

More Premier Travel Memories

A selection of short stories from Alan M Watkins

AEC Reliance/Burlingham UVE 333

Bought on HP (as usual) she was nearly repossessed when Premier lurched into their worst ever financial crisis early 60s and they were behind with the payments then. Only a personal injection of cash from Mrs Lainson saved the day and people coming up with personal guarantees (i.e, their homes) to the long suffering Lloyds Bank who showed an understanding that I feel confident in stating would not be available today.

There's a wonderful letter at the height of this crisis (when bankruptcy was literally hours away, fuel company at the helm, as with Corona at the last) from the Lloyds Bank Manager to Mr Lainson.

It begins: "Dear Arthur: As you know I have considerable affection for your company and we go back many years together. It pains me to say that the situation is now critical: I am prepared to reveal to you that only my personal intervention with the Regional Director has enabled the company's recent cheques to be honoured and it is now my current belief that this situation can only sustain for a period not longer than seven days from the date of this letter....."

Disgressing slightly, can anyone imagine a Bank Manager in 2007 writing such a letter? No, thought not.

UVE 333 was contemporary for her time and in the Summer of 1960 was joined by XMT 54-56. After they arrived and PT weathered the financial storm that engulfed them it paved the way for the modern fleet of the future.

UVE 333 had a short life as mentioned. I think she was parked at Harston when she spontaneously caught fire after coming in from a job and was completely destroyed. These days it would probably be arson by the local lads but as far as I recall it was then suspected as an electrical fault. As I recall the fire went unnoticed for a while and by the time the brave part timers from Sawston clanged their way to the scene (they would have been the nearest and none of this two-tone stuff then, old chap) she was well gone.

But the seed was sown and those and subsequent vehicles lifted PT from Primitive Travel, as it was affectionately nicknamed by some locally, to Premier Travel in every sense.

SUPPORT INDEPENDENT ENTERPRISE! as the late EAL would have said.

And more on the financial crisis

It was the Travel Agency which saved the company from bankruptcy originally. I've got all the documents (plus an injection of personal money from Mother).

At one stage they were so broke (and, yes, I have all the letters from a wonderfully understanding manager of Lloyds Bank, Cambridge, who deserves credit as well and it wouldn't happen now) that conductors were ordered to pay in the takings direct to the bank wherever their journey ended where there was a branch of Lloyds! That's how close it was.

I once made five trips to the Saffron Walden branch on the same duty! Not joking - FACT.

Also there were many weeks when the Staff had to wait until a Tuesday to be paid. And wait they did! Then the Foreign Summer Holiday boom kicked in and the dreadful months of January and February began to become quite wonderful in terms of company takings as the deposits were made.

There was for a while also Premier Airlines with one chartered aircraft and with one elderly and somewhat disgruntled "Air Hostess" who lived in Steeple Bumpstead. I believe it went as far as Belgium, France and Holland.

Bedford OB GCE 422

I drove/conducted her a few times, poor old thing was a bit knackered by then and the clutch had a habit of juddering rather spectacularly. She was a wonderful workhorse for the company covering everything from local stage to private hire to Birmingham-Clacton and seaside expresses in the summer (she was often the Saturday bus to Skegness and back) and when I drove her she had done nearly 800,000 miles according to company records. So they had their money's worth!

Spent most of her life at Chrishall with occasional loans to Godmanchester and "died" where she had arrived in the summer of 1948.

Stan Pennell was a regular driver in her early days and said she was the first new Premier bus he drove. "I couldn't believe me bleedin' luck," he said, in Stan's inimitable but long silenced fashion.

AEC Regal 4 LUC 204 on the 53

The history of the route is that Burgoyne started it in the 30s and it originally ran through to Chelmsford. It was cut back to Halstead because of wartime fuel restrictions.

In the 1952 timetable there is a note saying that Premier hoped to "restore" the route to Chelmsford but it never happened because both Eastern National and British Railways (Haverhill and Halstead had trains then) launched vociferous objections to the Halstead-Chelmsford section and so did Corona. So the extension idea was dropped.

In the 50s this Sunday only service was a money maker. It required double deckers and sometimes duplicates because RAF Ridgewell was on the route - after the War Ridgewell was a bomb storage depot with a lot of civilian clerks and a lot of Sunday visitors to same. It shut in 1957 and has long since been "returned to agriculture" as they say.

In the last year of Ridgewell's life the 53 in the 1957 timetable still had shorts to Ridgewell to cater for this traffic.

LUC 204 arrived in March 1964 and was No 163. Someone at Haverhill depot wrecked the pre-selective box (a novelty for PT drivers) on the second day of service of one of these RF's and it had to be towed back to London Transport so their engineers could fix it! I took to pre-selective like a duck to water and liked it but I was young then. It's mobile phones which confuse me today.

Generally thought a good bus, nice to drive (I thought so, anyway). Only complaint from Premier was that they found them heavy on tyres. (Or perhaps the Vehicle Inspectors were just getting tougher?).

The rural bus

The rural atmosphere was certainly alive and well when I first joined Premier Travel - we had regulars and a lot of elderly folk as well. We had an (allegedly) titled Lady from the Big House who insisted on being escorted personally to her seat (I had been warned about this).

It was an accepted part of your duty to help them on and off (no lo- floor buses then) and, for the most frail or aged, to lug their shopping bags up to the front door (often a considerable distance) while they rummaged for their key. Or sometimes you carried the kids on or off (wouldn't be allowed today, probably).

