

Corona Coaches memories

Another short story from Alan M Watkins

(prompted in this case by a picture of Corona Coaches' ECF 305, an AEC Regal IV coach, posted on the Ceased Bus Operators newsgroup.

ECF was a curious monster - new to Corona in 1952 it was the first under-floor engined vehicle in the fleet. It was an AEC Regal IV with a 41 seat body by Gurney Nutting, who also provided the bodies for the two Leyland PS1/1 which I remember so well from my childhood and which were then the mainstay of the London-Stowmarket route. Indeed ECF, although looking as if it is at Kings Cross when the picture was taken, was not a regular on the London route except to help with duplications at busy weekends/holidays. Much of the time it was used on private hire and excursions and, oddly enough, on some market day services where it avoided duplication on some routes. It had semi-automatic transmission which younger drivers liked and some older staff did not. It was, however, universally unpopular with the ladies (often the wives of drivers) who acted as the part time conductors for the various busy market days, for ECF had the heaviest sliding door (almost a centre entrance but not quite) and many of the girls could not cope with it. Even the men admitted it was tough to operate.

Corona was a quite wonderful company in many ways and it is a pity that it failed in the way it did. It was the fuel companies who were the death knell, going for the winding up orders. It started in origin in 1912 by Alan's father Nathan Chinery who was the village carrier at Acton and when Alan returned from World War One he mechanised it both for lorry and charabanc work. The London service started in 1929 and apart from a dodgy first couple of years never looked back until the middle to late fifties. The "Golden Age" of bus work came, I believe, later to East Anglia and faded slightly later but the new owners of Corona were hit by the massive decline in rural traffic that had already set in elsewhere. Car ownership, telly, changed the whole social structure.

One of the longest serving drivers was Charlie Gilson who was the London outstation driver (for many years with a PS1/1). The one full time conductor was Mr Radcliffe who took the fares on the first up journey and swung on to Charlie's coach at the White Horse, Widford, Chelmsford, and repeated the process in the afternoon but this time at Braintree Bus Park. He retired before the final collapse.

The Bedford SB's (DGV 123 & GGV 823) were a bit of a pain for Corona and other companies because the Eastern Area Traffic Commissioners would not sanction them for one man operation on pure stage routes on the grounds that the door was too far back. The feeder services off the main Kings X-Stowmarket route to Hartest and Hadleigh (with a vehicle outstationed in both) could be operated by one man SB's as it was part of an Express/Stage licence, not a pure stage licence. Bureaucracy rules! It was one of the reasons that Premier Travel never entered the SB market.

The garage site at Acton is now detached houses although the pub next door is still there (for how long is probably speculation). Purely by chance I rescued the last of the Corona Insert Setright tickets (the new owners changed to it from Bellgraphic on takeover). One of their regular advertisers were the grocers EW King in Market Hill, Sudbury, and many years ago I made up two sets of tickets and presented them to the delighted owners. The last time I was in King's - which still grinds coffee in the window and produces that "smell" of my childhood - one was hanging in a frame on the shop wall and the other, apparently, adorned the owner's home.

Grateful thanks to the operator - it is a company which helped launch my fascination for buses as I watched (probably Mr Gilson) climb out of his PS1/1 close to the Yorkshire Grey, Brentwood, and open the sliding door to let on his passengers, some with suitcases which were stowed in the boot. Any not pre-booked would have had their fares collected by Mr Radcliffe when he crossed the road from the up coach at the Widford "refreshment break." When, as sometimes there were, two duplicates on the 9 am down journey, that was quite a task for one conductor. There was a system for this. As soon as he collected any "casual" fares on Coach One he would go to the back of the bus and "signal" to coach 2 and then ring the bell on Coach One which would slow to allow him to transfer to the vehicle behind - and then a similar procedure to cope with coach 3. A very similar situation was used (two conductors, umpteen vehicles) on the Macbrayne Summer Routes Glasgow-Inverness direct et al except none of them moved off until you had collected any "casuals." Charlie for Corona was very good at helping with this as lead driver as he marshalled the short "casuals" as much on to Coach One as he could and the furthest "casuals" on to Coaches 2 and 3. Each morning Charlie also handed in the Kings X booking office chart when he arrived at Acton Garage.

KGV 195 was the pride of the fleet when new. It was an AEC Reliance C41F Burlingham body with a jack knife door operated by a small lever to the left of the gearstick. (A similar but "home made" system was used on the Premier Travel OB's with varying degrees of success but not at all if the wire broke which it sometimes did). It adorns the front cover of the Corona Express timetable for 1957 and 1958 signed for Lavenham, actually a "stage" destination on what was a "semi stage" licence from Halstead onwards plus umpteen restrictions from Braintree onwards to protect Eastern National in those sections. But Lavenham probably still the best known "little place" on the route.

It was ordered after Alan Chinery had sold out in 1956 (while remaining a somewhat grumpy consultant for a year or so as part of the deal) to John Hibbs and Bert Davidson, the sudden death of Bert being a major factor in the ultimate collapse of Corona (in my opinion). It was 8ft wide but Bert ordered the seats for the 7ft 6in version so there was improved leg room for passengers. Much loved vehicle by Corona drivers. Bert Swindell said it was a "joy to drive" and nicked it whenever he could.

Its usual turn was to operate the first up journey leaving Stowmarket at 8.30 and arriving Kings Cross at 12.50. It was outstationed at Stowmarket and the regular driver was Harry Pleasants (known by everyone as Jokey). M-F it came back down from Kings X at 6, arriving at Barnard's Garage at about 10.10 - a long day but not at all unusual in those days. (The longest rostered shift at Premier Travel in my time was 15 and three quarter hours). Not solid working but you were still on duty and couldn't do anything else apart from wander around.

It left the fleet early because it was the most saleable asset of the lot - pressures were building and no doubt it paid off one or two people. In the end it was the fuel companies who sank Corona and went for the winding up orders.

Arthur Lainson at Premier always maintained that the Golden Age of stage work peaked later in East Anglia by 1949-50 but then suffered "the most rapid decline" between 1956-58 when the writing was on the wall, so he believed. Growth of car ownership, telly etc. The then owner of Mid Wales Motorways, by comparison, put their peak years between 1946-1949 and then "downhill all the way".

I suspect that John Hibbs and Bert Davidson therefore acquired Corona at about the worst possible time for the then industry in East Anglia. The London traffic began to fall like a stone (always the backbone of the company) just after they took over. Not their fault - the social structure had changed. Their main problem was that they had no real capital - and unlike the Lainsons no family wealth to keep it from drowning, although it was the income from the "Premier" travel agencies which also helped keep Premier going when all seemed lost.

Ace move that - luck or judgment?

Premier - for whom John Hibbs once worked - offered to take over the debts but were not prepared to pay anything for goodwill/vehicles because Arthur believed it was already a declining market.

[The story of John Hibbs' purchase of Corona, up to its demise, is told in John's 2003 book *A Country Busman*, published by DTS Publishing]