

A modern day rural bus tale

Another short story from Alan M Watkins

Here is a little true story, not about a Ceased Operator but about a ceased system.

When deregulation came in Tony Ford of Ford's Coaches at Althorne (happily still going) decided he wanted to have a go at a modest number of local stage services - to Woodham Ferrers, Southend, Chelmsford all of which are currently [2011] still running although sadly with declining numbers I believe. His Dad started at Althorne at the same site in the 20's and had stage services then, one of which was into Wickford for Market Day Monday and had titled tickets headed AA Ford. Althorne. A block Uxbridge stuff as we say at ticket meetings, ticker paper which soon got downgraded.

Tony didn't know where to start so I drew up the timings/fare tables for all the routes for him and off he went. To set it up I printed him off a complete range of punch tickets and conducted all the first six month journeys using a Bell Punch machine which came from the ceased Stag Bus at Hatfield Heath, Essex, and which the then owner (a Mr Hall) had asked Bell Punch what the origin of it was. Bell Punch told him the Serial Number had first been hired to Blackpool Corporation Tramways in 1899.

I can assure you it was still working in 1982 and it's still working now! PING!

I have some lovely memories of that time. The number of times I was down the bus or upstairs collecting fares when someone got on and tried to hand over the money to the driver was legion - "no dear, we've got a conductor" - they weren't to know were they? They hadn't seen an Eastern National conductor for yonks and some of the young folk would never have seen one.

I wondered when I volunteered to do it for Tony as to whether I had lost the art but I don't think I had. A very early magic moment came on the Bradwell-Chelmsford Friday Only. It was a doddle to start off with - a few at Bradwell, five or six usually at Tillingham, nine or ten at Latchingdon High Street. But easy stuff.

The real challenge came at Purleigh where there was a huge travelers site at that time. You could have up to 30 people thunder upstairs at that time and they always appeared to have a delegated "payment official", frequently waving a note in your direction.

"13 adults and eight children to Chelmsford returns". Brief mental calculation - £7.20 please. A couple tried the oldest trick in the book of understating the number of adults/children but I always did my upstairs headcount before we lurched into Purleigh. So I don't think I had entirely lost it.

In that first six months I had any number of occasions when I "pinged" a ticket and the passenger said: "I haven't heard that sound for x number of years."

It still worked - of course it cannot compete with the computer feedback/analysis of today's machines but if push came to shove you could still get away with it today. But at the end of the day I certainly knew how much money I had to pay in

- I also designed the Waybill so I suppose it sort of followed.

As India still do with the mostly Filipina girls, one on each deck of a double decker. No ping's but punch tickets they certainly are in origin with the serial number preprinted on the top of each.

It was a pretty mundane job full time - although relatively well paid compared to many occupations - but often with a genuine camaraderie between the crews although if they didn't get on that could be a nightmare. Of course if you did it as an enthusiast it was a different realm.

As a really quirky aside there were some companies who banned husband and wife crews - Premier Travel were happy with it and so were Eastern Counties in Cambridgeshire. Lowestoft Corporation banned it and, no, I don't know why. LRCC/Southern/Western National were also happy with it and there were any number of husband-wife crews at same plus some who the young folk today now call "items" if they haven't actually done the legal bit.

Richard Delahoy adds that now [2011], the services still run and use Wayfarer Saver machines, which are in effect a slightly more modern version of the manual machines like a Setright – they don't require a computer or driver module and produce a printed waybill for the driver. These then have to be manually input to a spreadsheet to provide the data required to support claims for reimbursement of concessionary fare passes.