

More Rural Bus Tales - Premier Travel

Another story from Alan M Watkins

Two little stories if I may be permitted about rural bus operation, both concerning the late lamented (or lamented by me, anyway) Premier Travel Ltd Cambridge and equipment failure.

Daimler HGV 403 - with 401/2 they had sophisticated accordion platform doors. I arrived at Bishops Stortford one Saturday on Service 10 from Chrishall. The doors were always heavy to operate but on this occasion I couldn't make it budge and I was trapped inside along with 50 or so other souls. The combined weight of the conductor plus two other blokes didn't work either.

I went up the lower saloon, banged on the driver window with my ticket rack, and said: "We can't get the bloody door open."

Driver dismounted from cab, gave it a hefty kick from outside, and hey presto we all escaped. Left open for the rest of the duty.

When the Traffic Commissioners allowed 29 seaters to be operated one man, Premier Travel converted their OB's to a mechanism devised by Mr Day (Head Fitter at Chrishall). Basically, a hole was drilled in the floor and a steel wire was connected to the door. A basic steel short handle came up shortly to the right of the OB trembling gear lever and you just leaned down and pulled down and, hey presto, the door slid open.

Mostly it worked pretty well. I passed as a driver on AGV 194 and my first trip as a driver was a private hire with a darts team to Dunmow in some of the most atrocious weather I have ever driven in.

My first stage jaunt with an OB as an OMO driver was on a Tuesday Saffron Walden (Market Day) diagram. We arrived at Heydon and I duly yanked on the handle to open the door and absolutely nothing happened. Eventually I got out of my seat and just pulled the door across and had to do it frequently for the rest of a 10 hour shift.

I did a Drivers Report Sheet entry. "Mechanical door opener not working."

Three or four days later I saw Bill. "I've fixed it," he said. "It had come off the hook and was trailing along in the road. If it happens again that's usually the problem. Just get underneath and hook it up."

Well, I didn't know.

Rural bus services. Don't you just love 'em. I certainly do.

Make do and mend.

Further memories:

Here's a nightmare experience with Premier Travel (God Bless Them Too) which, sadly, I am about to inflict on you all.

On Saturdays the heavily loaded Service 10 Bishops Stortford-Chrishall 12.20 out of Stortford Car Park arrived at Chrishall at around 1.25. Up to about Arkesden and Langley you disgorged but from roughly those villages onwards you also picked up (not as many) and they weren't going shopping at Chrishall (which had only a Post Office and General Stores next to the PT Depot and who were forever moaning about diesel fuel leaking into the stream behind their property And God Knows what the environmental chaps would make of that today.)

They were going shopping in Cambridge, a tad more sophisticated than Stortford then and now. The Service 10 crew and vehicle then operated the busiest Saturday journey on Service 9 - the 1.28 Chrishall-Cambridge which, in the days I am writing about, had three double deck duplicates - one starting at Sawston, one at Stapleford and the last (often a Haverhill crew on a 44/45 duplicate of their own) starting at Great Shelford.. The service bus pulled in ahead of the duplicates and, if full, simply ran ahead of them leaving them to pick up the remainder. And that was usually the case. It was quite common in the days of 56 seaters to be able to take say two or three standing at Sawston and that was it. Your Sawston duplicate picked up the rest and so on.....

That's how it was and was it pretty smooth most Saturdays. I'd be full and have got all my fares in by Stapleford Post Office where we could grandly sail past the duplicate and by Trumpington I'd have me waybill filled in to boot - no pick ups beyond the Glasshouses at Shelford Road (licence restriction) and looking forward to my bacon butty at Drummer Street.

One Saturday was different. I can't remember who my driver was that day but we were both on the very late Service 10/9 late turn (it was a dual shift, neither of you changed on to anything else) - sign on 8.30 a.m. finish 11.50 p.m. When we arrived that day at Chrishall my driver was summoned out of his cab opposite Chrishall Depot by Frank Grice, the then Traffic Manager. All I could see was a conversation and then Frank walked across the road and said: "I've got to change your driver for this run. He'll pick you up on the way back but I've got a major problem with Service 12. You've got a new lad."

Frank then uttered what turned out to be the deliciously understated sentence: "But I'm not sure he knows all the route that well so you might have to keep an eye on him." And off Frank went to his little office (and for all I know probably locked the door before I could even ask which bit of the route or, if he hadn't, locked the door as we departed).

The vehicle was an elderly war horse - a Bristol pre war K5G ex West Yorkshire which WY had rebodied into the then modern style. They were solid old girls but, as some of on here may know, there is a particular gear changing technique with all these old Bristols (then, and now, for those in preservation). Put very simply unless you let the revs die right down before attempting the gear change there will be quite dreadful ear splitting complaints from the gear box and the change will not happen. Taken to perfection on pre war Bristol boxes you can, when this technique has been mastered, actually change gear without depressing the clutch.

I digress.

Our exit on a flat level road was not impressive. It's a second gear start of course but my new mate gave an unhelpful blip to the accelerator and we set off towards Elmdon with an ear splitting complaint from the gearbox.

I plodded down the lower saloon dealing with the Return Cambridge (5 shillings and a penny in those days, two shillings and seven pence the kids) but as we neared Cross Hill, Elmdon, a divergence of narrow roads going hither and thither my new driver nearly came to a halt and turned round in his seat and mouthed to me: "Which way?" I indicated "Which way" with my ticket rack - through Hinxton and Pampisford it was a straight road and so I set about my business upstairs taking in my stride the "two and one half returns to Cambridge please" - correct answer six shillings and five pence please as I ripped the tickets off the rack.

We were nearing Sawston when the now old duffer got back down on the platform but, eagle eyed, he'd noticed someone had nipped on by the council houses at Pampisford (as I rang them off from upstairs) and gone downstairs so I set off to find him. "Fares please". Which I did which is just as well. As you come into Sawston by the Paper Mill then there are two options - you either by pass the High Street or you turn into it.

My driver, fresh from his Elmdon experience, appeared intent on by passing it. This time he didn't look round and showed no intention of doing a right turn. Okay we were only doing 30-ish but we were in the WRONG LANE.

So I whacked my ticket rack against his bulkhead window several times and pointed RIGHT. And mercifully we made a "late" right turn and ground to a halt outside the White Horse.

Absolute nightmare. Which is not to mention the tortuous gear changes. We arrived at Drummer Street vaguely in one piece (well him, anyway, but not me or the gearbox) whereupon he declared: "I've never driven a Bristol before today. They are funny buses aren't they?"

Indeed they are. Hilarious I would suggest. And I would never have guessed he hadn't driven one before.