One sweltering day, somewhere near Arkesden I think, the lady said: "Would you and your driver like a drink of orange?" So we had a drink of orange...while the bus waited and everyone just carried on chatting.

And of course there were the cinema buses with the young lads in their "Teddy boy" outfits (remember winklepickers, anyone?). Teddy Boys with a deep rural accent always seemed a bit of a misnomer to me. And I think I can still smell the Woolworths perfume from the girls, all "made up to the nines" as they used to say.

Saturday night out of Bishops Stortford, Premier would regularly shift 150 people if the film was particularly popular. Stort Taxis were on permanent hire for a relief to Manuden with their OB. Stort provided the driver and one of the two conductors had to collect the fares on it before the main vehicles moved off - usually the two conductors used to toss a coin for this honour.

You got to know your passengers and they got to know you. Once when I had a very bad cold I was also offered various "remedies" for curing it - one I remember involved sucking a nutmeg, something I did not try.

In those days you were a lifeline, often for people born well into the then previous century who looked forward to their weekly trip to wherever it was. It was like a social club sometimes.

Sometimes you even collected prescriptions for the housebound - this was in the days when doctors actually came out to people who were ill and left the prescription with them. "Nan says could you get this for her....."

More on rural services

Oh the delights of rural bus operation in days gone by! August was a bad month for Premier Travel when you had the risk of coming up behind a Fordson Major towing sheaves of wheat (with often someone sitting on top of them on the trailer) at a steady 10 mph with no chance of getting by until it turned off. No 30mph tractors in those days.

A memorable experience on Service 10 (Chrishall-Stortford) one autumn (September-October time) was conducting the 4 p.m. out of Stortford. We made normal progress as far as Clavering but then encountered the arse end of a set of steam ploughing engines moving

from one job to another. The one in front of us was towing a) a living van and b) a water cart at a steady three to four miles an hour and occupying the entirety of the road. They turned off into a field somewhere near Langley by which time we were at least half an hour late. No way of overtaking that paraphernalia on those roads either then or now.

Don't recall any complaints - just rural life at the time I suppose. Every time you stopped to let someone off you caught them up about two minutes later at best. The passengers didn't seem fussed about it. The sound of an ex-Southdown Guy Arab permanently in first gear did however add significantly to the on the road noise of the late John Fowler's magnificent ploughing engines - a magnificent rural cacophony which would probably be sellable today?

Ex Ribble "White Ladies"

There were fine to drive but a pain in the &*\$ to conduct on two accounts. Manual platform doors are fine on limited stop services, as inhabited by White Ladies I believe (wherever to Kendal), less so with frail old dears on local stage who just didn't have the muscle to pull them (this was before electrics, for younger members) so you were ever trotting back and forth to let them in and out.

Also they came with high backed coach seats up and downstairs. Nothing wrong in that except that they occasionally caught your cash bag which rode up and tipped at least some of the contents on to the floor. White Ladies don't you just love 'em?

Fine to drive, less so to conduct.

PS: Loved the in cab quilt engine cover - thanks Ribble!

Also on DCK 208 the left hand wiper never worked in my time. Not that it mattered. If I know where my offside is I *think* I can accurately guess about the nearside.

A little story: there was a "stray" White Lady DCK 219 which didn't arrive until 1966. It went to Haverhill garage where it became the favourite vehicle of the Foreman-Driver Roly Scrivener and was the last in service with PT. As he was in charge of the duty allocations no one else was allowed to drive it except on his days off!

Roly retired, aged nearly 70, in the 1970s and through my friendship with Bill Ruffle I got to hear of this. So I managed to track down two pictures of "his" bus, one in service with Ribble and one with PT (I think Alan Cross had the Ribble shot, Robert Mack had the second). I had them framed and they were presented to him, along with all the other gifts, at his farewell do. I was abroad and could not attend but I had a lovely letter from him a couple of weeks later.

Lovely chap but, boy, did he "love" that bus!

Those with personal associations for me are AGV 194 (which has been on here) cos I passed my single decker test and did my first ever drive alone job with her and GUF 131 on which I passed my decker test, the latter I still regard as a triumph of brute force over matter. Buses were "heavy" to drive in those days but even then there was heavy and there was really, really heavy.....

I'd still take one on again mind you and attempt yet another triumph of man over machine! I bet the Southdown chaps were glad to see the back of them! These days there would be warnings on the internet.....

Ex Southdown GUFs

Southdown GUF's also sent you deaf after about an hour but like on the plane you just keep swallowing.

Being old I may have told this story before but during the GUF's time at Premier Travel there were two buses out of Bishops Stortford at 10.45 p.m on a Saturday night.

Service 10 to Chrishall, Service 26 to Barley. We followed the same road through Hazel End, Manuden but the 26 turned off left at the finger post marked Little London. We carried on.

The 10 was back at the garage by 11.45 or thereabouts - the 26 finished at Barley at 11.35 and then came back dead across the "Chrishall Downs", downs because they are exceedingly hilly.

One frosty winter night we parked our steed and me and Ernie Law (driver) were chatting outside the deserted Crew Room when across the night came the unmistakeable sound of a Southdown Guy changing down into First and roaring (no, that's an understatement) it's way up a hill.

Ernie was about late forties then. I was about 19 or 20.

"Put the kettle on lad," he said.

