

Yet More Premier Travel Memories

A further selection of short stories from Alan M Watkins

Some thoughts on vehicles

[Reflecting on pictures of 1950s buses]. Most (all of us?) love these old vehicles to pieces but the truth of the matter is that some of them were a real so and so to drive if you compare it (which obviously one now can) with the state-of-the-art modern vehicles. This was a cab with no "power anything" except YOU. If you were lucky in some post War vehicles you had the little trafficators that came out from either side (and inevitably got stuck by the way sooner or later) but most of the time it was hand signals. Most changes from dipped headlights to main beam were a stud on the floor, usually near the accelerator. In cab heating was at the very best minimal and usually non-existent. One advantage, in summer, is that you could often open the drivers forward window to get a through flow of air. But that was where the industry was at the time (lorries and cars as well). We knew no better and we got on with it (as every generation does in anything)

I mentioned the old Southdown Guys but in fairness to them I should point out that they were rugged and reliable although the "dip" lighting left something to be desired - distributing a small pool of light about 10 yards ahead of you which might have been fine on a brightly lit Brighton seafront but in deepest rural Britain with no street lighting at all was another moment of the time. They were, however, incredibly noisy and deafening in the cab. I've heard it described as a "bark" so I'll go with that. I do not know but perhaps it was just amplified by the bodywork.

A little story about those Guys if I may. When they were the main double decker fleet of Premier Travel two of them set off every Saturday night from Bishops Stortford car park at 10.45 p.m. One on Service 10 going to Chrishall (Garage) on the straight route via Langley and Clavering and one on Service 26 going to Barley. We followed each other through Manuden until the "Signpost to Berden" where 10 carried straight on and whoever was driving Service 26 had to seriously slow down, swing out in a narrow road, ram it down into second as the revs dropped and then use the four and half turns of the steering wheel (no power assistance available) to go into full lock to enter the complete blackness of the narrow road to Berden. If you had a full house on, as was likely, the steering got heavier and heavier. But we did it!

The 10 got to Chrishall just before Midnight if all was well and the 26 arrived at Barley around the same time. There was a long tradition of these late finish Saturday crews sharing a cup of tea in what passed for the staff "rest room" and both conductors had to stick their waybill through the office door. There was no one to pay in to, so you took the money home with you and paid in the next time you were on. Which might have been the next day or the following Thursday if you were a part timer. Either way Premier knew how much you owed them!

Chrishall is/was in the middle of nowhere. Completely rural England then and now. The 26 at Barley was then lights out dead to Chrishall and about three miles away as the proverbial crow flies (see under country mile as well). But it was not like a crow. The Guy Arab on Service 26 had to negotiate the "Chrishall Downs" to get home which involved changing into first and climbing. The Service 10 crew in the stillness of a rural night could often hear this and the response of the Guy Arab in going down into first followed by a hefty climb. That was nearly two miles away across an otherwise silent countryside asleep.

Time to put the kettle on! They won't be long.

More recollections

These were essentially Market Day and Cinema buses "to and from" with very little intermediate traffic. Occasionally someone got on to go "visiting" and then caught a later bus back in the evening but there was not much of this. Also it's a pretty lonely road between Barley and Chrishall particularly just before Midnight! You might see the odd fox but that was about it - oh and sometimes Pc Plod on his bicycle doing his late-night rounds. The Chrishall "bobby" took it in turns with Barkway to do this patch at night. Occasionally they would "hitch a lift" (especially if it was very bad weather) complete with bike!

The whole of PT's area was predominantly very rural and mostly narrow roads but the only route which couldn't take a double decker was the section of the 12 between Sandon and Hitchin because there was a bridge too low even for lowbridge vehicles. Anything going all the way to Hitchin had to be a saloon - mostly an OB but sometimes a Lancet III might turn up on it. Most of the daily services were predominantly double deck operated but they could actually turn up on any route including the Market Days. This was especially so during the Summer when all available saloons were on Express/Excursions etc and so many services which normally saw a saloon found themselves confronted with an elderly double decker operated probably by a Pye Contract driver on overtime and a part-time conductor. I certainly conducted one of the huge County Class Daimlers of Premier both to Camps End (where the road runs out completely and you had to go down a farm track to back round at Spindleberry Cottage) and the little Market Day jaunt to Little Walden.

