport company in the business. I'm afraid bus crews were very low down in the pecking order ...here is a tiny sample:

"And whether or not such loss of life, injury, damage, loss or delay is due to unseaworthiness, or unfitness of the ships, and/or ferry boats or vehicles, or their appurtenances, at or after the commencement of the voyage, acts, neglects, errors in judgement, or defaults of master mariners, engineers, or others of the crew of the ships, or of agents, stevedores, piermasters, boatmen, drivers, conductors, or other servants of theirs connected with the service in any way whatsoever, it being distinctly agreed to and understood that passengers, their luggage, goods and property are carried at passengers own risk. (Yes, I think that is quite clear).

Dogs were happily carried on buses and steamers but they, too, had their own rules. "Dogs and cycles are carried entirely at their owner's risk, both as to the injury or damage whatever done to themselves or any injury or damage they may do to anyone, or anything in any way. All dogs must be furnished with efficient collars, chains and muzzles. In cases of transshipment, owners require to see to their dogs and cycles themselves.

Parcels traffic was important right into the 60s and was either charged by weight or by weight/mileage (depending on the area). If the parcel was handed in at the office it was weighed and charged accordingly but if handed to a driver or conductor en route was charged by guesswork as buses did not carry scales. A book of parcel ticket of various values came with the driver/conductor "box". However there was considerable unofficial traffic (collecting a prescription/order from a local shop/dropping a letter off at a shop) which went uncharged for and which was sometimes "paid for" at Christmas or other times with a small gift of anything from hand knitted socks to a small bag of freshly dug tatties.

The "conductor" on the steamers - who issued casual tickets/accepted freight - was known as the Clerk of the Ship. He was (like the conductor of a bus) responsible for seeing it was not overloaded and for keeping a record of "casual" non prebooked traffic and had a Waybill of his own to fill in. In some cases they carried both Edmondson card tickets and Insert Setright machines to deal with this traffic.

All departure times of buses designed to connect with the arrival of steamers/ trains were held until they arrived, however late that was. In the event of a very late departure impinging upon your ability to do a subsequent journey you were expected to use commonsense and ring up and tell someone. (Everyone had a card with the out of hours numbers for those likely to be involved). Glasgow was manned 24 hours a day so if all else failed you rang them - transfer charge call as it was then. If a conductor was involved in the duty it was his responsibility to ring up.

Long before the days of mobile phones MacBrayne would communicate with the road crews by ringing ahead to the next Post Office they were timed to pass and asking the staff to convey said message or ask the crew to "ring in".

All buses serving Glenlia on the Foyers-Inverness route were "subject to road conditions permitting" as it was prone to deep flooding.

Prior to 1939 drivers and conductors wore gaiters as part of their official uniform.

Although latterly known for their buses in the Highlands and Islands they didn't actually run an Island bus service until 1941 when they acquired the services of Neil McGibbon of Bowmore, Islay.

The last MacBrayne bus to work out of Glasgow in official ownership was No 170 (AEC Reliance PGE 429F) new in 1968 on the nearly six hour 3.15 Glasgow-Campbeltown. It pulled out of the Parliamentary Road Bus Station for the last time on October 3, 1970. It was Leyland Leopards from Western SMT the following day.

The 1938 Guide (brilliantly written by the way) advised that "limited numbers of gentlemen" (I'm not sure "ladies" did cargo ships then) could be conveyed on the Friday cargo ship from Glasgow to Tobermory, Portree and Stornoway but wisely warned "Gentlemen" that there was no Steward on board "and passengers require to arrange with Cook for meals" plus, of course, whatever the unspecified arrangement with the cook was! Nearly a week at sea for 60 shillings (three pounds). Back in Glasgow the following Thursday.

The only stage service operated on Harris and Lewis was acquired in 1964 when MacBrayne bought out Cameron based in the Harris Tarbert. They bought it for the freight operations but with it came a Ford minibus with an eleven-seater Kennex body which was duly painted

in full MacBrayne glory and became No 32. It operated a Schooldays only Tarbert to Marig service which also operated on Fridays when schools were closed. As well as being the only official minibus operated by MacBrayne it was also the last outpost of the Insert Setright ticket machine, long after everything else had gone to Setright Speed.

There can be few transport companies that inspired a regional "saying". No one knows who first said it or wrote it but it passed into Scottish history. In a book published in 1973 it was ascribed as "Traditional" which I quite like.

