

It was Christmas Eve on the buses



More memories of Premier Travel

Alan M Watkins

Many years ago Christmas Eve on the buses was entirely different from today. In the 50s and 60s there was no internet shopping or credit cards and everything was purchased either by cheque or by cash. Last minute shopping, in the hope of getting a bargain down the market or at the butcher's shop, was commonplace the length and breadth of Britain. Car ownership, while growing, was still not commonplace and particularly not in rural areas.

Two seasonal stories which may entertain both concern, naturally, Premier Travel who along with most other operators in the 50s and 60s regarded Christmas Eve as a goldmine, not something to peter out at 7 or 8 p.m. in the evening. All their main services were operated to a Saturday timetable which meant, in some cases, drivers and conductors seeing in Christmas Day either on the road or a few minutes after arriving back at a depot. And they were busy, often very busy.

The 10.45 p.m. out of Bishops Stortford to Barley (Service 26) was part of the Saturday night mayhem which would be unbelievable to anyone today. In Bishops Stortford Car Park there would be three buses - the one going to Barley, the service 10 leaving at the same time for Chrishall and in the late 50s and 60s an OB going to Manuden, the biggest village on the route. This was hired in on a permanent basis from Stort Taxis and went direct. Stort provided the driver and either the Service 10 or Service 26 conductor had to take the fares before it moved off. This was not an onerous task as the vast majority would be cancelling a return ticket and it was usually "tossed for" between the conductors, unless one volunteered. The regulars all knew the set up and those going only to Manuden would faithfully pile on the OB. When that was full they reverted to the service buses who shared the same road through Hazel End (Three Horseshoes) and Manuden where the great yew trees on the corner normally clouted the upper deck nearside bodywork unless the driver could swing out to go round the bend. At the signpost to "Little London" the service 26 swung away to Berden.....

Some nights we shifted inordinate amounts of people - I sometimes had ten standing upstairs, 15 or more downstairs. It was illegal but it was hard to say: "I'm afraid you are going to have to walk to Langley" and so we didn't. We just got on with our illegal business and packed them in as best we could with the tickets being handed back down to me when I could fight my way no further.

A regular feature of the 10.45 p.m Saturday Service 26 was Billy's Bike. Billy came in from Nuthampstead either for the Stortford cinema or the pubs and as the last bus only went to Barley and didn't visit Nuthampstead he thoughtfully piled his bicycle on board as well. When things got really crowded it was best against the front bulkhead rather than in the aisle.

On this particular Christmas Eve there had been snow in the previous days but there was a brief thaw and then some severe frosts although no more flakes. Some of the rural roads still had ice ruts in them. The journey went without incident until Service 26 arrived in the village of Anstey somewhere around 11.45 p.m. only to discover that a lorry had skidded the front end into a ditch and left the arse end sticking out across the very narrow road precluding further progress for Premier Travel. Eventually the village policeman from Meesden arrived on the scene by bicycle

and took charge of the situation.

"We need a tractor to pull this out," he announced. "I'll go and try and find one" Given it was nearly midnight on Christmas Eve I sort of feel it equates with Evans historic announcement in the Antarctic: "I am going outside, I may be some time." And he tottered off on his bicycle.

The Premier Travel crew and their passengers, still about 30 of them at that time, contemplated the situation. "Roopey" was the driver. "Well," he said. "I'm bloody frozen and I'm going down the Chequers. You lot can stay here if you like."

The rest of the bus took the hint and the entire contents followed him into The Chequers and the warmth and hospitality of the publican (and Premier Travel Parcel Agent) Mr Magnay who was suitably thrilled to see such a late influx of customers. Christmas Day was suitably seen in and then some. It was gone 1 a.m. before a tractor arrived on the scene and winched the lorry out of the ditch.

By around 1.30 Service 26 proceeded on it's stately way to Barley. At the Nuthampstead turn the conductor attempted to get Billy and his Bicycle off the bus. But Billy was fast asleep (having also "had a few" in Stortford which he added to in The Chequers and was in no condition to be left in charge of a bicycle or anything else). Conductor goes round to Roopey. "I can't wake him up," says conductor. "Silly old sod," says "Roopey". "We'll have to take him home".