I think I've told the story before but I was once conducting service 10 on a Thursday market day out of Stortford when our progress was reduced to three miles an hour or less by an enormous set of steam ploughing engines moving from one job to another. When we did stop to let people off we just caught up with them again a few hundred yards up the road. All I remember was that we were stuck behind them for the best part of half an hour with the last one towing a line of water carts and a living van emblazoned with TAYLOR BROTHERS, WIMBISH, STEAM PLOUGHING AND CULTIVATING CONTRACTORS and underneath

DREDGING UNDERTAKEN before they eventually turned off into their next job. No overtaking possibilities at all. Such was life then. Nothing to be done - you all shared the same road.

MacBrayne's rural routes had a different problem - sheep and/or Highland cattle.

At the end of the day - Easter Monday 1955

It is 11.15 p.m. on Easter Monday [2016] as I write this. Aside from any private hire work Premier Travel would still have buses out on the road in 1955.

A double decker on Service 1 Cambridge-Royston would be at Harston - dead to Chrishall on arrival at Royston. Time to get that waybill made up and signed so you can push it through the Office Door. Leave your box in the Staff Room. Take the money home with you.

The Service 39 double decker off Service 26 ex Bishops Stortford would just have arrived at Chrishall Garage.

The coach which did the Hastings & Eastbourne Excursion arrive Cambridge 10.45 approximately would be on the way back to either Chrishall or Haverhill depending on who supplied the Driver.

The Service 29 vehicle (usually an OB) which met the London Kings Cross Service 38 in Saffron Walden High Street would be somewhere in deep dark Ashdon heading for a finish at Kedington just before midnight. Dead back to Haverhill. Not very far - about 10 minutes because you ignored the diversion to Great and Little Wratting once the lights were out and came back on the main road. You were first home of the ultra-late brigade.

Service 38 has gone its own way from Saffron Walden with a crew who took over at 4 p.m. and is now in deep dark Radwinter heading for Cowlinge due 12.25 a.m. Back dead to Haverhill - take the money home with you. Back in the yard just before 1 a.m. If the stragglers got off at Stradishall you could forget going on to Cowlinge and back round into the Guard Room entrance so possibly earlier back home. Not a foot down road but get that waybill done.

The night is still young for the following: a Chrishall bus which worked the semi-stage service into Kings Cross tonight is now 15 minutes out Kings Cross heading for Upwood Aerodrome where it is due at 2 a.m. Best part of an hour back to Chrishall in pitch black Britain.

Another saloon is 15 minutes out of Coventry also heading for Upwood having started at Birmingham. Due Upwood 2.15 a.m. and then back to whichever depot supplied it. If Godmanchester it's a 20-minute job. If Chrishall or Haverhill somewhat longer.

Also on the road is the bus which also worked a different semi stage service this evening into Kings Cross (the 7/28 were not amalgamated on Sunday/Bank Holiday evenings) because both vehicles worked home on Forces Express so they both went through whether loadings justified or not. This one has already set out at 10.30 p.m. from Kings Cross for Stradishall Aerodrome (Guard Room) where it is due at 1.30 a.m. This down journey was usually a Chrishall bus so then dead back to Chrishall which is going to add the best part an hour as well. On these lanes and by-ways dead journeys it was quite hard to put your foot down if you wanted to stay on the road. "Badger, get out of the way". There was not then, and is not now, any motorway type "quick way" back to either Chrishall or Haverhill.

No paying in with the Forces Services - paper return tickets sold on the Camps in advance collected in on the return journey and also stuffed through the letter box. Have your own rubber band for this. There might be more than one vehicle on the Forces Services as it obviously depended on the bookings but Easter Leave was Easter Leave. And if it took two to get them out it will take two to get them back. However if you worked in to London on a semi-stage and came back on Forces Express as 7/28 did on bank holidays you had to put that waybill through the door as well.

I digress but courtesy of the Premier Traffic arrangements for Easter Monday 1955 when it fell on April 11th.