"To God belongs the Earth and all that it contains,
Excepting the Western Isles, and they belong unto MacBraynes."

They certainly did and for a very long time.

"In the midst of life there is Death. And MacBrayne are still there."

Some years ago there was a story about an islander who, along with thousands of others over the decades, had left to seek his fortune on the mainland and in his case did so, becoming a very successful businessman in Edinburgh.

Like all the other thousands he had left the island by a MacBrayne steamer. On his death his Will stipulated that he also wanted MacBrayne to convey him "home" for the last time and thus his coffin was carried on a scheduled journey. For obvious logistic reasons that was not uncommon but this particular Will stipulated it.

On North and South Uist MacBrayne had three vehicles for Church services on a Sunday. These were at one time advertised in the "Islands" timetables but later this was dropped although the services continued.

The hugely popular MacBrayne "inclusive holidays" also had a religious aspect which never appeared in any of their publicity, but the rules were strictly laid down by the company. Any MacBrayne tour driver - whether mainland or island based - was duty bound to get his passengers together at a suitable point on Saturday and ask if any wished to attend a church service on the Sunday. All drivers had the times of local Sunday services of the various denominations. If any did wish it was his duty to take them by coach and return them to the hotel even if there was only one or two of them. If there was a clash of service times for the denominations it was the driver's duty to arrange a local taxi to deal with it - the bill to be sent to Clyde House, 44 Robertson Street, Glasgow.

As I say, never mentioned in the literature, but it was standard instructions.

An unusual passenger

Here is a reminiscence from a Conductress (she died at some age three years ago) based in the Fort William area (at one time the girls outnumbered the boys in conducting in Fort William) of which a brief extract is: "I loved the job. It was long hours but it was a good steady job and better paid than the shop girls got although harder work sometimes - lugging stuff about. I liked meeting people so I enjoyed that side of it and in the summer we got tourists and you could tell them things and what to do look out for and point out things to them so that was interesting and I think they appreciated it."

I asked her for her humorous moments (all bus folk have these) and here is one of them:
"One funny moment was when we backed down to the Corran Ferry - we were the last bus that met the Ferry that day. I think we had about eight people on board. Three people got off the Ferry for the bus, one of them was dragging a sheep with a halter round its head. He started on board and I said: "Hold on a wee moment....."

"So I went round to my driver ("Cally" McDonald) and said: "We can't take sheep can we?"

Cally said: "Well, we can't leave them here either can we lassie".

Anyway the sheep wouldn't get up the steps and Cally had to get out of his cab and grab hold of its bottom and finally it was shoved on board. One of the ferry lads came along and helped and he was laughing. So were the passengers. We got it on board it and it clattered down the bus in panic. I took his ticket but I didn't charge for the sheep. I didn't have a sheep ticket. I think he got off somewhere near Kinlochleven - well, the sheepie got off faster than it got on. It thought am away home here and off they went.

(To keep this vaguely related to buses, the driver having to get out of his cab and come round indicates a half-cab, Maudslay or AEC at the time which were the standard vehicles on the Fort William-Kinlochleven area services).

Try getting on board with a sheep on other BTC companies of the time. No wonder they left it alone!

MacBrayne - the only government owned company that was completely off the wall and did its own thing. It certainly did not have sheep tickets but it had milk tickets.

Further observations about MacBraynes' history:

There is nothing much new about subsidies and it is as true of MacBrayne as anyone else. They had held Post Office contracts from 1852 but in 1928 were in severe financial difficulty and in that year did not submit a contract for conveying Mail to the Inner and Outer Islands. This caused a major crisis because they were the only company capable of serving those destinations and the Postmaster

General stepped in and effectively arranged a take over which left the LMS Railway with a 50 per cent stake. The new Company also received a massive Government subsidy and the postal services to the Islands were saved. The subsidy was so great that it enabled MacBrayne to replace many of their ageing shipping fleet.

MacBrayne's first foray into buses happened in 1906 with a service from Fort William to Ballachulish. This had been started a year before by the North British Railway but they abandoned it in the summer of that year. MacBrayne took over just before Christmas, buying a chain driven 32-seat Milnes-Daimler of German origin from an operator on the Isle of Wight. That must have been an interesting and lengthy journey to Fort William. It was, by all accounts, not the most reliable vehicle (in fairness the roads of the time probably did not help, often being feet deep in mud) and if the Daimler wasn't fit for work the service simply did not run.

