

Bristol SCs

Another story from Alan M Watkins

I remember these very well of course and the two prototypes - as far as I recall these were tried out round the various Eastern National depots but some certainly settled at Maldon and if the number blind is to be believed this old chap last saw service on the 97 to Bradwell Power Station which had contract journeys not in the public timetable as well as those that were - one of them was a 4.50 a.m. Sunday morning Maldon- Power Station (bet that was a popular shift). One route they were used on was Maldon-South Woodham which is actually quite hilly in places and these were totally unsuited for that sort of work.

The problem with the SC was a simple one - if it was a flat lightly used route you could get very good figures - Lincs Road Car could get 20 mpg sometimes which for a 35 seater is pretty good. But as soon as the bus was heavily loaded and had any sort of inclines to deal with it was hopeless - it was a 4-cylinder Gardner and it just ran out of steam and then of course the mpg dropped like a stone. And contrary to public perception there is quite a bit of Lincolnshire that does have serious hills - anywhere round the Wolds area for a start but even in other places and around Lincoln of course.

Lincs drivers disliked them - the nickname for them was Slow and Clumsy - the OMO drivers had to half turn to issue tickets and were constantly complaining about back and shoulder pain. They were also extremely noisy, especially if working hard. It was impossible to carry out a conversation in the seats nearest the front if it was pulling hard.

Lincs had more of these than anyone else - nearly 100 plus 16 33-seat coaches which were also pretty useless in that role. The express drivers used to complain that you couldn't make up time with them. It just wasn't there. The coaches were converted to bus operation. The last SC's didn't disappear from the Road Car fleet until 1975-76. There are eight road car SC's in preservation and I believe another one has recently been found in reasonable condition resting in a barn somewhere (probably fruit farm work).

Road Car also used SC's as crew vehicles (although they did this all the time with all the nominally OMO vehicles) simply because most crew shifts involved not only involved changes of routes but changes of vehicles between saloon and DD's and it was quite impractical for an OMO driver to cover say one journey in the middle of your shift. Often SC's were used as duplicates both OMO and crew operated.

The worst thing was to be a crew duplicate to an SC journey - the company rule was that you never overtook the service bus (although people did, of course) which meant waiting patiently behind this while it slowly loaded.

The windy route between Spalding and Grantham (Service 20) was a classic SC duplicate case - the 20 was operated by SC's outstationed at Bourne but in school terms the 7.40 a.m. from Bourne to Grantham required two double deck duplicates (for the Grantham schools, including Mrs Thatcher's Grammer School) - likewise the 4.30 p.m. back out. The idea was the SC was kept free to deal with any local traffic but it meant both deckers got stuck behind this thing as it trundled through the countryside, waking the dead if it met an incline.

I don't know what the arrangement was on the ENOC vehicles (I can't remember) but the Lincs SC's were unusual (for Tilling) in having a bell cord instead of bell pushes - there was just one push near the front on a column. Three of the ENOC SC's went to Cumberland and one survived in the Caernarvon area in service until about 1980.

An economic hit for operators with the right sort of operating territory but probably the least liked Bristol ever produced from the staff point of view.

And more observations . . .

Unlike the LS or MW OMO the door is not level with the driver. It couldn't be because the engine protruded into his compartment and I can assure you that no amount of quilting made any difference when it was under pressure. They couldn't step up level with him so the driver had to turn to operate the Setright and give out change. He was always at an "angle".

On a wonderful flat route somewhere out in the Fens with not many on board impressive mpg.

I used to think the City Coach Company Seddon's were noisy (and they had a bulkhead) until, minus bulkhead, doing a regular triplicate 4.25 Grimsby-Market Rasen with 35 on and 8 standing (Service 3 to Lincoln) as it slogged it's way through the Ravendale Valley (hint: Valley is the key word here).

In 2008 the driver or crew would be demanding ear muffs - Elf and Safety and all that. It's not nice to hear a Gardner engine in real distress or not so close to you anyway.

A few over 300 sold, nearly 100 of them to the Road Car. Tells it's own story I think.

Attractive to some managements for the potential mpg but in every other respect an absolute nightmare. I think some decided it was false economy. And the minute it hit a real hill away went your 15-20 mpg.

I am glad that they have been preserved, of course, although with fuel prices being what they are I hope the preservationists don't have 35 and eight standing.

A very funny Bristol SC story:

All regular contributors [to the now defunct Ceased Bus Operators discussion group] will be aware of my comments on the noise ratio of the Bristol SC (or Slow and Clumsy as it was known at LRCC).

This lightweight vehicle in which everything under stress rattled in sympathy with anything else under stress was designed by Bristol/ECW for one reason only - the important reason of fuel economy. By keeping the weight to the minimum they achieved and operators like ECOC and LRCC ordered them in droves both as OMO vehicles (although hideously designed for that) but because trials proved that on a reasonably flat route you could get 20mpg out of them which were extraordinarily good figures for the time and even beat OB's whose average, if not under too much stress, came in at around 15mpg which, in it's day, was equally wonderful.

So far as I know the SC came with only a four-cylinder engine (which makes sense on the economy front but less helpful on hills) particularly with a full load. So it made absolute sense for LRCC to send two of them to Louth which probably had the most hilly territory across the Wolds! Early corporate thinking perhaps?

This story is not mine. It belongs to William Cash who is now in his early 90s and lives in Dunster. He doesn't have a computer and I was put in touch with him through a fellow member of the Omnibus Society living in the area and, by letter, he has provided me with some wonderful stuff on Southern National way before my time. William drove lorries in World War II for the Army as a youngster and on demob applied for and got a job as a SN driver at Minehead something he did until his retirement "as I really enjoyed my time on the buses."

This is in his own words:

"During the summer months at Minehead I went on to coach driving (not the bus routes) and I did all sorts of excursions and tours. Sometime in the 50s I was made up to Head Coach Driver at the garage and got an extra six shillings a week but only during the Summer and this stopped in about the second week of September whether you were still doing excursions and tours or not.

"It was useful for the time because you also got to keep the tips as well. You couldn't earn much money in the Winter in those days except for a bit at Christmas when Overtime was available or you did all day on a Stage and then did a Private Hire in the evening, so you tried to make the money in the Summer. I put all my high pay into my National Savings Bank Account. My missus said why don't you spend it and I told her it wouldn't be there in the Winter.

"One year Mr Ensor who was Chief Inspector at Minehead said to me:

"Billy, I've got a big job for you. They are trying out a new bus and I want you to drive it. You've got to drive it for a week and there's lots of important people on it.

"Anyway, I turned up on the Monday morning and there was a red bus marked Thames Vally (sic) and I was told to drive it. Some of the seats had concrete slabs on them but there was only five or six people aboard. So I got on and drove around as instructed all our routes that we did out of Minehead. I just did there and back over the routes and then I could go home.

"I don't know who the Big Wigs were but Ensor told me that there was a Director, the Traffic Manager from Exeter, the Engineer chap from Exeter. Who the others were I do not know. Anyway I drove them around. It was easy to drive but it didn't half make a noise - in this bus the engine was next to you.

"One day I had to go up and down Porlock Hill three times with these Big Wigs on - that was my job for the day and then I went home.

"I parked it up at the Garage and I never saw that type of bus again at Minehead."