

Some Colchester observations

Another story from Alan M Watkins

Colchester independent Mawdsley & Brown of Rowhedge had KEV423, Bedford OWB/Duple B31F and MVX596, an OB/Mulliner B31F, acquired by Eastern National in September 1960 but neither was used by EN.

I think Mawdsley & Brown owned the old Post Office at Rowhedge or they had some connection - a relative perhaps. That is where their route started and finished. You are close to what was Shipyard Corner which is where some EN journeys terminated.

My memory is that the route needed one vehicle for most of the day with the second acting as a duplicate in the "peaks". When Eastern National took them over they incorporated their timings, or some of them, into Service 76 Colchester-Peldon-West and East Mersea. They followed the same route to Rowhedge via Old Heath.

The livery was closer to "Salmon pink" but pink both of them most definitely were. It was, however, still "shocking" in those days.

At the time they were taken over they used stock punch tickets - I think by Williamson.

For those interested in such things the ticketing arrangements that I remember in the late 50s were:

Eastern National, Eastern Counties: Setright Speed (which were quite "novel" then)

Moore Brothers: Insert Setrights

Chambers, Bures: huge range of titled Bell Punch, individual single and return tickets, the latter going up beyond six shillings for the Bury service. Very stylish tickets.

Wents: Stock Bell Punch, return tickets collected back in.

Sage's Bus Service: Stock Bell Punch but some titled Returns still in use

Norfolk's: Titled Bell Punch, another large range.

Osbornes: Titled Bell Punch of their own non-standard design.

Heath's Saloon Bus Service: Titled Bell Punch with quite a large number of halfpenny fares.

The one Colchester independent who didn't use the Bus Station at all was R.W. Hooks whose irregular service to Dovercourt via Wix started from the Castle pub next to Colchester Castle. Hooks owned virtually everything that sold anything in Great Oakley - the garage, the cycle shop (which also sold radios and them new fangled TV things), the ironmongers, the taxi etc etc. Hooks also had titled Bell Punch tickets. Opposite their garage was a tiny sweetshop run by two old girls in their eighties when I visited it.

Hooks at one time had an STL, their only double decker I think, which they used on some sort of contract service they operated for Parkeston Quay. The main Colchester service was operated by an AEC (Regal II I think) and their livery was a rather pale green.

Colchester/Chambers:

PS: another useless bit of info. Miss Went who was the regular stage service driver on one of three OB's which made up the fleet of her father's company, Wents of Boxford (near Colchester) did not have a uniform but her driving attire was a little unusual as on every occasion as a kid that I travelled on the service she wore jodhpurs! Being very young I did not have the temerity to ask why. Female bus drivers were, of course, very rare in the early 50's and probably those wearing jodhpurs even rarer. I have vivid memories of her armed with her rack of Bell Punch stock tickets and dispensing same before driving off.

There were a couple of real characters on the Colchester buses at that time - one was a driver for Norfolks of Stoke by Nayland who only had one eye (the other was glass). Not sure what modern regulations would make of that but not aware that he killed anyone. He was a part timer for Norfolks who worked in a shop in Nayland when he wasn't driving for them.

Then there was the huge conductor for Chambers of Bures whom everybody loved - a giant of a man over 6ft tall and weighing I would say well over 25 stone for whom climbing the stairs was an endurance test. He usually arrived gasping at the top. I imagine he had some thyroid or glandular disorder. Very sadly but almost inevitably (at least in those days) he died in his early 40's and is buried in Bures churchyard. Tremendous character for whom people appeared to have tremendous affection, not least the Chambers family who employed him as one of the partners told me nearly 30 years ago: "Absolutely lovely man. Salt of the earth. Great character and we all loved him."

Then there was Jack Mulley at Ixworth, Suffolk. Rolls Royce owner and, at the time, a very rich man (and very astute commercially). His normal dress belied this - a roll neck jumper which appeared to have been worn for months at a time (or years even) flecked usually with engine oil with cuffs on the jersey which had turned black. Reputed to have paid in cash for one of his Rolls Royces while driving a day excursion to London. He changed cars frequently and also changed ladies frequently which was fairly unusual in rural Suffolk of the time.

Some observations about St John's Street Bus Station

In case of interest, the layout of St John's Street as I remember it from the 50s was the front bays nearest the road were allocated to Eastern National and Moores of Kelvedon. By the side of the loo was an additional bay which was occupied by Sage's Bus Service (later J.D. Best whose ex open topper we have seen). The other side of the loo was the preserve of an independent operating to Rowhedge (Mawdsley and Brown) which was bought out quite late by Eastern National. At the end it was run by two ladies, the respective widows I think, and both their Bedford's were in a quite unmistakeable and completely unforgettable shocking pink. Girl power!