Their first new bus was a chain driven open sided charabanc (useful in the Winter!) manufactured by Albion which seated 14. It was G 1327. This was followed by five new Commers in 1912 which bore names: Hare, Hound, Stag, Weasel and Wolf.

By 1938 the comfort and quality of MacBrayne had improved considerably and positively inspired the Author of "See This Scotland First" into something approaching rapture:

"A MacBrayne coach is like a modern parlour: walnut, cedar and kindly springs, upholstery, bland and inviting as your favourite chair. We glide out of Ardrishaig. We glide through Lochgilphead. Lean back and see the pictures running to you and changing as they run. We glide through tunnels of green and pass again into the sun shining.....

(Fair enough, chaps, no doubt the non-stop combined rail/steamer/coach tour did "glide" but there was a bit less gliding on the stage services what with having to clear post boxes and throw bundles of newspapers out of the door on some days). Still, seems churlish to spoil it!

MacBrayne did not enter the lorry haulage business until 1929 when they bought three Albions and a Morris Commercial. It was still only about a 20 strong fleet by the end of the Second World War but expanded considerably afterwards, aided by taking over several Island hauliers. It is little known that after the LMS share of the Company was nationalised in 1948 they became a subsidiary of British Road Services although remaining self-contained. The bus overnighting on the Glasgow-Campbeltown service was for some time accommodated at the local BRS Depot.

While the company did their best to allocate coach type vehicles to the longest routes anything was pressed into service when the pressure was on. It was not unknown for a bus bodied Bedford VAS to be allocated to the Glasgow-Fort William-Inverness summer services as a duplicate which required a certain hardiness and earmuffs. Being a bus enthusiast would be a decided asset for such a journey! Not sure there would have been too much "gliding" either and absolutely no "walnut and cedar". And as for the springs....oh, well never mind it got them there (eventually).

MacBrayne had a variety of licences for the Glasgow-Campbeltown service which allowed "limited stop" running in the summer together with non-stop (apart from comfort) between the two.

The early hours bus service between Fort William and Kingussie served four separate trains three from the direction of England and one heading to it. It took letter mail out of Fort William for all over Britain and collected mail from all over Britain. Loading/unloading was a joint effort and quite hard work. Full mail bags are quite heavy.

Fort William was the largest bus garage with about 25 vehicles. Next was Glasgow with about 18 although winter delicensed vehicles added to that.

Many staff, particularly on the Islands, were dual qualified as PSV/HGV drivers (as was then) which gave them enormous flexibility to meet the peaks of both sides of the business.

MacBrayne owned three AEC Q's from 1934 until 1949 two of which are thought to be the only vehicles to carry "route branding" (not that the term was thought of then) on boards on the side, a la Green Line, in this case advertising the "Glasgow-Fort William Grand Tour Loch Lomond Pass of Glencoe Loch Leven Loch Linnie".

MacBrayne never used the word RELIEF on destination blinds. A few carried the words DUPLICATE but that was actually rare.

Three of MacBrayne's ships took part in the war effort with King George V helping with the evacuation of Dunkirk and Lochnevis spending four years mine laying. Three AEC Regal I coaches (91-93) were requisitioned by the War Office and one Bedford WLG was converted into an ARP Ambulance.

A MacBrayne steamer crew reported a sighting of the Loch Ness Monster having observed it "for ten minutes passing between the bridge stanchions at a speed of fully nine knots an hour". I respect the detail of the speed, most concentrate on how many humps it has.

When the LNER axed their train service between Spean Bridge and Fort Augustus they refused to approach MacBrayne to run a replacement bus service because they were, of course, partially owned by the rival LMS although both companies sold Circular Tour tickets involving the Steamers/Coaches of MacBrayne.

They owned a total of 33 Maudslay Marathon III buses. Is that a record for one company?

In a sort of re-run of MacBrayne refusing to tender for the Royal Mail contracts to the Inner/Outer Isles they were on the receiving end of a similar sort of crisis in September 1950. Ardgour and Acharacle Motor Services Ltd finally gave up any attempt to make money out of running two services in the Ardnamurchan Peninsula and announced they were quitting on December 31st of that year and would not renew their licences.

