

Alan M Watkins talks about his days as a part-time conductor with Premier Travel

It was in the 1950s when I wrote to Premier Travel and asked if they had any vacancies for part-time conductors. At the time I was living at Billericay, Essex, and had recently found the freedom of the road courtesy of a Mobylette moped.

I had a reply from Arthur Lainson, the boss, saying they had a vacancy at Haverhill depot and enclosing a form which I filled in and returned. I was then invited to attend an interview at 15 Market Hill, Cambridge, and after a couple of hours at a steady 30 mph I duly arrived on the appointed day.

Eventually I climbed two flights of very steep stairs to an eyre on the top floor wherein was ensconced the founder of Premier Travel, together with his Labrador dog. Very tall and commanding figure was my first impression and the dog was quite nice as well.

The interview went fairly well and I remember he said: "I see you have been to University so can I assume you can add up?" I could but only just and so I didn't add that bit. I then filled in a fairly lengthy form which had to be sent to the Eastern Area Traffic Commissioners confirming that I did not have any criminal offences against my name among other things. It also asked me to provide a "referee" for my character so I put down Dr Bowesman who had brought me into the world.

About a fortnight later I had a letter from Premier Travel saying that my application had been approved by the Commissioners but that I should report at 11.30 am on a Saturday not to Haverhill but to their garage at Chrishall on the Essex-Cambs border. I still have that letter.

The trusty Mobylette eventually conveyed me to Chrishall although I got lost a couple of times on the way. There I met Frank Grice, who was the Traffic Manager who presented with my official Conductors Badge and then introduced me to Mrs Francis who was to be my "teacher". "Just do as she says," he remarked "and you'll get on fine. Good luck."

We had a cup of tea brewed in a small dilapidated wooden hut and she handed me the waybill backed by a wooden board. She gave me the Insert Setright ticket rack and told me to enter the opening numbers of each different ticket, explained the procedure for "spoiled" tickets, people refusing to pay or who did not have any money. I also remember: "Always let dogs on as Mr Lainson loves dogs but take my advice: if you have more than one send one of them upstairs if you can." (I have another story about that but it is for another time)

"That's our bus", she said as a Dennis Lancet III going to Sandon (wherever that was) arrived. "Put your ticket machine on". The outgoing conductor got off, engaged a few words with Mrs Francis and departed. "He's off to the Ickleton relief" she said.

A fair number of people got off the bus at Chrishall but a fair number of people got on as well. "Have you checked your fare stage, date?" she said. Of course I hadn't. "I've done it for you," she said, "but that's the first thing you check. And whenever you issue a ticket from a shilling onwards ALWAYS turn the wheel back to zero as soon as you issue the ticket."

"Off we go," she said. "Don't worry, I'll do the bell for you." So I proceeded down the Dennis Lancet desperately trying to stay upright as I bumped down country roads which reminded me of GK Chesterton's "The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road" as I cannoned into seat ends. "Feet apart or you'll never stay upright" she said.

I don't remember all of it but I think most were returns towards Royston and if they didn't state the fare for "one-and-half return to Royston" a voice beside me said: "two and six and one and three and it should be stage 14. You should have altered that after Chrishall but never mind."

I remember that almost all of the bus got off at Royston and only about three or four joined to go towards Sandon. We trundled along roads that seemed to get narrower and narrower and eventually arrived in this tiny place called Sandon. I filled in the ticket "finishing numbers" on the waybill. The driver got out, came round introduced himself (can't remember who he was) and we chatted happily during a half hour break.

"Off we go again," said Mrs Francis. The driver got up to return to his cab.

"Now what haven't you done?" she said. I looked at her. "Well," she said. "The last time you sold a ticket we were at Reed. Well, we are now at Sandon and we are now going back so is Reed still your stage number?"

Oh dear. I changed the stage number.

"There's one other thing you haven't done" she said. Oh Lord, what else I thought.

"Well," she said. "When we got on our bus it was going to Sandon. Now we are going somewhere else....." How embarrassing! "Foot on the toehold, then left hand on the radiator cap, wind away....no other way....there we are: CHRISHALL. That's the one we want. If it isn't on the blind wind up RELIEF or if you come across a blank that will do."

And I thought as a young person that it would be easy. We eventually arrived back to the Chrishall garage and Mr Grice said: "Everything all right?" "He'll be fine," Mrs Francis said.

"Good" said Mr Grice. "Now, young chap: next Saturday you will report to Haverhill garage at 1 pm...go right down the High Street, turn left into Camps Road, it's just up on the right and ask for Mr Scrivener who is the manager. You'll be doing the service to Great Bradley unless he changes things by then."

I thanked Mrs Francis for her help and said: "Will you be there next week?"

"No, no dear" she said. "You'll be on your own from now. Just remember what I said. Always check your fare stage, always turn back to nil anything from a shilling onwards....."

And that was the tuition!