It was a frosty night and sound carries on a clear night like that but the drop down into First was well over a mile away.

I went and put the kettle on.

Drummer Street bus station - and Southend trips

This may be of interest to those who remember the old bus station in Cambridge. The good old days when so much mileage was lost or late running as a result of being penned in and not being able to get your bus into or out of for that matter. Oh! Those Summer Saturdays (or any Saturdays for that matter).

Come on chaps! If you are on Service 27 with an ex Southdown Guy Arab (GUF series) hopefully heading to:

BRENT PELHAM
BARLEY
BARKWAY

What would you rather be hemmed in by? A couple of Neoplans, Scania's, Volvo's?

Or the latest shiny Lodekka of United Counties en route for Bedford? Or a brown and cream Burwell & District Daimler heading towards Burwell and Soham (preferably with Linda conducting, what a looker) or the Eastern Counties K5G heading for Willingham and Over who pulls in front of you to his stand just as you put your hand out of the window?

The building in the middle was affectionately known as The Pyramid. In it was housed Premier Travel's Drummer Street "booking office" normally staffed by Inspector C***** before he ran off with the money and on busy summer Saturday weekends often staffed by Arthur Lainson, helping selling tickets for Excursions, Express Services. So the man that started it sold you the ticket. Seems okay by me.

Mystery tours at 2 pm and 6 pm in the height of Summer started from here. That was then, of course. A gentle stroll for an OB. Heading for Tea Rooms, of course. Lavenham, Finchingfield, Flatford Mill so not that not much of a mystery and always back in time to do the 6 pm.

Later in the year, much much later, it was the starting point at 2.30 pm in September/October Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays for Southend (illuminations).

All along the Sea Front (both ways) in 2nd and then parked at Kursaal (Coach/Car Park) while they wandered round and did their thing. Backed in among many, many coaches.

Met a young bloke driving for Eastern Belle (Bow, London, son of the Guvnor), Orange Luxury, Fallowfield and Britten, Timpsons, Wiffens, Finchingfield, all attracted like moths to the flame of Southend Illuminations.

Actually most of us took off to Sid's Cafe on the seafront where we bemoaned our fate (and charges) and talked shop over "Sid's Steak and Kidney Pudding Gravy and Mash" which was around One Shilling. Large cup of tea 4d.

Jam Sponge & Custard 6d, ditto Spotted Dick & Custard (no comments please, it was a different age).

Apart from the fact there is a half decent Waitrose I can't think of any reason at all for going to Southend today.

Type training - or not!

Little story: we had a new part time driver at Premier Travel Chrishall once and as sometimes was the way he was thrown into the thick of things one Saturday lunchtime. He had never driven a Bristol before (a dear old former West Yorkshire gal). I was on a split duty - conducting part of the shift and then driver/conducting later on. He also did not know Route 9 Chrishall-Cambridge.

So I conducted him with extremely interesting noises coming from the gearbox and then him stopping just before Elmdon and turning round and looking at me. I stopped collecting two and two half returns to Cambridge please and pointed in the direction of "Right" and off we went.

When we got to Stapleford level crossing we were in a queue behind the first duplicate (who started ahead of us) as the gates were against us. I have no idea which gear he was trying to select once we were on the move but by the time he had selected it the gates had closed again for a freight train coming in the opposite direction.

When we got close to the Paper Mill at Sawston he was about to gaily race off along the by-pass when I thoughtfully banged the ticket rack on the window and helpfully pointed "Right" turn which took us off down the "High Street".

When we finally made it into Drummer Street he said "There's something wrong with this bloody gearbox."

As tactfully as I could, I said: "I think you are revving up too much. You'll find that if you let the revs die to almost nothing you'll get the gear and then tread on the gas.....if you do that you won't need to worry about the clutch. It just slots in."

Who needs synchromesh? Wimps :):)

Very funny at the time but a real baptism of fire for the poor chap.....class learning, route training. What??????????????????

Huntingdon recalled

Ah Huntingdon of blessed bus memory. The UCOC crews at the hallowed Mill Common. The K's, the Premier Travel STL, OB's and all that stuff. How sophisticated the UCOC depot seemed at the time compared with the ramshackle wooden huts up the road at Godmanchester (Gill's Garage) from where Premier operated. We were not envious - just five minutes to Mill Common anyway and we had the best company to work for. We had dear old Harry Wynn (a lovely Cockney whose little terraced cottage overlooked the river) and when on lengthy layovers you could always get a cup of tea and cakes whereas the UCOC lot always moaning about a Mr "Smithers", the then depot superintendent? Yes they had the more sophisticated vehicles and I doubt they had to tow start a reluctant STL for the Wednesday Service to Bedford on Service 17.

Premier at Huntingdon also had something quite unique I think. A part time Tuesday, Friday and Saturday conductor called Bob Cave very well known to everyone at the time, getting on for half a century ago. Bob was the Captain of the Huntingdon Salvation Army Citadel and, for obvious reasons, never worked Sunday. What a lovely, lovely person.

So many memories of being shipped over to Huntingdon to drive or conduct to cover for summer/winter holidays. Of orders which said:

4.15 arrive Drummer Street
4.45 Travel Cambridge-Huntingdon UCOC [ie, travel passenger by UCOC bus]
Conduct 6pm Upwood Circular
Return Cambridge UCOC
T/O and conduct: 9.45 Cambridge-Stapleford and return
10.45 Cambridge-Chrishall
Sign Off

Of course I had my badge on and never once was I asked to pay to and fro Huntingdon just as I never asked for the fare from anyone wearing the badge. Unwritten law of the time. If they boarded with a badge they travelled free - never ever got challenged on this, jumper on board and all.