No other takers being about, the Scottish Area Traffic Commissioners ordered MacBrayne to take over their two routes and yet another Government subsidy and Royal Mail contract hove into sight.

Observations about MacBraynes' excursions/tours:

As an adjunct, MacBrayne were sort of "nationalised" (ie taken into 50 per cent railway ownership which then became "nationalised" in 1948) when they ran out of money in the 20s (the bus side still in its infancy) and refused to tender for the Royal Mail contracts to the Inner and Outer Islands of the Hebrides. As they had the only fleet of steamers capable of providing this service the then Secretary of State for Scotland was forced to step in and "take over" MacBrayne. All the MacBrayne contracts - both bus and steamer - were joint arrangements between the Company, the Royal Mail and the Secretary of State for Scotland.

MacBrayne certainly benefitted greatly from the "railway relationship" and prior to 1948 the Summer Brochure listed in detail the many and various tours available via both the London, Midland and Scottish Railway and the London and North Eastern Railway. All of these, with very few exceptions, utilised the stage carriage services of MacBrayne and dovetailed with their timings. As these tours had to be prebooked in advance which, as you all will realise, enabled MacBrayne to know how many vehicles they would need to meet a steamer on a particular day.

In High Summer the Fort William to Inverness stage carriage route would probably need only two vehicles to cover the summertime casuals on the "stage carriage" bit but up to six or eight vehicles more to cover the same journey carrying prebooked passengers. These worked direct without stopping - the Edmondson card tickets checked by Summer conductors before the vehicles left - and usually arrived considerably ahead of schedule of the actual stage carriage buses. It was not coincidence that MacBrayne knew how many vehicles they would need or what the likely volume of "casual staff" was needed for the season ahead.

Apart from Cal-Mac (which I don't count personally) MacBrayne may now have been long gone but in my brief time with them the thing that came over most was how brilliantly organised it all was - amid the remoteness of much of their operating area. In the Summer the real heroes were the Charting Office in Glasgow which in July and August was manned 24 hours a day and needed to be I would think. Before the days of faxes a lot of this stuff had to be done by telephone calls or archaic teleprinter but someone was still needed to read it and act upon it.

Here is an example: in the high season of July and August Fort William offered "excursions" to such as the Glenfinnan Monument or Achnacarry while Inverness offered excursions to such as Foyers (waterfall and all that) or Day Excursion to Fort Augustus. Guess what? All departures coincided with the relevant Stage Carriage Service so if there were not enough punters to fill an extra vehicle they all got shunted on to the stage carriage bus and stopped at lots of Post Offices/Post Boxes. If there were enough they bowled along on their own.

Scots are tight they say (I don't go with that, personally). I prefer to call it brilliant organisation by MacBrayne who only had a very limited window to make any non-Royal Mail contract money in the Summer and needed to milk it for all it was worth.

If you had a poorly supported tour/excursion dumped on a Stage Carriage vehicle in my time but which was going further than your journey you had to note down the number of the Edmondson card ticket and issue a no value Exchange Ticket to acknowledge it. You always knew in advance they were being dumped on you and so you walked down the bus first and sorted that out first before the casuals.

A little story: I once conducted a bus from Fort William to Glenfinnan on which was dumped poor loadings at end of season for the "Excursion". When I went aboard (and knowing this) I asked anyone "going on the Glenfinnan excursion" to put their hand up. Eight or nine did so. I checked their Edmondson card as valid - simple there and back and no exchange ticket needed (the office knew who they had dumped on you) until I came to an old girl probably in her Seventies who had put her hand up but had no ticket when I asked her for it.

"Where is your ticket?" I said. "I don't have a ticket because you haven't given me one" she replied.

"But if you are on the Excursion you should have a ticket" I countered.

Blank look.

Me: "Are you on an Excursion to Glenfinnan?"

Old Lady: "I don't know"

Me: "Why are you going to Glenfinnan?"

Old Lady: "My sister has asked me to come over and stay with her for a while. Her husband has just died you know."

Poor old love. Standard Insert Setright ticket for the time.

And more on Excursions/Tours:

At the risk of being extremely pedant let us look at the "bus" involvement in a slightly infamous MacBrayne tour - Glasgow to Mull, The Uists and Skye there and back in three days. Start Tuesday back in Glasgow by around 8 pm that evening.

