

Western National conductor

More short stories from Alan M Watkins

For eleven weeks in the summer of 1961 I was one of hordes of temporary conductors hired for the seaside resorts which kept Western National (and Southern) exceptionally busy in those days. I was supposed to be based at Helston (which had another fabulous route by the way - the 27 and 27a to The Lizard) but I was only at Helston for three and a half weeks when some sort of staffing crisis surfaced at Penzance and I was shunted over there. I also did a week and a half at Falmouth but most of that time was spent at Penzance which was very, very nice from my point of view. It was an area I didn't know at all.

Although sometimes you worked a full official duty - and it could be very, very busy with full loads a lot of the time (yes, that was then) - there were also days when basically you just did duplicates and that was dependent on crowds (and the weather, of course) so there was often a lot of sitting about in the canteen or the local "caff" awaiting instructions from the Duty Inspector. That way you got to meet all or most of the outstation staff and the Lands End boys (and girl) had several lengthy layovers of an hour or so and so you just got chatting - or I did. I was, and am, interested in people and I loved chatting to them because I was very interested in the industry and the people who made it tick and I've never lost that interest.

One of the common threads of outstation staff was very long service. They'd have made more money if they had been at the main depot because opportunities for overtime/rest day working were very few and far between - summer and a bit at Christmas as well - so they probably earned less on average than the main depot staff. But in many ways they were their "own bosses" and perhaps that had attractions plus, of course, steady year-round employment in very rural Cornwall out of season was a job not to be scoffed at. For exactly the same reason there were many long service employees of British Railways (and the former GWR) in long forgotten outposts. And, as I've said before, compared with agricultural work or the clay industry in some parts of that area it was far better paid. I have never done any research on outstations in the Tilling/BTC group and Eastern Counties and Lincolnshire had quite a number but my "gut" feeling is that in any "league table" Western/Southern National between them would beat anyone.

But, as previously posted, even these had their interesting "quirks". Southern National kept three or four vehicles at South Petherton in the heart of the village where the late Veronica Gunn (to whose family I am distantly related) terrified various Southern National Area Superintendents for decades and - yet - the laying over Southern National crews could always repair to her tiny office at Safeway Offices and be assured of a cup of tea and perhaps a slice of cake while they chewed the cud on the then industry.

Another short story from Alan M Watkins – route 128

Here is a brief glimpse into the job of the conductor - prompted by the posting onto the Ceased Bus Operators photo group of a shot of Western National 2000 (805 KDV), a Bristol FLF6B with ECW H38/32F body, new in 1962, seen when brand new in Bretonside Bus Station, Plymouth on 2nd August 1962. It was working the 128, Plymouth to Torquay, a joint route with Devon General.

So let's join Alan for a brief stint conducting a 128:

"Yes it was joint with Devon General Service 45. Very, very busy in the Summer. Many out of Torquay going only to Paignton Zoo. Joint returns - retained and an exchange issued and the cancelled return attached to the Waybill, like LRCC with BMMO and Trent.

Happy Days! Swung aboard a couple of those, possibly this one, on this route. They had that new car smell even if they were buses. I blame Lowestoft.

Starting numbers already on the Waybill. Two buzz, the door folds shut. Off we go! Close on two hours.

And the 6-cylinder gals could seriously motor.

Fares Please!

"Two and two half returns to Paignton Zoo please (the third kid sitting on Dad's knee looked "under three" so let it pass)."

Not a blink. "Eighteen shillings please." Churn, churn. Change to CH RET. Churn, churn.

Dad proffers a £1 note and gets a two shilling piece back.

Mum says: "Will you tell us when we get there?".

(Sure sign of a holidaymaker).

"Yes I will."

On we go.

"Single to Ivybridge."

One and eleven please, carefully switching from CH RET to S.

Holds hand out. Gets two-shilling piece and gives a penny change.

Two returns to Torquay.

Thirteen shillings please.

"What time does the last bus come back to Plymouth"

"Ten past nine".