I once drove an ex West Yorkshire K5G for a week between Black Horse Drove and Cambridge Pye Works. There should have been an attendant/conductor on the back. There wasn't. (Not sure there ever was). Whoever chose rang the bell or I looked in the mirror.

The driver handed over the key to his house and that is where I lodged for the week. On the Friday evening it was leave the key in a pre-arranged place and dead to Chrisshall.

Massively unsophisticated many might say.

Goodness me this is a long time ago.

A couple of other little memories of Huntingdon. Conductor Cave was ALWAYS shown on the Daily Orders as Capt. Cave as he was, of course, a Captain in the Salvation Army!

Also if you were starting out after Mr Wynn had moved from the sheds to the Premier Travel Agency office you had to pick up your float (five shillings it was) from the office. If he was out you "floated" it yourself.

Premier's first bus out of Godmanchester/Huntingdon was a contract - a very lucrative double deck contract which ran for some years - conveying the workmen building the motorway from Barford onwards. The STL's were the regular performers on these.

Crews from Chrishall and Haverhill were also called in for the special services to Brampton Races which along with the Cambridge-Newmarket licence was the reason RACES appeared on all PT blinds. Return tickets only (like Newmarket) and inherited from Gill's.

In my time, Premier had full time drivers at Huntingdon but no full time conductors.

Winter work

More memories of my youth, misspent at Premier Travel: turning up on my Mobylette moped in the late 50's for the first Premier Travel stage bus out on the road: 6.15 a.m. sign on, 6.30 dead to Fowlmere, 6.45 a.m. Fowlmere-Cambridge Service 1, the early factory bus.

A nice frosty night/morning in Jan/Feb for example. Staff took their uniform home with them. Go into crew room (no lock on the door), switch on the light and look at the Daily Orders to see what leviathan you had got for the duty and whether they were any add ons for that duty and write them down. Hopefully driver already there, more local than me, or arrived shortly afterwards.

Find vehicle! Well in the case of a DD duty that was simple. It would be in the yard or the back of the yard somewhere because PT had no covered accommodation that could house a DD. Eureka! Crew find bus!

Bus covered in frost inside and outside. Bus (ex Southdown GUF for example) gets two swings on the handle from driver first (recommended for turning thing over and waking the old girl up) before it eventually fires on the button. That was apparently the advice from Southdown for very cold weather starts. Driver scrapes viewing hole through front windscreen (a ticket rack edge will do it as well as any modern plastic scraper). Collect frost edged ticket rack back and off we go!

It was hard to defrost the PT GUF's because there wasn't any heating at all.

But the passengers defrosted it every morning bless them. Fifteen piled on at the Green and you'd have 15 more within the next two miles all shivering by the roadside. Body warmth, Woodbines, Players Weights, Park Drive and Breathing all helped and as we bowled along the defrost began.

First the windows began to thaw out - as the body warmth quotient increased it spread to the lower and upper roof where by Harston there was a steady fusillade of ice cold globules of water pattering on the passengers and conductor. Anyway by the time you got to Drummer Street at around 7.30 a.m. you could see out of all the windows. Problem solved!

I think we were all absolutely bonkers, crew and passengers, but we knew no better then!

Busy buses

Here's a little story which I've probably told before but it does concern the PT GUF's. When they were the main decker fleet two used to leave Bishops Stortford (Car Park) at 10.45 on a Saturday evening with the heavily overcrowded cinema services 10 to Chrishall and the 26 to Barley - they followed the same road to just beyond Manuden where the 26 lurched away left at Little London Corner into darkness and Berden. The 10 crew were home at Chrishall first but the crews normally had a cuppa before going their ways into the night.

I can remember having parked our Guy in a suitable space on the forecourt one winter's night and as the driver and I stood chatting we heard the 26 coming back dead, changing gear on a winter's night to come up the Chrishall Downs "lights out" with that wonderful "bark" of hard work - and that was two and a half miles away from the depot on a quiet winter's night when all was dead in the countryside. That was the signal to get the kettle on!!!!

One little tale of "the country bus". One night on one of these heavily loaded Service 10 I had about ten standing upstairs. That was commonplace if it was a popular film. What are you supposed to do? Tell them to walk to Langley or Arkesden? No, it was a country bus and we just got on with it in those days. Besides which there was no one to report anyone, they just wanted to get home.

One night a village copper got on at Hazel End in full uniform and said: "Evening, just want a lift to Langley, missed the Eastern National". It was so crowded he had to stand on the platform with me till we lost a few at Manuden. Not a word was mentioned about our grossly overcrowded old lady from Southdown groaning under the weight of about 12 standing downstairs and eight on top. Poor old girl had never been so abused in the green I bet. If it was Mr Greenhill conducting the 26 he wanted a Bovril, not a tea. He had a "personal" jar of Bovril in the "rest room".

That was then.

