

Passing my test and my first driving job

Another short story from Alan M Watkins

It was a pretty wild night in my part of the world recently, with high winds and the rain hammering at the windows, and it set me off rambling. Those nights always remind me of something very bus related in my life. As I've said before I passed my PSV test (then divided in two sections, saloon up to 35 seats and double decker) first stage on BGV 719, a Bedford OB belonging to Premier Travel which had taken part (and won a prize) at the Brighton Coach Rally when it was equipped with a pair of chrome air horns on the front. Sadly they had long disappeared when I started learning on her but I would dearly have loved to have heard them.

My instructor was mostly senior driver the late Stan Pennell. Stan was a Premier legend, an East End lad with an East End down to earth view of life and not afraid to express it whether to the directors or one of his colleagues. He was one of the first employees to have been appointed to the Premier Travel board and was legendary for livening up board meetings with his trenchant views from the "shop floor".

Stan's instructions were pretty straight forward (with the odd expletive early on) but as I progressed the lessons became shorter and shorter. It often involved me driving from Chrishall into Cambridge and as soon as we got on an open road anywhere outside the City there was an immediate stop at a transport cafe for a cuppa. Sometimes we made three or four of these stops. While there would be an occasional coach for company it was in those days mostly van and lorry traffic with the occasional commercial traveller as well. Prices varied between 3d and 4d for a cuppa depending, usually, on the size of the cup.

It was quite some weeks after I passed my test that I actually drove and, perhaps understandably, I vividly remember the occasion when I was in charge for the first time. Incidentally the driver was only in charge when driving alone: if you carried a conductor he had the legal responsibility for the vehicle, not the driver. It was exactly the same on British Railways: while the engine crew liked to think they were in charge of proceedings the legal responsibility (passenger or freight) was always with the Guard.

The test itself was remarkably basic. It was conducted on a former wartime airfield and consisted of reversing manoeuvres from right and left between a pair of oil drums with an empty beer bottle stood on top of each. You had to reverse between these from right and left approach and after each reverse the gap was narrowed - it started out at about two feet more than the width of the vehicle and got down to about three or four inches either side. Nudge either oil drum and you'd had it. Fortunately I didn't nudge. The rule was that if the beer bottle "wobbled" you could have a second try - if it fell that was a fail. This procedure took about 20-25 minutes. The examiner sat on the front seat and wrote up his "notes".

Then it was on the road. About another 20 minutes of straightforward driving (Stan's voice kept coming back, as it was intended to, "whatever you do keep looking in the mirrors. Even if you see a coach pulled by headless horses and driven by bleedin headless horsemen keep looking in the bloody mirrors").

We went round two roundabouts with different exit routes from both and then back to the "test centre".

Then a few questions about road signs, how to indicate to a policeman on point duty that you were going straight on (palm of your hand held up in front of your face). One I remember was being given a card showing a reproduction of a railway engine with "smoke" coming out of the chimney and asked what it indicated. Rather easy one: level crossing and there were many such signs throughout Cambridgeshire and the Fens in those days (just before Dr Beeching wielded his axe of course). Fifty minutes I would say at most and I got the "pass" slip, an "instruction leaflet" on the bureaucracy, and, yay, I was in charge of up to 35 people!

I'd been saving up my money as a conductor for Premier Travel as much as I could and just after passing my PSV test had amassed the princely sum of around £12. As previously posted my personal travel in those days was a Mobylette moped which served me well but in the winter was a literally body numbing experience. Flushed with my success of being potentially in charge of 35 people I purchased my first car in my elation.

Just up the road from my home was Hutton Garage (directly opposite the Hutton Plough stage point for the old City Coach Company) which was run by Squadron Leader Bennington with a military precision that continued to do the RAF proud. Absolutely archetypal Squadron Leader of the time: immaculate haircut, polished shoes, Harris Tweed suit (usually) and the obligatory moustache and the obligatory use in a cut glass accent of the words "Old Boy" regardless of your age. It was like meeting the comic Terry Thomas a big star of the time. (Youngsters will have to use [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Thomas)).

Squadron Leader Bennington (rather like Terry Thomas come to think of it) always had a selection of "used" cars on the forecourt. Used is probably an understatement but that was then. I really wanted the Morris 8 but that was £18 and I didn't have £18 so I ended up for £10 and a still valid tax disc (only because there was no MOT in those days) with BE 1873, a Ford Model Y first registered before World War Two and showing every sign of that.

But it was mine! This is no place to dwell on the Ford Model Y but mine had three forward speeds and a reverse, a top speed when new of around 40 downhill and with a following wind, and equipped with a single "suction powered" windscreen wiper which stopped working when the engine was pulling and went ballistic if you stopped.

There is little point in discussing the lights. By default they were on main beam which threw a "pool" of light about 15 yards ahead. Dipped was achieved by pressing your foot on the little button just to the right of the accelerator which reduced the pool of light to about eight yards ahead of you. There was no heater, there was no demister. There was however a "choke" which was rather important for getting under way.