One bay was reserved for the Eastern Counties service to Ipswich (221) and then Osbornes and in the right hand bays Norfolks. To the right of those bays there were additional bays, slightly nearer St John's Street road. The one in the corner was reserved for Wents of Boxford but there were others for Chambers of Bures, and Heaths Saloon Bus Service, West Bergholt. Went's never had a large fleet (maximum of three I think) but at the time they had a white OB among them which was driven by Mr Went's daughter Katherine - a woman driver was a very rare sight in those days.

A further rambling, if I may be permitted. Chambers had the largest conductor I have ever seen in my life. He was nearly 18 stone and 6ft tall. He made that bloke in the A-Team look like a wimp. His name was Eric Anderson but for some strange reason was known as Titch. His progress up the stairs on Chambers Colchester-Bury St Edmunds service was something to behold as with much gasping and straining he arrived on the upper deck of one of their immaculately kept Guys.

That service is a two hour run and in the days before ticket machines it required an enormous ticket rack - three tier two sided and nearly two foot long. This, combined with the person with the ticket rack, was a wonder to behold!

It doesn't have a happy ending unfortunately. He died at just 52 and is buried in Bures churchyard. About 25 years ago I was chatting with one of the Chambers family and mentioned him. "EVERYONE remembers Titch" said Mr Chambers.

I have still got all my little card (price 3d) timetables of Chambers of Bures (tel: Bures 233) and all those years ago they additionally advertised themselves in this as Coal & Coke Merchants, Saddlers and Harness Makers. So it was in those times.

Interesting thing about Chambers (still the same family): they are Quakers and certainly during the 50s and 60s refused to operate on a Sunday whether it was Stage, Private Hire or Excursions.

Further observations about St John's Street Bus Station

The old bus station at St John's Street was really interesting if you were 13 in 1955, as I was. From the top end you had the main EN routes - still with Bristol JO's in evidence, plus the Moore Bros single and double deck Guy fleet. Every now and again the predecessor of Vine's (then Sage's Bus Service, Crockleford Heath) limped in with a pre war Leyland TD double decker which was decidedly down on the springs before it backed into the parking space next to the "Gentleman's Convenience" which stank to high heaven. Next to the "Ladies Convenience" was the parking spot of Mawdsley & Brown, Mulliner OB's in Salmon Pink (as might befit the two lady owners) heading off to Rowhedge.

Eastern Counties K5G's on the spectacular route to Ipswich via Manningtree and Mistley (look out for the swans), the pre war high radiator ECOC L's from Hadleigh outstation on market day with the original "tin bible" indicators still going. Sometimes they did reliefs to Manningtree on the layover and that was chalked on a blank board by the conductor. The also rans included Osborne of Tollesbury double deck and Daimler saloons, prewar WTB's, OB's, the immaculate fleet of Chambers of Bures and (Wed and Sat) the OB's and Regent III's supplementing the Guy deckers. Bures via Lamarsh, single track roads for the OB they were. At the back were Norfolks of Nayland with the full front Austin CXB being a regular performer on the Saturday only Colchester-Sudbury via Assington (Park Gates) and to the left of them Heath's Saloon Bus Service to West Bergholt and backed right up against the retaining wall Went's of Boxted, their all white OB frequently driven by Miss Went which was somewhat unusual in 1955. For some curious reason lost to me Miss Went also drove wearing riding britches. No, no idea either but what a gal.

That was the place to go if you loved buses and were 13 in 1955. Service 51/53 Tilbury-Clacton/Harwich to Colchester was 2/6d return if you were under 14. Last through bus to Billericay was the 6.30 from Colchester. After that you had to catch the 7.30 going to Chelmsford only and change to the 4 going to Pitsea Broadway but your return from Billericay was not valid so that was to be avoided.

I'm glad I enjoyed those days and glad that I can remember them. Eastern National/Eastern Counties were on Setright Speeds, Moore Bros on Insert Setrights and everyone else on Bell Punch. Wents and Mawdsley and Brown were on "stock tickets" - everyone else on "titled" Bell Punch. Chambers had a huge double sided ticket rack for the service to Bury - full adult fare Colchester to Bury 6/5d return in 1955. On my "child" journey, nearly two hours, it was 3/3d Return. I still have the ticket "rounded up to the nearest halfpenny above".

I would say that in 1955 the places to be for a young bus nut were Colchester, Bury St Edmunds and Sudbury. What places they were then if you loved buses! As a child, of course, you never thought the variety would be lost.