

Driving for City Coach Company, Brentwood - a war-time tale

Another story from Alan M Watkins

The City Coach Co of my childhood who took me to school, shopping, to the cinema and occasionally to the seaside in a wonderfully diverse and interesting fleet, the uniqueness of which I would think was matched only by Barton in their heyday.

My mother passed her PSV test on a CYO registered Leyland Tiger but could never remember which one. This was in the late Autumn of 1942 when she returned six weeks after giving birth to me (an event which nearly cost both our lives). City by then were in crisis. There were about 20 or so Conductresses at Brentwood by then but they were losing drivers to the war effort.

Of the staff at Brentwood only three girls held a driving licence, of which one was my mother. They were offered the chance to train as drivers on better money and all three accepted. It was possible then with overtime to earn over £5 a week which was a considerable sum then, especially for a woman in a "semi skilled" job and way above anything the factories paid.

They were given priority and trained in a week, working from 8 in the morning till 8 at night. No dual controls - the window behind the driver was removed and the instructors passed his instructions that way. They trained on most of the City routes (which they already knew of course). The test was on Saturday and consisted of driving from the garage in Ongar Road to RAF North Weald where reversing etc was tested. They all passed and celebrated with a cup of tea in the RAF Mess.

City must have been pretty confident about this system because all three were rostered to drive that afternoon!

My mother vividly remembered getting her "badge" back at the garage. Her first duties as a fully fledged PSV driver were afternoon and early evening duplicates. She went to Billericay and back, to Blackmore and to East Horndon Halfway House and ended with a Wickford and back.

She also vividly remembered the reaction of passengers in those first few weeks - they were the first female City drivers at a time when female drivers of anything were comparatively rare, particularly in rural areas.

She described these as falling into two categories: a) a look of absolute disbelief merging into abject horror on occasions; b) people in queues nudging each other and pointing at her and lots of little boys standing behind her window. One of the girls had a passenger who refused to get on when he saw it was a girl driving saying he'd wait for the next one!

The two earliest duties in those days of war time when every factory/engineering works however small was in some way involved in the war effort were BT1 and BT2 service and duplicate at 4.15 a.m. Brentwood to Laindon Station via Great Burstead. Both these buses then worked the Laindon Circulars which were packed out because they serviced all the workers trying to get to the Fortune of War to catch the Westcliff buses in either direction serving the many factories along the Arterial Road.

If she was cycling my mum used to leave at 3 a.m. If the weather was really bad she would use our car but because of petrol restrictions this was for emergencies only and only in the very worst conditions. By 1942 petrol was barred from virtually everybody except Registered Users. We got round this because my Grandparents had a smallholding and needed petrol for our gigantic cultivators - also two trays of eggs (1 egg a week was allowed on the Ration Book) would get you a jerry can full of petrol from Captain Benington at Hutton Garage

(opposite The Plough) under the barter system. He also owned the garage opposite Mountnessing Windmill. He was an archetypal RAF "Biggles" (Wilko, over and out), cut glass accent and the traditional RAF handkerchief moustache. Trays of eggs provided the capacity to do proper puddings without the disgusting powdered egg substitute.

There was some resentment from male drivers to the girls especially when City broke with convention and paid them the same money and some male conductors were none too happy either so my mother said that wherever possible City tried to put out all female crews.

My mother said the hardest part was driving in the dark with masked headlamps and she had several near misses with cyclists and pedestrians - no street lighting at all of course. There were some horror journeys in the fog as well and she was once driving into Wood Green when the air raid siren went off and they all had to decamp into Gants Hill underground station to await the all clear.

When I have a scanner I will post to the group a good picture of my Mum. She looks very smart in her uniform (including black slacks, whatever next, women wearing TROUSERS!). The picture is too cropped to identify the Reg No but it's a TS7 and she is leaning nonchalantly against the radiator with her cap at a jaunty, perhaps even rakish, angle and looking every inch a bus driver! It was taken in the summer of either 1943 or 1944 at Sun Corner, Billericay.

She apparently did drive me several times as a baby but I was too young to know about that! My first memory of her driving was our Morris 8.

A highly regarded and highly efficient family firm.

And some more . . .

As mentioned previously, my Mum drove for City during World War II, one of five girls at Brentwood Garage and I'm afraid that although I love these unique vehicles [the twin steer Leyland Gnu] she hated them because they were so physically hard to drive (or at least for her, like me of fairly slight build).

Of course having only blackout lights in the dark during the War probably did not endear them either. She once said: "Bloody things....the clutch pedal was so large I could get both feet on it."

She recalled a nightmare journey sometime during the War which involved a Gnu (not the fault of the Gnu) driving from Laindon Station to Brentwood at night in very thick fog, a journey which apparently took the best part of four hours during which she almost ran over someone on a bicycle at Little Burstead.

Heros and heroines every one I would say. Spunky girl my Mum, in her day.

Another contribution from The Department Of Useless Information: the cover to the engine cowl inside the Gnu drivers cab was quilted.

Stylish or what?

Further memories:

In the dreadful winter of 1947 the City Coach Company used snow chains on those wonderful old Leyland TS's and my Mother told me that they did during the war as well. Whether Eastern National did in those far off times I have no idea. I have a very vivid memory of 1947 when the main road at Hutton was around two feet deep in snow - we waited hopefully outside Hunters Chase. It was more or less "virgin snow" because there

was no traffic in those days and certainly not in those conditions - eventually the good old City Coach Company TS came trundling round the corner from the Hutton Plough heading for Billericay which was as far as we wanted to go. We put our hands out and the driver pointed to further down the road where about 30 yards past the stop it slid (fairly) gracefully to a halt and we scampered after it (as much as you can scamper in deep snow) and clambered on.

And we got back home again, although on the return journey the driver stopped at an unofficial stop (the little bridge near the then Archers Fruit Farm which carries a Chelmer tributary beneath which ran through the foot of our home) probably so he could get a little "run" at the tiny hill by Hunters Chase going to Brentwood.

In the savage Winter of 1963 (which went on a lot longer than 1947, the latter a massive initial dump, possibly bigger than the 1963 initial dump, but it didn't last as long), the 251 route then was divided into two parts at the foot of Bell Hill, Billericay, with vehicles ex Southend using the local Council estate entry and exit horseshoe as a "turning circle". Passengers had to make their own way on foot up and down Bell Hill and there was a vehicle parked opposite Mill House (not an official stop) where the road levelled out and that bus continued towards Brentwood.

What the hell happened at Brook Street I cannot say! Or Crays Hill for that matter, the latter a wicked hill in poor conditions with a turn involved as well. Or Crown Hill, Rayleigh.

Who knows?