It was in late October that I thus travelled in style (still with an overcoat on) on a wild and woolly night to be in charge of a bus for the first time. That it was BGV was pure coincidence - she was one of five or six Chrishall OB's that could have been selected for this modest job at the time but selected she was for what was not exactly a "top link" run for the Private Hire department.

It was some sort of inter league pup competition (I never was clear about the details) which involved a team of darts and dominoes players pitting their wits against a similar league in the Dunmow area. My job was firstly to pick up the "organiser" at Duddenhoe End at 6 pm and then meander on his instructions around various villages en route to Dunmow. I then had to wait until whatever time they finished and meander back. The pricing for this job by the way was £5.10s.8d which included my money. I hope that puts it into perspective. I only know this because when I picked up the organiser he handed over £5.10s.8d in what really was a small brown paper bag.

It went without incident apart from me being encouraged to "beep" the horn outside a cottage in Arkesden which flushed out whichever player it was. I don't think I had more than about 20-21 on board. Through a wild night we safely arrived at Dunmow. I backed round in the Railway Station driveway and parked up in the "bus lay by" outside Dunmow Post Office going to the top end of it so that the Chelmsford- Dunmow Eastern National boys and girls could just come in and out of it without me getting in the way. They all trudged up the lane by the side of the Post Office to whatever hostelry it was (and I have no idea) and I switched all the lights out and pondered an exciting evening in Dunmow.

Behind me, in the High Street, there appeared to be only two active shops, one selling Fish and Chips and another a "General Stores" as was in those days. So after a while I paid a visit to both, wandered back with Cod and Chips (somewhere in the region of one shilling and threepence (for the chips) I believe and settled down with that week's edition of the Herts and Essex Observer (price 5d but it was a chunky read).

The wind howled on and then the rain started. Great big blobs hit the windscreen and then it was just went torrential. Driven by the wind it appeared to be an inch deep as it swept across the street in front of you in waves. Proper torrential and so it continued for the rest of the night.

Eventually the motley crew of darts and dominoes players were blown back in my direction at about 10.30 p.m. I watched them holding on to each other as they battled the elements back to the comfort and safety of an OB. I pulled the door open and the dripping crew staggered aboard. It was an interesting journey home. At the end of Dunmow High Street I turned right on to the Thaxted road, dropped down the hill, and discovered that the duck pond (which is still there) was, in fact, occupying the rest of the road as well by now. The road and the duck pond were as one. The High Street and to just beyond the duck pond were lit streets then and a couple of the duck population were happily swimming along the "main road" so we went down to walking pace, avoided the ducks, sent out our own waves and continued on.

Interesting drive on those back roads, Water up over the bonnet occasionally as you hit the "pools". Fortunately good lights on an OB and virtually no other traffic anyway. Interesting times at Langley, however. Rare to see a "ford" in full spate and "foaming" but this one was and a mini raging torrent up to the front mudguards of the OB. No problem for the bus but still a bit of rural awesome in its way. It was just a "splash" usually and in the height of summer just a couple of inches deep.

Nearly came unstuck at Langley Upper Green. The organiser, sat on the front seat next to me, asked if I could go up a lane (given the raging conditions) to drop someone off outside their home which would save them a walk in quite dreadful conditions. Premier's slogan was "Support Independent Enterprise" so I readily agreed to this bit of independent enterprise and turned left up what turned out to be little more than a cart track. I would think it was around a quarter of a mile and the darts/ dominoes team player was duly grateful as she scurried into her cottage. She had joined at the junction with the "main road" on the in journey.

Aha, as Alan Partridge might say. Slight problem. Ahead of me in the OB headlights was a field. Judging by the chunky furrows a recently PLOUGHED field. I had about 13/14 on board still. So no good going there then! Errrrmm.....and nowhere to turn round either.

For the younger generation OB's didn't come with "reversing lights" either.

So, on this foul and abusive night with the wind and the rain hammering away. I reversed whatever distance it was back to the "main road". It wasn't perfect driving I admit. I several times went into the hedge on the nearside, stopped, pulled forward and tried again and eventually made it back to the safety of the "main road".

Anyway all safely deposited home by about 11.50 p.m. Back to the garage by just short of midnight, parked BGV under cover in the main "barn", stuffed the Private Hire docket and the brown envelope with £5.10s.8d through the letterbox of "Gricey's" office.

Set off back home in Ford Model Y BE 1873 avoiding the raging "ford" at Langley by going the long way round peering optimistically into what passed for a pool of light from the headlamps and a suction wiper which often wouldn't let you see where you were going. Which is not to mention the canvas showing in places on both rear tyres.

Got home about 1.30 I think, a half hour earlier than the Mobylette moped and certainly drier.

What a night! And all provided for £5.10s.8d apparently. Those were the days! Cheap at the price I would say, looking back.