Not for nothing was this tour - the cheapest they did in my time and highly popular on that account (even cheaper in May and September) - known universally among MacBrayne staff as "The Gallop".

It was £11 in 1964 and £10 in May and September. Departed every Tuesday from the MacBrayne Coach Station 8.45 a.m. Coach to Oban. Highly unlikely it was a Glasgow coach - much more likely to be an Ardrishaig coach finishing off a previous tour/railway circular tour the night before or coming into Glasgow as a duplicate on Campbeltown-Glasgow. If it did not come revenue earning the Traffic Department would have been really, really sad I would say and probably annoyed as well and would have regarded it as a defeat. (An Oban private hire to Glasgow would have worked just as well but I hope you get the idea, not necessarily the driver but the vehicle placement).

On this lightning tour the coach takes them to Oban, dumps the passengers but does not go with them. That coach is available for a Tuesday afternoon excursion from either Oban or Dunoon. The passengers embark on their adventure to Mull where at 3.30 pm they had an

"Afternoon Tour from Craignure to Tobermory and return". What they actually had was a trip on the stage service (or one of many duplicates in High Season) there and back. They spent the night on board the ship so no hotel transfers necessary.

Second day (Wednesday) Craignure to Lochboisdale "thence Coach to Lochmaddy" - well actually the Wednesday stage service as it turns out (duplicated if necessary). Night on board another steamer, no road transfer necessary.

Thursday: A somewhat brief look at Skye: steamer to Uig then coach to Armadale -the scheduled stage route duplicated as necessary. Then steamer to Mallaig and Coach via "Fort William to Glasgow".

As luck would have it this could possibly have been a driver on a "roundabout" sort of holiday/railway diagram going back home and who had previously dropped them off in Mallaig?

Yes it could I think.

And some thoughts on scheduling:

I'm in the process of setting down my memories of nine months in the MacBrayne chart room/traffic department in Glasgow which was 24/7 and was divided in the same room into three sectors: The buses, the steamers and the lorries in that order. The bus side had little or no contact with the lorry side but both had considerable contact with the Steamer division and both buses and lorries had their own problems particularly in height of season: July, August and early September. It was, however, a totally integrated operation and, from time to time, all three Divisions had considerable running dialogue with the Scottish Region of British Railways as was. Future generations, if interested, will hardly know how this stuff happened.

As an example MacBrayne tours were an absolutely vital part of their summer income. They all started from Glasgow but the Glasgow allocation was only around 12 vehicles and most of those were committed during the Summer on the many and frequent long distance services - Glasgow-Campbeltown and Glasgow-Fort William-Inverness plus local private hire when they could fit it in. The vast majority of the tour coaches were from Adrishiaig who, aside from Fort William at around 25 vehicles, had the second largest allocation (normally 19 or 20). The way that MacBrayne utilised vehicles and minimised dead mileage was, frankly, little sort of awesome but was actually the result of considerable and careful planning by the Traffic Department and I think it tragic that this skill is in severe danger of being historically lost to enthusiasts of the future.

It is sometimes forgotten that MacBrayne were "nationalised" in 1928 long before any bus company when they hit serious financial trouble and the loss-making services (Royal Mail included) to the Islands were up for tender and MacBrayne said they could not afford to carry on commercially. There was no one else available so the Government and the then LMS took a 50 per cent share each.

Bus folk may wonder why MacBrayne were not ordered to buy Bristol/ECW when the BTC took control of them. MacBrayne were considered so politically sensitive at Westminster that they were left completely to their own devices right to the end.

State owned but left alone by the State given the extraordinary nature of their business I would suggest. They regarded themselves as a State-Owned company that was, effectively, as independent as Arthur Lainson's Premier Travel.

Winter driving:

When I worked for David MacBrayne for two Winter Seasons (which was a very busy time for them on certain routes - people going "home" or going to relatives for Christmas) it was standard practice from September 1st that all vehicles carried snow chains. At Fort William garage in Summertime they hung around the walls of the garages with the registration number of the vehicle to which they were allocated - sometimes the type of vehicle rather than an actual registration number. The company instruction was a maximum speed of 15 mph once you put the chains on. Chains went on front and back wheels.

Mercifully I only got involved in this twice once below Rest and Be Thankful (you have to be joking) at Arrochar and that was a wotsit job in a driving blizzard.