As was in the era of vehicles we all love looking at.

A Character

Premier Travel produced many great and individual characters among their employees but none more so than the person I am going to tell you about.

Karl Woebelmann arrived in Britain in difficult circumstances. He had been press ganged out of a "reserved occupation" in Germany (railway fireman) to fight for Mr Hitler very late in the War as (in both countries) reserved occupations were plundered as it came to a head. Karl, a Private, was captured by us in the aftermath of Normandy and was duly shipped to Britain as a Prisoner of War and was sent to the Camp at Trumpington, a suburb of Cambridge, where on a shilling a day and accompanied by armed escorts he was shipped out to work on various local farms and shipped back again at night.

These escorts continued after the War had ended although the atmosphere became slightly more relaxed. Still on one shilling a day Karl was one of many mobilised to help clear roads in the severe Winter of 1947. In that year he was told he would be flown back to Germany or could apply to stay if he so wished but would have to be self-funding if he decided to do that.

[One of the things that Karl told me in that original chat and which I left out above was that, naturally enough, as a former fireman on the German State Railway (or whatever it was then) he wrote to the L.N.E.R as was about the possibility of a job as a railway fireman and received a letter saying that they were "unable to entertain your application." Feelings were raw as stated].

He consulted the farmer for whom he regularly worked who expressed a wish to keep him - "best man with cows I've had" Karl said proudly- and so he opted to stay in Britain on better than a shilling a day but under £2 a week basic salary, lodging in Withersfield which was 18 shillings a week of that. No overtime.

Like many villages Withersfield used to hold Saturday night dances in the village hall. One night he danced with and fell in love with a local girl called Evelyn. It was a difficult courtship. Her Dad did not approve of her liaison with a German Prisoner of War and there were various subterfuges as to them meeting. But they were both in love and so it came to a sort of head where both of them stood before her parents and said they wanted to marry.

Karl said: "Her father said No and I thought that was the end of it to be honest. But then I saw her Mother a few days later in the street who said: "About Evelyn, would you be willing to marry her in the Church?"

(St Mary the Virgin, and still there)

Karl said: "I told her I would do anything for her and she said she thought I would. I know she loves you."

And, so, eventually the marriage was "approved" (or approved by Mum anyway) and they were married at St Mary the Virgin and moved in to somewhat cramped accommodation at Withersfield Council Houses with her parents. About a year later they produced a baby girl. About six months after that Evelyn became pregnant again in what Karl described as a "Christmas Accident".

What has this to do with buses and Premier Travel? Quite a lot actually. So a babe in arms in a Council House and another on the way on farm workers money - step forward the Haverhill Echo at 4d a week.

PREMIER TRAVEL LTD: VACANCY FOR CONDUCTOR AT HAVERHILL DEPOT - APPLY PREMIER TRAVEL, CAMPS ROAD, HAVERHILL.

"I was trying out possible jobs because we could not really afford a second baby" Karl said. "I got the job and the starting money was four pounds a week which was nearly double my wages and it was a lot easier than being out on the farm. It changed our lives because you could earn a lot on overtime sometimes".

Karl became much loved by all and sundry at Haverhill Premier Travel, both staff and passengers. The proverbial Gentle Giant - 6ft 4", around 14 stone from top to bottom -the original helping Old Ladies man. Proud of his two little girls who attended the Premier Travel Christmas parties. A really gentle soul plucked from the nightmare of war as it turned out.

It is not my story. It is Karl's story as told to a then Young Person when I was a duplicate to Bury St Edmunds and asked how he had ended up here.

Karl was one of those very special people who you sometimes meet in life, a person who I would say exuded kindness. I saw him around the garage at Haverhill but we only "met" on that day in Bury St Edmunds where I was his duplicate - Bury was normally a two decker job, one going via a direct route and the other wandering round the lanes and then meeting up again on the run in. In my time it was a very popular service and although you could get

to Bury via Eastern Counties Premier were a lot cheaper. We had a fairly long layover before repeating the process back to Haverhill and that is where that original chat took place.