On OB picture triggers more memories

I drove GFU700 on a number of occasions. It was second hand (can't remember where from but will find it in time) and was mostly based at Chrishall. It was acquired quite late in April 1961 as the very elderly Bedfords fell by the wayside, mostly with timber frame bodywork problems rather than repairable mechanical problems. My guess is that in the picture [not reproduced here] she is working service 7/28 which was in terrible decline at that time and an OB was more than adequate on most occasions. The LONDON on the blind is pretty unique - it had the standard Chrishall/Huntingdon blind but other non standard destinations on the blind (which Premier did not have otherwise) including Hastings, Ramsgate & Margate which I assume was from the very short blind of the original operator. The normal inscription over the years for Premier was either Kings Cross or Kings X or London Kings X.

Haverhill garage had a separate blind but there was some "crossover" because there were some Chrishall routes where Haverhill had a turn, principally out of Cambridge daily and Saffron Walden on Tuesdays. Huntingdon inscriptions did not appear on Haverhill blinds and in the event of a vehicle being sent there it trailed about with a blank or the ubiquitous RELIEF which of course would not have in any way thrown the passengers waiting at their appointed places.

Huntingdon was a completely separate location (with no Premier linking stage service) with a very small allocation (normally five and a spare in my time). If they got a "posh" private hire requiring something better than a stage vehicle it was covered from Chrishall or Haverhill.

ANY pictures of Premier Travel are always welcome as all know. Treasured memories of so many things - an absolutely wonderful company in every respect both to observe and to work for. I was very fortunate to enjoy the golden period in the late 50's early 60's but in all my forays as a temporary conductor/driver across a number of companies nothing is going to shift Premier Travel from the top of the list. And to think I got paid for enjoying myself!

When I first started conducting for Premier Travel I was studying music (which I went on to do for a living) and sometimes had with me my music case containing scores which I was able to study during "quiet moments" at PT (also at Lincolnshire Road Car) and during long layovers. Of course it didn't take long to get around and Arthur Lainson, the founder and owner of PT, once buttonholed me in Drummer Street, professed a love for the music of Schumann, and we were able to have an avid conversation about same. And I was being paid for the time for both!

Long before, around about 1947 I think, one of Arthur's "part time conductors" went on to become the Head of Economics at Oxford University. So anything in "Cambridge Blue" is very special to me fortunately before the company went over to the brighter blue which Mrs Lainson - or "Mother" as she was known to all - described as "Woolworths Paint". She was not amused and voted against it.

Yes it was long hours, often cold unremitting work, but you felt you were part of a "family" rather than purely an employee and I am definitely not alone in that view. It was very, very special. I absolutely adored working for them: the Market Day buses where you helped the frail old boys and girls down to their house with their heavy shopping bags from Stortford or Walden or Royston while the driver patiently waited - the blistering Summers Day with temperatures nudging the 90's where an old lady said as I deposited her shopping bags inside her cottage: "Would you and the driver like a glass of Lemonade?"

Yes we would. And so she made us one, both. And I conveyed it to my Driver and we drank and I returned the glasses and no one thought it anything particularly peculiar as we moved on after a delay of a few minutes.

The world has made many strides since then, many of them wonderful and commendable, but we may have lost a few bits and bobs along the way in the process.

That's life!

London duplication with an OB, and some thoughts on blinds

Here's a magic moment from an age away. I was once instructed as follows (one man stuff this was on that day).

EXTRA DUTY 2 CAR GCE 422
SIGN ON CHRISHALL GARAG 6.45 A.M.
DEAD CAR TO HAVERHILL MARKET HILL
DUPLICATE 8.00 A.M HAVERHILL SERVICE 38 TO LONDON KINGS CROSS
DUPLICATE 2.00 P.M. LONDON KINGS CROSS SERVICE 38 TO COWLINGE AS FAR
AS LAST PASSENGER
THEN DEAD TO CHRISHALL AND SIGN OFF.
DRIVER TO ENSURE THAT HE HAS EXPRESS SERVICE PAD TICKETS PAD FOR THIS
DUTY WITH CARBON PAPERS.

GCE 422 [Bedford OB/Mulliner, new 1948] had been a grand old bus for Premier, having done nearly a million miles for them but I'm afraid, somewhat like the Author of this message, she was old and knackered by this time and had problems of her own. Her gearbox was pretty much terminal and to keep her in second gear you had to physically

push the lever forward all the time otherwise she would jump back out of it into first. Once you had done the change she was okay but unless you forcibly pushed her gear lever into second and HELD it there she'd usually jump back down. That's not really a problem once you know what the solution is.

So early that morning I collected GCE 422 (made sure I had my Express Service pad with two carbons which were only needed for the Chart Room if you picked up a wayside "casual" who wanted a Period Return. Top copy to the passenger, second for my waybill, third for the Chart Room. Press hard on the pencil).

It was either a Saturday or a Sunday and I can't remember which but, assiduous as ever, I attempted to wind up London Kings Cross and her little handle went round and round in my hands but absolutely nothing happened. Like the wheels on the bus it just went round and round.

I saw the Chrishall Chief Fitter Bill Day in the yard and, with the innocence of youth, said: "Bill, the blind handle doesn't work."

"No it doesn't," he said cheerfully. "I've got to fix that next week."

And thus it was that I duplicated two journeys to and fro London while the front of the poor old girl showed SHAFTENHOE END (which was a Wednesday Only working on Service 12 after which presumably the winding gear had given up the ghost). Not one passenger either inward from Haverhill or outward from London Kings Cross made any mention of this.

Probably a digression but actually real life at the time.

So off I went forcibly holding in her gear lever in second bumping across the yard to duplicate the 8.00 am Haverhill-London Kings Cross and all that. Poor old girl!