You also learned that it was helpful - along with your box - to add a Thermos flask to that. It's not Essex I know (but it is Winter) and there's something mildly surreal about sipping Tomato soup as you trundled down into Ardrishaig.....

I can't see people getting out today and putting snow chains on even in bonnie Scotland.

And finally, some historical notes on MacBraynes

Early next year is the 107th anniversary of the end of the buses of David MacBrayne which dominated the Highlands (and later most of the Islands) for decades and, along with the steamers and the lorries, were part of a unique contribution to transport in some of the most remote areas of the country. Despite being effectively a nationalised organisation from 1928 they did their own thing to the end and the great Scottish bus photographer John Sinclair recently aptly described the operation as idiosyncratic!

The last services to be operated by MacBrayne were on Islay, an appropriate ending in a way because that was the first "offshore" Island to have MacBrayne bus services following the acquisition in 1941 of the licences of Neil McGibbon of Bowmore. Effectively all services were tailored to the steamer calls and the pattern (and most of the timings) remained unchanged for decades.

Major acquisitions followed on the Uists in 1947 and 1948.

As we come up to the August Bank Holiday it is perhaps worth recalling that this month was often the busiest time for the company particularly in an era when adult holidays were pretty much restricted to factory/works/shipyard closures during the "school holiday" weeks. From the early 60s their popular holiday tours kept vehicles occupied throughout their region and the main routes from Glasgow into Argyllshire and those to Fort William and Inverness often required heavy duplication. On occasions duplicates operating on the Barton Express from Nottinghamshire to Glasgow would be hijacked to help out.

In the peak periods Saturdays would see lines of vehicles filling the less than salubrious "Coach Station" of MacBrayne (strictly functional this) and yet more parked in lines outside. Despite the limitations of the building, and the location of same, these were very vibrant occasions and, I am sure, the start of some very happy holidays and, for some, the magical exploration of some of the most dramatic and wonderful scenery it is possible to encounter. Conductors and other staff on the main routes out of Glasgow (and Fort William) were expected to be a walking encyclopaedia as it was common to be bombarded with questions which is not to mention the assumption that any large stretch of water was Loch Ness. It was, however, faintly amusing to see passengers gaze riveted on the waters of the real Loch Ness just in case "Nessie" graced the day with an "appearance". It has to be said that, while not milking it, MacBrayne in their brochures did little to cast doubt upon the existence of same which under the circumstances is obviously fair enough.

They had, for those interested in such, the largest range of overprinted Insert Setright tickets of any company using the system - going up to a 40/- £2 overprint to help out a machine capable of only 9s/11d pre decimal (50p ish today) and some quite complex three-part Setright tickets on some routes out of Glasgow. They remained faithful to GNP (Glasgow Numerical Printing) throughout their use. The last Insert Setright machine/tickets were used on the Friday only service on Lewis and Harris from Tarbert to Marig (school service the rest of the week).

The "conductor depots" were basically Glasgow, Ardrishaig, Oban, Fort William and Inverness. For many years "Lassies" were prominent at Fort William including, so I have been told, a couple of Mother and Daughter combinations.

The whole raison d'etre of MacBrayne was integrated transport and their timetables were peppered with adjuncts to would be passengers: "Departure time subject to the arrival of steamer or ferry from Mallaig", "Departure subject to arrival of steamer and train", "Departure time subject to arrival of steamer". Or, as a former MacBrayne driver on the Islands said only last week: "They knew we would turn up but they didn't always know when if we were delayed in leaving."

And not many bus timetables contain this sort of instruction: "Connects with ferry to and from Carinish-North Uist. Intending passengers must make their own arrangement for hire of ferry boat."

Or on the mainland and not that many miles from Inverness: "All services via Glenlia subject to road conditions permitting". When they took over one of their last Island acquisitions - on Mull - they found themselves operating along a forest track for a couple of miles. Offroad MacBrayne!

In addition to their own obligations MacBrayne often provided "island capability" for large mainland operators whose vehicles either could not be accommodated on the ferries of the time or would simply be too large and unwieldy for the frequently single track roads of the Islands not to mention narrow bridges with only inches clearance or hairpin bends or both. Among these were Wallace Arnold, Glenton Tours, and other holiday companies such as Scotia Tours and the Scottish "Holiday Fellowship" organisation. Many mainstream companies from England who offered a fleeting visit to Skye had to rely on MacBrayne to ferry them around on the island itself.