So the bus turned left and went down to Nuthampstead where "Roopey" ("I know where his Sister lives") assisted the conductor in removing the comatose Billy (conductor went back for the bike while Roopey hammered on the door and finally awoke Billy's nightdress clad sister) and thus Billy was reunited with his nearest and dearest. The bus finally arrived at Barley at close on 2 a.m. Christmas Day and back to Chrishall Depot in time to see 2.25 a.m.

Roopey to conductor: "Happy Christmas! "That's my bloody chance with the missus gone so I'm going to put in an overtime ticket."

With grateful thanks for this story to Premier's last ever conductor, always known as Far Away, the late Dennis Greenhill (Jerusalem: There is a green hill far away, oh never mind). Lovely man who did the neatest waybills I have ever seen.....

Last of the Winter Wine I suppose.....

Christmas Eve as was in the late 50s (or A Sort of Christmas Story)

Before the days of widespread car ownership and widespread TV ownership - and probably more importantly before the days of internet shopping - Christmas Eve was a significant day on the rural services of Premier Travel. All Rest Days were cancelled and, usually, the entire part time staff (of which I was one for quite some time) were expected to work and did work.

A lot of the big national companies of the time - Eastern Counties, United etc - usually included a line in their timetables warning that "Holiday Modifications" or some such would be addressed by local leaflets at the time.

It was sort of chaotic but thoroughly enjoyable at the time this end but, also, in the case of Premier Travel partially pre planned. I am sure there are other examples of which I am unaware but in the case of PT many Christmas Eve "arrangements" were actually pre-printed in the Stage Carriage and Express timetables. What happened on the particular Christmas Eve was sometimes done on the "hoof" as they say but the broad outline was there.

Basically in the late 50s they anticipated shifting large (and in some cases) larger number of people back home at a peak of around 4.30 p.m./5 p.m. from market towns and a very late surge from 10 p.m. onwards for those who had been out on the "razzle" or, if teetotal, handing over presents to be unwrapped under the proverbial Christmas tree the following morning (remember Amazon did not exist then and you had to get them there somehow).

In the case of Premier Travel this partially depended on what day Christmas Eve fell on in any particular year and how vehicles could be utilised but broadly the basis was this for the main trunk routes whatever day it fell on:

Service 9 Chrishall - Cambridge: Saturday Service

Service 10: Chrishall - Cambridge Saturday Service

Service 12: Saffron Walden - Hitchin but predominantly Saffron Walden - Royston Saturday Service

Service

Service 38: Kings Cross - Cowlinge - Saturday Service

Service 44/45: Withersfield - Wrattings - Cambridge Saturday Service

Unless otherwise specified other routes operated on what day Christmas Eve fell on. For example if Christmas Eve fell on a Wednesday Haverhill - Braintree Service 58 operated - if Christmas Eve fell on a Monday it didn't.

Although not explained in the timetables the Forces Leave services would operate to the base requirements (usually a day or more ahead of Christmas Eve for those going on Christmas Leave) but again dependent upon the calendar.

The London Service (particularly 38) was a nightmare in those days (and also at Easter). It was "booked in advance" or "tickets available on the coaches."

There was very heavy traffic to both West Suffolk and Cambridgeshire (people returning home for Christmas, spending Christmas with relatives etc). Many of these occasionals did book in advance through the PSV office at Kings Cross so there was a basic charting but it took no account of who turned up on the day. One Christmas Eve the late journey out of Kings Cross was two double deckers backed up (as Premier Travel had run out of vehicles) by two OB's from Biss Brothers, Stortford. (The two conductors split checking/collecting fares between them)

The vehicle availability was also affected by what day Christmas Eve fell on. At Chrishall and Haverhill there were substantial contracts (about 17 vehicles, many outstationed) committed to contracts to Pye at Cambridge and at Haverhill about four contracts committed to Gurteens as well. Unless Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday those contracts would have to be fulfilled although both Pye and Gurteens shut down at around 1 p.m. if Christmas Eve fell on a weekday. Lucky boys and girls!

Duty cards broadly went out of the window - I once D/C'd a Cambridge - Chrishall duplicate in an OB expecting according to Daily Orders to go on to Service 12 to Royston.

Nope. Hijacked by Traffic Manager at Chrishall. Back to Cambridge please on Service 9 (relief) then ring me when you get there or check with Mr Lainson.

Okay. Not going to Royston. Going back to Cambridge! OB gives a little "chuff" and we go on the other side of the road behind the double decker in from Stortford.