We knew no better.

And leading on to some thoughts about blinds – working and not!

Quirky old Premier Travel invented special blinds for the Southdown Guy Arabs (which didn't quite fit sometimes I'm afraid) - I once mentioned this to EAL and he claimed it was a mistake by Norbury's but it didn't really matter as everyone knew where it was going and where it was passing but I like to think that it was Mr Lainson's interest in destination blinds (yes he was interested and knew all about them) as a miniature tribute to Southdown. The VIA was vertical and in Red (which cost more money).

When they got the ex BTC Bristols deckers with either two aperture or three aperture displays with individual numbers Mr Lainson worked out Premier Travel blinds to fit them and thus they gave a full "display" rather than being "blanked" off. The London Transport STLs were blanked off to a single line destination only but as Mr Lainson told me: "We were pretty short of cash I'm afraid."

They were, as I recall, all cannibalised blinds off old vehicles and as the Empire had considerably expanded beyond the "old vehicles" many had no "modern" Premier destinations (nor were they added) and the word RELIEF was constantly employed - so much so that they received a formal warning about this from the Eastern Area Traffic Commissioners after a complaint I believe from a member of the public. This warning was acknowledged but never changed the STL blinds so far as I know. From memory they were blanked off or painted out to accommodate whatever cannibalised blind they had acquired.

Or as my conducting "instructress" (Maisie Francis, still alive at great age I have been told) said: "If it isn't on the blind turn it to RELIEF or if there is a BLANK you can use that. They'll all know anyway because of the time."

Proud to serve

My connection with PT goes back over 50 years and it was a very special time of my life. I was very young at the time and my time with PT taught me about people and how to deal with them. The way the Lainson and Matthews family dealt with their staff also taught me how to deal with people when I was in charge of them and I learned all my lessons there.

I regard it as an honour to pay tribute to what I still think was an extraordinary company run - and maintained - by some very special people.

It certainly is not a rose tinted view - frozen to death on the back of a Southdown Guy Arab or frozen to death and DEAFENED while driving one - is not rose tinted. Think the current weather in some parts of the world [written in February 2012] - no heaters.

Being nearly an hour late thanks to freezing fog in getting to Drummer Street to work the Saturday 10.45 to Chrishall Service 9. All Eastern Counties vehicles from Hills Road off the road from 7.30 that evening. Conducting a Bristol K5G I think it was - deserted bus station (usually very busy for last trips at that time on a Saturday) – 72 people I had on board that night.

Service 9 had a licence restriction - no setting down before the Cambridge City boundary (as you came into Great Shelford as I recall) to protect ECOC. The fare table for PT had blanks before that point. I think the single fare to Gt Shelford was around 10d at the time but this was a very long time ago.

It matters not. Among the 72 I had a few punters trying to get home to Trumpington and a considerable Shelford lot having been abandoned by ECOC - but we were not allowed to stop at Trumpington. Improvised solution? Took them all, charged them the Great Shelford first setting down fare (a couple of "it's only seven pence on the Counties were met with: "Well it's ten pence on here if you want to get home" - gave them a 10d ticket apart from one lady who only had eight pence and I allowed her that and gave her a ten pence ticket and met the shortfall out of my own pocket.

When we came into Trumpington High Street on this galleon in the fog I suddenly realised as we sailed past the stop that my driver (Mr Wisbey) would not have been prepared to be stopping at a bus stop in Trumpington as no set down/pick ups allowed. So I gave him the emergency six bells and we eventually ground to a halt.

"This is our only stop in Trumpington" I bellowed and the illegals piled off. Some way from the Post Office.

I went round to the front. Mr Wisbey opened his sliding window and above the beat of a Gardner engine idling (and you all know what that is) Mr W said "what's up?" "Nothing" I said.

I think we got back to Chrishall about 1 a.m. and we had a good laugh about it later.

Executive decisions and all that. I guessed that at around midnight in freezing fog there wouldn't be too many staff from the Eastern Area Traffic Commissioners trying to spot illegal set downs by Premier Travel. In any event I had charged them the fare to the Boundary.

Apart, as a youngster, the fun of doing it at the time it really taught me a great deal in every respect. I learned far more than conducting or driving with Premier Travel and I remain extremely grateful to PT for all those "life lessons". I made lifelong friendships, too, and I think my proudest (and probably saddest) moment was when my eulogy to Arthur Lainson was read out at his funeral by his widow.

But if he had not employed me in the first place I couldn't have written it!

Nor could I have set down people illegally on that foggy night.

Special company from top to bottom and very proud to have been part of it.

Night duties

A few more asides about Premier Travel.....

The last rostered stage carriage crew finish was roughly 1.45 a.m. on a Monday morning.

You worked the 9 p.m. Sunday night which duplicated the last journey Service 9 to Chrishall as far as Stapleford (cinema stuff) and went back on service to Cambridge. Then you worked Service 8 for the RAF boys out on the town (and sometimes a few ladies as well) at 10 p.m. to RAF Duxford or Duxford Aero (depending on the blind) and dumped them all at the Guard Room. Then Service 16 (no passengers at all in my time) to Whittlesford Station five or six minutes down the road. Then await arrival of train at Whittlesford Station at 11 p.m for the lads wanting to get back to Duxford - occasionally a few "too far gone" on leave to either have any money or be capable of handing it over!