Over the next couple of years I learned a fair bit more about him. Roly Scrivener, the Haverhill chargehand/depot manager, who described Karl as "one of the nicest people I have ever met", told me that after their marriage they had to put up with a bit of rural resentment which, as Roly said, was understandable in places where families were mourning War loss yet to be inscribed on the village Memorials and, possibly, where feelings were very raw.

Bit by bit, Roly told me, Karl repaired that. He and his wife threw themselves into village activities - like most rural council houses of the time that at Withersfield had a huge back garden and, like the chief mechanic Bill Ruffle, Karl threw himself into gardening, providing a great deal of the produce for the Withersfield Harvest Festival. He became a regular winner at local flower shows, gifting his flowers and veg to the local OAP club. Roly told me that Karl had skills as a carpenter/repair man and locally sometimes provided those skills free of charge to those in rural need (then, as now).

On the road he was a terrific ambassador for Premier Travel - the genial gentle giant. I once walked with him from the garage to Market Hill to take over the Saturday afternoon bus to London on which I was conducting the Relief and people smiled at him, said Hello, said "How Are You" and I think someone even waved from the other side of the road. So, perhaps, by then he was integrated.

Huge man who ambled about with a ready smile, who loved where he was, what he had, and what he was doing. I knew Evelyn and the two girls - the girls inherited their father's flaxen hair - because I sometimes picked them up to take them into Cambridge but by then the girls were growing up. Here is a digression: there were no staff/relative passes on Premier Travel (BTC had an elaborate pass system, either free or half fare) but on Premier Travel you just didn't charge them! As previously posted, same with other bus company staff wearing their badge or a Police officer in uniform.

Long after my time Karl was forced to retire by a recurrent heart problem which subsequently killed him. Roly told me that the church he was married in was packed out for his funeral - including the Lainsons - so perhaps he did integrate?

On a technical note the Daily Orders at Haverhill ignored the surname and just listed him as KARL. As you would.

Gone missing . . .

When I started at PT there were three permanent conductors at Haverhill of which Karl was one, a lady of similar distinction of whom I will post in due course who had started with Burgoin who PT bought out, and an Irish lad of which more anon. Part timers helped them cope with busy days, holidays, sickness etc and some (including me) were shared between Haverhill and Chrishall (Have Insert Setright, will travel) and occasionally sent to Godmanchester as well. My first weekend was at Chrishall, my second weekend was at Haverhill.

Back briefly to the Irish Haverhill conductor. He'd only been there a few months before he did a runner with an entire weekend takings leaving behind an Irish girl with a four-month-old baby and two other children quite young marooned in a council house in Western Avenue, Haverhill, with no money. When the hapless Irish girl turned up at Camps Road depot in tears wondering where her husband was on the Monday morning a response kicked in.

Roly Scrivener telephoned Market Hill, (Cambridge 3327) to let them know about their missing Conductor and the missing money.

By the time Mrs Lainson turned up on the doorstep waving a welcome £10 note - and only one of several as the weeks progressed - Mrs German Conductor had been alerted by her husband and turned up to be a shoulder to cry on, help change nappies, and providing vegetables plundered from the back garden at the Withersfield (Council Houses) stage point on Service 44.

On duties and scheduling

While Premier Travel had duty cards - and stuck to them on the main daily routes - more or less everything else was subject to daily change. Indeed as a part timer (as I was) you usually only knew the sign on time for certain - Gricey (Frank Grice, the Traffic Manager) would buttonhole you if you were working or, if you were off, would telephone you and ask you if you could do a sign on at a particular time on the day they wanted you. You always got a finish time although this could be rather vague but unlike the organised Big Boys it was a very small rural company.

Here is a running order instruction for a duty that I did in the late 1950s one Friday. Also although every vehicle had a Fleet Number these appeared only on the Official Fleet List and were NEVER used on the Daily Orders of any depot - just the registration number with two exceptions. The one and only AEC acquired with the business of Burgoin of Haverhill was always listed as REGAL and a Dennis Lancet II acquired second-hand from Salopia (ANT 471) was always listed as ANT as it was universally known to all as The Ant.