Plods on. Two returns to Shinnars Bridge please.

(Defeated, has to get the book out for that one)

Looks it up. Nine shillings please.

Halcyon days. Lovely days.

And some thoughts on scheduling – prompted by a picture of a Western National Bristol K type at Bigbury on Sea:

We can tell a little bit from the picture [not reproduced here for copyright reasons]. The crew have their "summer" uniform on and are wandering off for a quick cuppa or a wee (or both) probably to the Riverside Stores which had a summertime "caff" next door.

This is almost certainly working one of the Summer extra journeys which ran from June to early September because they had a layover of around ten minutes at Bigbury whereas the year-round service journeys gave you only a five minute break. The whole thing shut up for the Winter of course and then there were only five through journeys each way on this route.

However the 92 had four additional through journeys in the Summer and regularly in August, particularly on a hot day, presented WN with a bit of a problem. The 11.35 a.m. and 12.50 pm. down from Plymouth often required duplication and if that happened the duplicate crews had a very lengthy comfort break, staying at Bigbury to probably cover the 5.10 and 7.15 departures back to Plymouth. The 7.15 was duplicated as far as Modbury (for local traffic) by a year-round Plymouth service bus.

It was common for an Inspector to travel down on a very hot day to assess the "get you home" traffic. If the situation was exceptional Kingsbridge was not that far away and could be called in if needed (probably double time). Crews and vehicles in Plymouth were not a problem in August because the Royal Navy at Devonport was pretty much on holiday and the Plymouth factories had their "wakes fortnights" as well which released a lot of commitment. There was actually a 92A which diverted to serve either Kingston or Ringmore off the main road.

I did the trip to Bigbury a couple of times and while it does epitomise the Summer Seaside of the 60s before everyone owned a car, one of my visits coincided with heavy rain and gale force winds which temporarily did away with the carefree days of Summer. Sodden, billowing and empty deckchairs and all that.

For quite a while this route was also the haunt of Leyland PD1s as well. Around about an hour and twenty from Plymouth it was a very popular destination but, year-round, the main traffic was between Plymouth and Modbury and fairly sparse thereafter. Six Sunday journeys in Summer but only two round trips in Winter. I never saw Bigbury-on-Sea in the Winter but I suspect it could have been a bit bracing.

The actual village of Bigbury, which was fairly small, was about ten minutes away from the "On-Sea" bit. The attraction was a huge, family friendly beach, cliff top walks, a fairly famous cliff top golf course et al and on a nice day was a very easy escape from the Plymouth area for those so minded. Plymouth operated the service.

Some more on scheduling

Services 132 Plymouth-Bideford and 135 Launceston-Bude "operated jointly by the Western National and Southern National Omnibus Co.Ltd."

A summer Sunday turn was a 7.45 a.m. sign on, dead from Laira depot to the bus station for the 8.05 a.m Service 135 to Bideford (usually a tram [Bristol LS]in my time). At Launceston Town Hall there was a SN Launceston bus waiting and you transferred the passengers to them (no mention of changing buses in the timetable).

The Western National bus then set out on the 135 to SN territory at Bude where it did two local Bude circulars before returning to Launceston at just after 3 p.m. The passengers on the 1.30 p.m. Bideford to Plymouth then had to transfer to the WN vehicle returning home and the

SN tram then returned to SN homeland.

Southern National Weymouth-Dorchester-Poole-Bournemouth Service 36 (normally double decker) was a joint operation with Hants and Dorset Service 11. All six journeys included crew change for both companies at Bere Regis. It was not a vehicle change - just crossing the road job. Weymouth and Bournemouth operated.

So the first crew out of Weymouth acquired a Hants & Dorset bus to get back to Weymouth and the first Hants & Dorset crew acquired a Southern National bus to get back to Bournemouth, with both issuing their own individual tickets on a foreign vehicle. Each night there was a Hants & Dorset vehicle in Weymouth garage and a Southern National vehicle in the H&D depot at Bournemouth.