I've the duty card for this.

It reads: " Await arrival of train connection (Whittlesford Station) and if longer than 30 minutes consult with station staff as to arrival. If seriously delayed crew can abandon this journey."

So they would have had to walk it. It wasn't that far.

Assuming it was on time or thereabouts the Duty Card continues:

DEAD CAR from RAF Duxford to Cambridge Railway Station.

1.00 a.m Service 33 (AWAIT ARRIVAL OF TRAIN) to Oakington Aerodrome. (No clue as to how long you had to wait).

1.20 DEAD TO CHRISHALL.

I think you signed on at 11.45 a.m. for this one.

Actually, in practical terms, you did not go DEAD CAR to Cambridge Station. You went to Drummer Street and got a cuppa or bacon roll from the caravan bloke just before he packed up if you wanted. THEN you went to the Railway Station and collected those on Long Week End Leave.

It was a very long shift and the late Dennis Greenhill (Premier Travel's last full time conductor) told a wonderful story about how one night he did this shift and arrived back at Chrishall then realising that all his rolled up bank notes of the time were missing.

He drove to Oakington on his moped the following morning and found it had been handed in at the Guard Room! You could take £40 or £50 quid on this shift which was considerable money at the time. You couldn't pay in at any PT garage after about 6 p.m. at any garage in my time and so you took your bag home and paid it in when you were next on. You did however have to put your waybill through the letter box but you had to take the cash home with you.

I digress as always. Stan Pennell was the first staff rep on the Premier Travel board and he told a wonderful story about one of the Board meetings he attended.

His own words: "Mr Frank (Matthews) asked if there was any other business. So I said yes: I'm fed up being bitten by bloody fleas while driving Service 5 (Birmingham-Clacton). They all looked at me so I told them that our Birmingham lodgings were flea ridden and I'd got the bites to prove it. I also told them that the landlady was a miserable old cow as well."

Mr Lainson said: "We'll look into this!" I said: "If you don't believe me go and sleep in the bed yourself. I never knew if he did but three weeks later we were all moved to a small hotel not far from Digbeth Street which was pretty decent and a great improvement."

And more . . .

Railways had their "working timetables" which survive in number but bus duty cards have not been so lucky and were transient pieces of paper rarely preserved.

But even in comparatively small companies like Premier it was a very complex operation frequently altered by "Daily Orders" as things had to be done on the hoof.

In the early 50's there was a remarkable duty at Haverhill involving a school term duplicate from Haverhill to Saffron Walden (the stage section of Service 38 to Kings X) - this worked back to Haverhill at 10 a.m. except on Thursdays. On Thursdays the crew were instructed to leave the bus on Saffron Walden Common, walk to the railway station and begin a very convoluted journey over now closed railway lines to Haverhill! The entire process had to be repeated in reverse on Thursdays to operate at 4 p.m. out of Saffron Walden - total amount of driving and conducting about an hour and a half, the rest of the duty spent travelling! Bonkers! It would have been cheaper to tell them to get a taxi to Haverhill (and far quicker) or just bring the bus back dead. Problem was that Thursday was a dead day in Haverhill/Walden with very little to do and no market services.

Mind you this was in the "Windmill Timetable" era of the early 50s when they went berserk and overstretched themselves (and cost the planner of this experiment his job) and which provoked the very East London landlady of the Meesden "Fox" public house (Meesden about as rural as you could get then) to make the classic observation: "Bleedin' ell. I ain't seen so many bleedin' buses since I left London."

Grand try but life was changing. The telly had just about arrived and you could pick up pre-war Ford Model Y's for £15 or less (much less if you were good at mechanics and the vehicle was "broken"/non-runner). One of Premier's conductors who was a farmworker before he joined told me his first car was bought for £5 because it was seized and he towed it home with a farm tractor and his brother steering. Eventually they got it going again. The Golden Age for bus travel was on the slippery slope.

An Excursion operation

The picture here <http://www.sct61.org.uk/ltrf282> shows a Premier Travel RF taken by Brian Pask sometime in the 60s.

Quite understandably, some doubt has been expressed as to whether this was, in fact, an excursion as proclaimed or merely a haphazard indicator choice. The condition of the fairly careworn RF doesn't help.

But it WAS an excursion although one which led to a fraught relationship between Eastern Counties and Premier Travel for several years albeit one with some quite funny moments.

When Premier bought out Grey Pullman at Haverhill in the late 40s one of the excursion licences that came with it gave Premier the right to run a Saturday excursion leaving Haverhill Market Hill at 1.30 p.m. direct to Cambridge with no intermediate passengers allowed, return fares only, and restricted to one saloon vehicle. You could prebook and get a paper excursion ticket at the office on the corner of Camps Road or you could turn up on the day and, provided accommodation was available, you were promptly issued with a four shilling Insert Setright return issued by the driver. An A Board was placed in front of the vehicle (bit like the seaside Mystery Tours etc).

The vehicle travelled direct to Cambridge and depending on traffic you could do it in about 40 minutes. For years this operated without let or hindrance and with apparently no interest at all from ECOC. Then something, or someone, at Cambridge changed and Eastern Counties suddenly declared war on Premier Travel beginning in the late 1950s and continuing for several years and certainly into the likely time of Brian's picture. It was surprising that they were that bothered because, so far as I remember, it was never a major money spinner. For years it was an OB job and if you had 15 on board you thought you were doing well. It did get better in the summer school holidays and at Christmas but was never a major money maker. I would think with an OB it just about covered itself.