The Sign On was 6.45 a.m. and the Daily Orders read:

WATKINS 422 (This was a Bedford OB new to PT with a Mulliner 31 seat bus body and which was pretty knackered by then having done not far short of a million miles)

DEAD to Newton (Green)

D/C (Drive/Conduct) 7.10 a.m. Service 1 duplicate to Cambridge 7.40 a.m.

DEAD TO ICKLETON SCHOOL FOR:

8.35 a.m. Ickleton-London (SHOW KINGS X) Service 7

Hand over passengers to Service 28 vehicle at Jubilee Cafe.

IF TOO MANY PASSENGERS FOR ONE VEHICLE YOU MUST TELEPHONE CHRISHALL 226 before proceeding. (Service 7/28 to London were basically hail and ride as would be said today and although it was unlikely that two vehicles would be required outside of Christmas, Easter, major Bank Holidays, it could not entirely be ruled out). I cannot remember it happening outside of Holiday Periods.

DEAD TO LANGLEY PRIMARY SCHOOL

11.30 a.m. PH (Private Hire) Langley to Saffron Walden Swimming Baths and return at 1.45 p.m.

DEAD TO SAFFRON WALDEN COMMON

4.30 p.m. SERVICE 12 ROUTE SCHOOL CONTRACT DUPLICATE TO CHRISHALL (VIA POND STREET) - you showed PRIVATE on this as it veered off the Registered Route for the contract. The kids all knew. 5.10 pm

5.45 pm DEAD TO JUBILEE CAFE

D/C Service 7 to Ickleton or as far as last passenger

DEAD TO CHRISHALL AND SIGN OFF.

It was a long day overall in an age of no drivers' hours and no tachographs but on the bright side you were on time and a quarter from about 2.15 p.m and time and a half from around 6 p.m.

If "Gricey" was really desperate he might say: 'I'll put you on double time after five o'clock (this was usually something requiring an early start and a Midnight finish).

I digress as usual and that was then. But you could sometimes make serious money. By doing horrendous hours I once took home nearly £15 in one week at a time when the standard agricultural worker was on little more than £3-10 shillings a week.

London service scheduling

And then there were the secret workings/arrangements of tiny companies like Premier Travel whose two village "London Express Services" (Express 7/28) involved two vehicles meandering through villages in Cambridgeshire, Essex and Hertfordshire and, at one point, passing each other going in opposite directions both with KINGS X on the front. Good to give a wave!

Theoretically these were pre-booked Express services but in reality only the London area bookings were pre-booked and got on to a "chart". Otherwise the timetable stated: "Seats should be booked in advance. Tickets will be issued on the Coaches only if Accommodation is available".

That did not actually work from the countryside end. No one booked in advance at the countryside end and just waved you down at the roadside. "Two returns to London please" or nearer the festive season or nearer to Santa: "Two and two half returns to London please." No problem aside from calculating that child returns were three pence above half fare.

So there might be a "chart" for both, but you had no idea how many casuals you would pick up along the way.

Premier Travel did it this way. They assumed that Services 7/28 might morph into one bus to KINGS X but there was no hint of this in the timetable. The Daily Orders would nominate which ONE bus would continue to London and which would beetle back to Chrishall for something else they had programmed for it.

The "London count" took place on a point not timetabled in the Premier literature - it was on the forecourt of the Jubilee Transport Cafe at Puckeridge (which was not in the timetable of either). If the combined 7/28 could fill one bus off the one nominated bus went to Kings X.

If there were too many "roadsides" (rare but most likely in the run up to Christmas in my time) for one vehicle, both went to London.

Or as Daily Orders said (if you were doing the vehicle not scheduled to go through to London) in Capital Letters: "IF YOU ARE REQUIRED TO GO THROUGH TO LONDON YOU MUST TELEPHONE CHRISHALL 226 BEFORE DOING SO."

Indeedy because "if going through to London" it would bugger the rest of my Daily Orders which might read: Dead to Brent Pelham Primary School. 11.15 a.m. PRIVATE HIRE Brent Pelham-Clavering football match. Return at hirer time - dead to Chrishall. If through to London it was a problem for someone else.