

Bill Ruffle - Premier Travel chief mechanic, Haverhill depot

Another story from Alan M Watkins

One of the lifelong friends I made during my time with Premier Travel was Bill Ruffle, the Chief Mechanic at the Haverhill Depot. We were nearly 50 years apart when we first met but that did not stop friendship. Bill possessed an awesome innate skill with anything mechanical and was a truly remarkable man with a built in contempt for some "management solutions" but on the other hand a very loyal company man who worked into his 70s.

Bill entered the industry at the dawn of easy public transportation. Born around 1900 he was the only boy of five children of the village blacksmith at Withersfield, just a few miles out of Haverhill.

By the time he was eight he was "working the bellows for my Dad".

I once asked him how he had become a mechanic and this is what he told me:

"I started with my Dad. He was a wonderful man, very strict mind but he had a heart of gold. He mended iron gates and of course did all the horses but my Dad could see the changes coming. Not only could he do blacksmithing but he could do mending of any kind and so we got the traction engines when they needed repairs and then he started to get cars when the big house people got them and they broke down. The big house people never had any idea about cars but my Dad did. He didn't have any books but he could cure most of their problems.

"One day some la di da turned up with a motor cycle. He said the engine had suddenly just stopped and how much would it cost? My Dad told him to come back in a week and he'd tell him but he never came back, not ever. And so it stood there in the workshop for years up against the wall, I can see it now. It was a Triumph.

"Anyway on my 14th birthday my Dad gave it to me as a birthday present. He said if I could make it go it was mine. So that day I took it apart, down to every last nut and screw. So I put her back all together and tried to kick start her. She fired but she wouldn't go. I was heartbroken. So I went to my Dad and he came out and I tried again. Same result, bit of smoke but she wouldn't keep going.

"My Dad stood there and was laughing. Silly young bugger, he said. Try putting some petrol in it, I drained it out years ago. So we put some petrol in and she went first time.

"And off I went on it, round the lanes, and could she go! I bet I got up to 50 or more. I stayed helping me Dad for a few years. All my sisters went off to Gurteens (a local textile factory) but one day in the (Haverhill) Echo I saw that Burgoins (Grey Pullman Coaches) were wanting a mechanic and so I decided to have a go. I got the job at thirteen shillings a week so that's how I got started. "

Burgoins were taken over in the 1950s by Premier Travel and Bill was "taken over" with them. By that time he was living in a council house in Western Avenue, about half a mile up from the Premier Travel garage in Camps Road.

During all his time with Burgoin and Premier Travel he never had a telephone at home, a conscious decision with a logic behind it that is hard to find fault with.

"If they can just ring up, I thought, they'll ring up. If they have to get up off their a**e and come up here then it might be more important."

One such occasion was a snowy Christmas Eve. Bill and Enid had gone to bed and it was close to midnight when there was a hammering on the door knocker at Western Avenue.

I'll let Bill continue the story:

"I got up and went downstairs and there was Roopey. Bill, London bus has broken down. Terrible rattling noises from (Saffron) Walden and she won't go nowhere. She's between Radwinter and Hempstead. So I get dressed, cycle down, pick up me toolkit and a duck board, pick up an OB and off I go. So I find her by the roadside, hand over the OB and off they go. It's Christmas Day by now. It was one of the Leylands (PS1). I asked Smudger (Driver Smith) and he said she rattled like hell out of Walden and then she just died.

"So I had a rummage around and found the timing chain was broken. God knows where the bits were, probably out on the road somewhere but I wasn't going to go looking. It was bloody perishing. So I patched her up and drove her home at ten miles an hour. It was gone three before I got back to bed."

At that point I asked how you "patched up" a broken timing chain.

He looked at me as if I was bonkers. "Hairpins. You know, ladies hairpins. They work." Of course, how silly of me not to think of that!

The minute he retired he installed a telephone at his home so as to keep in touch with their five children (among them John a civil engineer and Judy a consultant neurologist) but free from pointless "call outs".

There is a picture of him in Paul Carter's book on Premier Travel in which he is among the crowd shown outside the University Arms Hotel with one of the Wilkes and Meade HVE double deckers. Although unidentified he is easy to spot because he is the tallest man in the picture, nearly 6ft 8.

He passed away in his sleep in February 1981.