

# Driving a Bedford OB

## More short stories from Alan M Watkins

My soft spot is for OB's. I passed my (then) saloon PSV test on AGV194 (Premier Travel). Just after the war they helped countless companies cope with the upsurge of traffic and in those "Golden Years" made a lot of people a lot of money and built countless companies along the way.

They ran out of breath uphill with a full load, tis true, but for me they are the iconic country bus of all time.

You could wind them up to 50 (no speed cameras then) on the level but they were also a joy to drive. Absolutely precise steering (not always guaranteed at the time) and wonderfully instantly responsive brakes as opposed to the vehicle on which I passed my decker test (Guy GUF131ex Southdown) on which absolutely nothing at all happened until the pedal was at least halfway down.

With an engine in good condition an OB would tick over without anyone hearing anything. The only indication that it was "alive" would be the gear lever moving unless you were in the front seats to catch the faint murmur. Further back you would hear nothing.

But when you pressed on the accelerator there was a delightful little cough" (some call it chuff) as it powered up.

My first "all in charge" trip after passing my test was an OB Private Hire from Elmdon to Dunmow with a ladies darts team - the return journey in some of the worst torrential rain I have ever driven in.

I'll have you know that I also drove AGV 194 on the Saffron Walden Ladies Hockey Club Easter tour of the Lake District - games at Kendal, Keswick and Cockermouth - and although it took a very long time AGV was faultless (even when screaming in the Lake District). It was good enough for Mountain Goat to use an OB in later years and Waunfawr on Snowdon tours into the 70's. The early SB brakes were not a patch on OB brakes and were the subject of complaints from Bedford operators.

At the end of that mini tour I had tips totalling over £10 - the vast majority probably for the occasion when the Hockey Captain came to my elbow and said: "Driver, is it possible for you stop if you see a field with hedges or a clump of trees?"

Always willing to oblige I found a suitable location and most of the bus emptied. What on earth they were doing I have no idea because I didn't look. No I didn't. That was then.

I appear to have very seriously digressed but, yes, I don't want to choose my favourite bus but I probably have.

I blame Frank Grice, the then traffic manager. "Would you like to learn to drive, young man?" (See separate story about learning to drive a bus)

*continued . . .*

## More thoughts on driving Bedford OBs

I sailed through my saloon test on an OB - I did my first ever totally in charge private hire for Premier Travel in one and my first ever "tour" - Easter by coincidence - in which I collected the members of Saffron Walden Ladies Hockey Club and took them on their Easter tour for games in the Lake District. It was a bit of an eye opener for a then Young Person but part of life.

The OB was quite different. It did come with a starting handle (there should be a little hole at the bottom of the radiator for it) but you rarely needed it and if you did it was a thin gentle affair with little or no malevolence).

Normally you had an ignition key and a smaller key which opened everything else. The whole thing was deliciously simple. You turned on the ignition key and the pathetically small engine usually fired into life. No one went deaf. In fact no one in most of the bus would know that the engine was on. The OB ticked over to itself but it wobbled the gear lever just to let you know it was alive. That's all it did.

Right, okay, if we are not starting off uphill the rest of it was standard stuff. Clutch down, no effort required on the pedal, into second (no effort required on a spindly gear stick still wobbling away), press right foot on accelerator and little bus said: "Oh, we are going are we?" and gave a little noise which is either described variously as an OB "chuff" or "cough".

So off you went with responsive brakes far superior to the successor SB, responsive steering which did exactly as it was told without any effort from the driver and without any known vices to me.

A total joy to drive at that time. Excellent visibility. It only had a 27/28 horse-power engine so it soon came unstuck on hills when it duly produced the OB "yell".

I regard myself as very lucky to have driven OB's both for Premier Travel and later for MacBrayne who had a one off "lorry chassis" version classified as OLAZ. There was no difference in driving them at all. Same chuff/cough, same yell.

Brilliant vehicle of that time. Whether waiting time on Saffron Walden Common for Premier Travel or waiting time for MacBrayne and the arrival of the Inner/Outer Islands steamers in Uist when it was time to go you just turned the key and it went.

I digress as ever but what's not to love?