The problem was that Eastern Counties had a 1.35 p.m. departure from Haverhill Market Hill on double deck operated Service 113. This wandered up through the twisty roads of Wethersfield and called in at Linton as well - all told it took about an hour to reach Cambridge. Suddenly Premier Travel found themselves accused of "abstracting traffic" and breaching their licence.

It must be said that, in the past, it is likely that they occasionally broke the "letter of the law" because some drivers would pick up their wife/friends on the way out of Haverhill before heading for the main road but that was the extent of it. It certainly never, so far as I know, diverted off the main road to the villages either side and had it done so the flat fare of four shillings in those days wouldn't have been much of a bargain the closer you got to Cambridge.

The first complaint was the A-board in front of the vehicle. ECOC complained to the Traffic Commissioners who wrote to Arthur Lainson for his response. His response was to take Mother on a day trip first to Lowestoft and then along the coast to Cromer where Mrs took photographs of Eastern Counties (and Metropolitan Coaches) hawking for excursions with A-boards in front of the vehicles. A further complaint was that the driver of Premier Travel carried an insert Setright machine of which they were highly suspicious.

The counter to that was that the driver could issue an excursion ticket at the door if he wanted (no restriction on the licence as to when the seat was booked) and Mr Lainson said that if ECOC would prefer it an official Excursion ticket would be issued instead of an Insert Setright.

In correspondence I have Eastern Counties countered that they could see no reason why an Insert Setright machine should be carried at all. That was pretty weak, I think, and was immediately blown away by Arthur who pointed out - quite correctly - that the Cambridge Excursion was the start of a duty which included stage carriage work. When the Cambridge excursion got back to Haverhill (about 5.20 p.m) it had a short break and then went dead to West Wrating where it duplicated the cinema bus double decker. Later in the evening it duplicated (if necessary) the late runs returning the RAF lads who had been "out on the town" (such as it was) back to RAF Stradishall. The driver was also required to hang about for the midnight Bumpsteads Circular just in case that needed relief as well. So that's why he had a ticket machine.

Undeterred ECOC further complained that they had "evidence" that the destination indicator was showing Cambridge which, they suggested, was an attempt to encourage passengers waiting for their 1.35 p.m. departure to choose Premier Travel instead. By this time I sense the Traffic Commissioners were being slightly worn down by this and in the hope of ending this suggested to Arthur Lainson that perhaps the buses could show PRIVATE or EXCURSION to which Mr Lainson readily agreed and an instruction was issued to Haverhill garage. The A-Board of course was still saying "Excursion to Cambridge, 4/- return"

In the spirit of the thing - and with a Lainson eye twinkle - the board was repainted to read: "Excursion to Cambridge" with DIRECT written in capital letters added to it.

Was this fuel on the fire? Possibly because ECOC then attempted a "secret" operation which, alas, came to naught.

Well it might have been secret had it not been for the community of bus folk, the drivers and conductors of their day. ECOC had an outstation at Haverhill (two double deckers and two saloons in my time, also kept in Camps Road where the PT garage was). We all knew their boys and girls and they knew us - same industry and, anyway, we sometimes gave them a lift to begin their duty or took them home free of charge at the end of it. For years one of the Haverhill conductors hitched a lift in on Premier's contract to Gurteens clothing factory for his early shift. And why not? Another drove part time for Burtons who were sometimes hired in for Clacton reliefs by Premier. So very small rural world. Same business, different bosses.

And thus it came to pass that the ECOC "master plan" became known almost as soon as it was hatched. It filtered through to the PT Haverhill depot that ECOC were proposing to send an Inspector in "plain clothes" to monitor the Premier Travel excursion. He was going to travel down on the 12.5 p.m. out of Cambridge, duly observe the Premier Travel excursion vehicle, count the number of passengers when it departed, and go back to Cambridge on their round the houses 136 up through the Camps villages at 2.15 p.m. Meanwhile another "plain clothes" Inspector was to meet the vehicle at Drummer Street and count the number of passengers that got off.

This master plan appealed immensely to the Depot Manager of Premier Travel, the late Roly Scrivener, who immediately announced: "Right, I'm going to drive this Saturday" and duly hiked an OB round an hour ahead of schedule, put out the "new" A-Board, and sat back and waited. There were ten prebooked passengers apparently, about average I would say.

It turned out to be a day of torrential rain, so Roly told me. When the 12.5 from Cambridge arrived at Haverhill and parked up it left one man not going shopping. As it was raining so hard he took shelter in a nearby shop doorway but then produced a pocket book and made several notes. As if that wasn't a giveaway Roly said: "You could tell he was an inspector. He was wearing a company greatcoat and he looked a right miserable sod."

Roly sold three more tickets at the door - he had carefully wound up EXCURSION on the front - and prompt on 1.30 kicked the OB into life, raised himself from the driving seat and said to the man in the doorway: "Oi....you!". Roly claimed the man looked slightly startled. Roly added: "If it helps, mate, I've got thirteen on board" gave him a thumbs up and slid the OB door shut. He claims the Haverhill conductor on the 1.35 p.m. ECOC immediately in front of him had to suppress a serious bout of snorting laughter.

I know it's not in the league of mini-bus wars after deregulation but that's why the RF in Brian's picture (this service rarely photographed) says EXCURSION on the front.