

The winter of '47 – City carried on!

Another short story from Alan M Watkins

The great blizzard of 1947 disrupted transport everywhere but the City Coach Company Southend-Wood Green route was maintained and I can tell the details of that for anyone interested. They were fortunate in having depots in the right places and a bit of luck at Rayleigh, Essex.

I cannot remember the day the great blizzard struck in Essex but I think it began one late afternoon. There was a driving wind behind it all - just as there were days of driving wind during the days of torrential rain which provoked the East Coast floods of 1953 combined with a very high High Tide - and by the following morning we had snow two to three feet deep and deeper than that with drifting. It then ceased but began again later that day.

Mid morning my grandmother decided on a Reconnaissance Mission down to the main Billericay-Brentwood main route and parked me in a wheelbarrow - I was five and a half at the time - and pushed me down there. The snow on the main road was mostly virgin apart from a few sets of tracks. Round the slight bend from the Plough public house at Hutton came a six wheel Leyland LT of the City Coach Company travelling very slowly through some virgin snow and my Grandmother took an executive decision that we should go into Billericay. I was lifted out and she waded across the road, leaving the wheelbarrow in situ, and we put our hands out at the bus stop behind which was the red phone box. As the bus approached us we saw the driver pointing furiously ahead "down the road" and my Grandmother got the message and we waded down towards Archers Fruit Farm where the LT finally slithered to a halt about 40 yards from the stop. As it passed us there was what I can only describe as a curious "clanking dull thud" sound which seemed to be coming from the two rear wheels on our side (six in all of course) around which were chains.

We clambered on board and made it to Sun Corner with three or four other hardy souls. There were no other passengers in the two and half miles to Billericay and did a bit of shopping at Purdy's the Grocers (one of the two Purdy brothers gave us a cup of tea and some biscuits and said he'd had to walk in from Stock, where they lived, to get the shop open at 8). Not sure where in Stock they lived but that's a good five miles or so from the shop.

Anyway, replete with supplies we retreated back down to Sun Corner where about eight or ten hardy souls were waiting opposite the Police Station. I think we waited about half an hour when a snow covered vehicle (can't remember what sort, another Senior Moment) arrived and slowly took us back to Hutton. I don't remember snow chains on that one. I do remember it was a very exciting day and the little wood on the way to our house looked totally, totally different and also that we passed a policeman pushing his bike through the snow.

The main City route Wood Green-Southend had several hill problems all of which still exist. The first real one out of London was Brook Street Hill at Brentwood which starts off looking not much but then climbs and climbs - there's another little hill by Brentwood police station but nowhere near as severe.

Sun Corner is on a hill at Billericay (or the Southend bound stopping place is) and City got round this by ignoring the hill and stopping the other side of it roughly level with the Sun public house. A mile and a half on was Bell Hill, Billericay, a steep drop and then Crays Hill (which has a nasty bend in as well), then Crown Hill at Rayleigh, a steep climb with another nasty bend in it, from Rayleigh High Street into Southend was pretty easy going.

The City garages at the time were Wood Green, Brentwood and Southend and this is how they organised it.

On whichever day the Great Blizzard occurred it fortunately left City vehicles trapped at the foot of Crays Hill and at the foot of Crown Hill (don't know about anywhere else).

Southend operated as far as Rayleigh High Street. Passengers then had to make their own way down Crown Hill (which fortunately had hand rails on the footpath I think) where one of the "trapped" buses took them through Wickford to Keeling's Yard at Crays Hill where they had to walk down Crays Hill (no handrails there for certain) where one of the previously "trapped" buses took them to the foot of Bell Hill, Billericay. There any hardy souls who were still with them at that stage had to make their own way up Bell Hill where a Brentwood bus would hopefully be found waiting near Mayflower Avenue.

That went all the way to the top of Brook Street Hill, Brentwood, here they turned in one of the then private roads. Anyone London bound was left to negotiate their way down where a Wood Green depot bus would take them to the "smoke".

I've no idea whether anyone was spartan enough to make or attempt the complete journey but within these limited sections City certainly kept running. We got to do our shopping thanks to the Brentwood-Bell Hill section anyway. It has to be remembered, of course, that many communities were self supporting in those times and "cut off" villages today often had a village shop at hand. Our nearest would be at Hutton Post Office (about three miles there and back) in the shadow of the famous Conifers (one of my earliest childhood memories and still there although the "shop" is now a private house) but fortunately a Leyland LT with snow chains hove into sight and, thanks to City, we were able to make it to Purdy's the Grocers where my Grandmother, fearing weeks without her Cuppa, extravagantly bought TWO POUNDS of tea, costing jolly nearly three shillings all carefully weighed out from a tea chest into a brown paper bag a la Arkwright's.

Cottis the Baker delivered daily as usual because this was horse drawn in 1947 and apparently needed neither snow chains nor suffered from wheel slip. Who knows?

I thought it was all wonderful. Our water stand pipes froze solid but Grandmother smashed the ice on our outside rain water trough with a pick axe (or tufter as she called it) and fed the livestock first and then we carted the water in via saucepans and boiled it on our coal fired kitchen range and all had a cup of tea while listening to the BBC Home Service Weather Forecast on our Accumulator Powered Radio.

Unfortunately in those times we just didn't know any better.