

How I discovered Premier Travel

Another short story from Alan M Watkins

I've probably told the story before (see Spotting Days) but an OWB introduced me to the wonderful world of Premier Travel from which I never looked back having many happy years working for them as all of you on here know.

The year was 1955. It was school holidays and my Mum had scraped up 7/6d (which half fare got you a long way in those days) for a day out on the buses while she went off to London even leaving me cheese or whatever sandwiches in my school satchel which together with my notebook and pencil is how I set off. Yay! Where to now?

Chelmsford was always my starting point from Billericay so off I went, Westcliff on Sea (still hated them for taking over City) taking me to Sun Corner, probably walked down the High Street to St Mary's Church or waited opposite the Post Office for a 51/53 Tilbury/Clacton Harwich which would have been an L5G in those days or probably a KSW on the 4/4a Pitsea-Chelmsford although sometimes a venerable Chelmsford leviathan.

I do remember it was a freezing cold day and I would have had my St John's Cap on and my St John's Scarf and my St John's Raincoat. And my satchel with my EN timetable.

Got to Chelmsford and probably pondered Colchester but I'd done that a lot and on this day there was near the top of the stand a bus going to Bishops Stortford (which I had never been to but I knew it was a regular route and I could get back from it easily). So BS it was – I think it was a KSW and I suspect it was still Route 8 in those days (58 later).

It was definitely a Monday or Tuesday and I can say that because of subsequent events. Monday or Tuesday was a dead day for buses in Stortford but as I'd never been there I was not to know that. To be honest outside of the EN garage (which I thought was tiny) and which seemed to have a lot of lovely pre war stuff (which was everywhere at that time) it was a bit of a disappointment.

I wandered down the High Street and turned into an indoor shopping arcade (at the end of which was a WI group selling local stuff and I bought a jar of Strawberry Jam for my mum - I think it was 8d or something like that - because I was still loadsa money on 7/6d.

I walked out of that Arcade into a moment that changed the formative years of my life. There ahead of me was a Car Park with a few bus shelters.

There was one bus only as Housman said more effectively in *A Shropshire Lad*. A Bedford OWB - painted in a light blue with a strip of darker blue below the windows. On the side it said PREMIER TRAVEL. Off I went to it. There was no driver, there were no passengers, the folded door was pulled shut. Totally abandoned. (Subsequent knowledge tells me the driver was probably in Bob's Cafe out of the freezing cold but I was not to know that as a child).

The light was fading fast and worse it was beginning to snow with flakes settling on the light blue bonnet. I knew I had to get home if it was going to snow and so I couldn't stay around and besides which I was nearly frozen to death - I think there was an Arctic wind at the same time. Smashing cheese sandwiches are always welcome but hardly warming.

So in my notebook (which I still have) I wrote in childish hand; ECE 879 Bedford OWB Premier Travel going to MANUDEN. I did not know of the existence of Premier Travel so carefully wrote below this the "Registered Owner" details on the side:

PREMIER TRAVEL LTD
15a Market Hill
Cambridge (Tel 3327)
Managing Director: E.A. Lainson (MA)

With that I abandoned ECE and fled for home via EN probably getting home about five-ish or six-ish ahead of my mum and with change that I always handed back.

BUT.....

I then carefully wrote, also in childish hand, to E.A. Lainson (being careful to include the M.A. cos I knew it mattered - "when addressing a letter also include any honours which they might show on Correspondence after the name of the person you are addressing " – and on January 13th I wrote the following:

"I am interested in buses and would like to know more about Premier Travel as I have seen one of your Bedford buses in Bishops Stortford. Please could you send me your timetables. I enclose a 1/- Postal Order (okay, so not all of it went back to Mum).

Yours faithfully
Alan Watkins

You did Yours Faithfully in "first" correspondence because Yours Sincerely was only to be used in a subsequent "relationship" correspondence (at that time). First approach was always "Yours Faithfully". If the recipient responded with Yours Sincerely so did you.

The following week I received this reply:

"Dear Alan Watkins,

"I have pleasure in enclosing our current Timetables for our Stage and Express Services together with a copy of our Current Fleet List which I hope you will find of interest."

Yours SINCERELY,
(Signed Arthur Lainson in his distinctive small handwriting)

Managing Director
Premier Travel Ltd

An Office Copy of this reply was kept on carbon paper with an additional "Timetables and Fleet List Sent" initialled EAL.

Find of interest? As young people today would say you have to be joking. In the timetables in his own hand he had written: "This is normally double deck worked" - "This is worked by saloon coaches except on Saturdays".

The next Saturday or so I'd got the money out of Mum and set off on the 12.25 p.m. Stortford-Chrishall Service 10 which turned out to be the Service 9 1.28 Chrishall-Cambridge ("These are normally through cars the timetable stated although later I learned to disregard the "normal" bit). I lurched through wonderful villages, splashed through fords, and then the conductor came up wearing no uniform at all, everyone seemed to know him, and BEST OF ALL he had an Insert Setright ticket machine which I hadn't seen since the demise of the City Coach Co in 1952 some three years previously).

"Half return to Cambridge," I said. "I can't do that," said the Conductor. "It's a half return to Chrishall and then I'll come round for your fare to Cambridge." I think it was four shillings and tuppence in total.

Seemed fair enough. So TWO Insert Setright tickets instead of just the one. We stopped outside the Chrishall garage where lots piled on (we had reversed round at Arkesden which I thought interesting) and there were lots of interesting vehicles in this funny "two tone" blue - OB's, a Dennis Lancet III I think.

Had a wonderful time at Drummer Street - Eastern Counties of all descriptions (one still with a "Bible Board"), stately Daimlers from Burwell and District (of which I also knew nothing about) and an EN "lookalike" which said United Counties and was going to Bedford.

Through cars in the return they turned out to be (although different conductor).

There are many moments I treasure with Premier Travel but ECE 879 opened that world to me with the snow settling on the bonnet – Arthur Lainson's response to a child the more so, my journey from Stortford to Cambridge and Return, my interview with EAL at Market Hill with the Labrador lying at his feet: "I see you are going to University so hopefully you can add up".

"Yes I can" I said. "Fill in this form and as soon as you get your badge you can start." He got up and shook my hand and I trundled down the stairs out of his eyre." I filled in the form sitting on a park bench somewhere and it was posted back through the letterbox at 15a probably twenty minutes later.

I can be specific about my child correspondence to EAL and his reply because, nearly 25 years later, I rescued the "archive" of Premier Travel and about halfway down of about ten feet of stuff just thrown through the door I came across my original childish letter and the Office Copy reply. I don't mind admitting I was in tears if anyone understands. When I keel over it will all go to the Cambridgeshire Collection (and they know that, God help them). Including all the threatening letters from various diesel/petrol suppliers). It was a terribly serendipity moment to me.

Starting from an OWB set to do the 3.30 p.m. Monday/Tuesday Service 26 Stortford-Manuden to having my eulogy read out by Margaret ("Mother") at the funeral of Husband and her subsequent letter has been a long journey.