

The closure of Arriva Southend's London Road Garage – 2000

By Richard Delahoy

Goodbye, London Road

Ninety-nine years of Southend's transport history ended on January 28th, 2000, with the closure of the Arriva Southend garage at 87 London Road. In May 1896 a plot of land behind 85 London Road had been bought by the Council, initially to erect a power station to supply electricity to the rapidly expanding town; in July 1901 the tram depot opened on the same site. The depot was progressively expanded over time and was adapted to house motor buses (in 1914-16 and then again from 1931 onwards) and trolleybuses (from 1925 until 1954), although the last trams had departed in 1942.

In the early 1960s a new garage was built fronting onto London Road itself, following the purchase of land south of the old depot site. The new garage - familiar to enthusiasts for the past almost 40 years - was opened in 1961*. In conjunction with the engineering works established two years earlier* at Tunbridge Avenue (subsequently renamed Tickfield Avenue), near Prittlewell station, SCT had very modern and well equipped premises. Subsequently, in the 1980s*, with the dramatic expansion of the coach fleet, additional land ("the annex") at the north western corner of the site was bought, to provide open air parking to supplement the covered garage.

The old garage site included electrical distribution equipment, a hang-over from the days when the Corporation had generated its own electricity here, and the site and buildings were taken over by Eastern Electricity as a depot. That use continued, in buildings which in some cases still had tram tracks in them, until Eastern Electricity moved out. The depot buildings were demolished and the site cleared in October & November 1978, to make way for a DIY store.

In the early 90s the maintenance area within the garage, previously only used for light running repairs, was substantially expanded, with additional pits constructed and workshop equipment installed. This allowed the closure of the Tickfield Avenue works towards the end of 1993. Unfortunately, not all of the good facilities at the works could be replicated at London Road - the purpose built spray painting shop giving way to the brush painting of buses in the middle of the garage floor, surrounded by operational buses!

Garage sale

Following the British Bus take-over of Southend Transport, the London Road garage site was transferred from Southend Transport Ltd to British Bus Properties Ltd in 1995, paving the way for its subsequent sale for redevelopment. The sale, in September 1997, was to property developers the Grantchester Group plc and at the time, it was understood that Sainsburys were the intended future occupants, possibly involving the old garage site behind, occupied by a Texas DIY store, by then owned by Sainsbury's Homebase company. The deal was that Granchester had to provide a replacement garage for Southend Transport.

There were very few suitable sites in the town centre for a garage that did not have potentially more valuable alternative uses than a bus garage but one derelict area was the old coal concentration yard to the north east of Southend Victoria station (and thus on the opposite side of the railway to the old Tickfield Avenue works), at the far end of Short Street. (Incidentally, don't be fooled by the name - the street is longer than you might expect!). It is understood that Southend Transport had relatively little input to the detailed design of the garage and certainly no control over the construction. Work started late in 1997 on the physical construction of the open-air parking, 12-road maintenance building, office block, pump and wash line.

By one of those quirks of fate, I first photographed the construction work on January 28th, 1998, not knowing then that the move would take place two years later to the day. The earliest suggested date for the move had been March 1998, but construction work was still under way. However, by early May, it appeared virtually complete. I am not sure when the work was theoretically complete, but certainly by the autumn of 1998 more tentative dates for the move were announced to the staff. However, all was not well! Southend Transport (by now renamed Arriva Southend) refused to take occupation because of significant construction flaws. Much legal wrangling followed, during which no work took place.

Eventually, agreement was reached on the nature and extent of the remedial works (and on responsibility for the costs!) and - slowly - work began again. By December 1999 all was virtually ready, one of the last jobs being to rebuild and relay the new approach road, which (like other parts of the site) had been inadequate to take the weight of PSVs. So we come to the move itself.

Preparing to move - the last week

Moving an operational company, running 20 hours a day, 7 days a week, is never going to be easy and certainly cannot be achieved overnight, requiring months of planning. Thus, the final work started a week or more before the actual move. New schedules were brought in on Saturday January 22nd, eliminating the time-honoured practice of crew changes outside the garage. The consequences of this are discussed below.

One of the early tasks was to dismantle the bus wash and re-erect it at Short Street - by Wednesday work was well advanced and thankfully the weather was fine, as no vehicles could be washed for a fortnight! The garage also needed to be cleared of withdrawn and stored vehicles. This included 6 Tiger coaches, made redundant by the influx of Scania's and by the October coach service changes. Space is at a premium at Short Street and it was difficult to be certain exactly how many vehicles could be fitted in without hampering operations; this was exacerbated by the need to find room for some Portacabins, required to provide emergency office space whilst yet more remedial work was completed in the buildings.

Therefore, Stephenson's of Essex agreed to provide storage for 6 vehicles and on Wednesday 26th, 4307/8/9 and 4313/4 were removed to store in the Rochford area. The 6th coach, 4315, was in a poor condition and was still at London Road until Monday 31st as, although driveable, it was lacking lights. (The Tigers did not stay for long - all 6 were sold to dealer Houston Ramm and by February 4th, 4307/15 were already at the dealer's yard in Rochdale; one is to remain locally however, as 4309 has been acquired by Stephenson's for their operational fleet).

D-Day - January 28th

And so to Friday January 28th. Drivers on the early morning duties signed on at London Road as normal, until at around 0830 the Control Office and traffic log were taken over to Short Street. Thereafter, drivers signed on at Short Street and vehicles, which returned to garage during the day on layover, did so to Short Street. The last two vehicles to leave London Road to take up normal service are thought to have been Dart 3387 and Fleetline 5337, the latter on the Deanes school contract.

Meanwhile, specialist contractors were busy removing two key items - the fuel pump system, and the social club's snooker table!

Inside, work was busily under way to complete routine repairs to the remaining vehicles in the maintenance area and to remove all the engineering equipment to Short Street. Hired lorries and vans were supplemented by buses not required for service, but the work could not be completed on Friday. Thus, Friday night closed with the bulk of the fleet safely ensconced at Short Street but with the stragglers left in London Road. These comprised:

- Lance 3379, Mercedes 2086 (which was a recent transfer from The Shires and had not yet entered service in Southend), withdrawn Tiger 4315 and the open top Regent, KTF 594, all locked away in the maintenance area;
- withdrawn Fleetline 5330, dumped in the middle of the garage floor, in use as a store shed and most definitely not moveable under its own power, along with long withdrawn service van C471GNO.

The stragglers depart

The deadline to clear the site and hand over the keys had been midnight Friday, but this was relaxed to midday Monday and then to late on Monday. The movements of the Regent open topper to more suitable covered accommodation at another Arriva depot had been the subject of a number of plans, but instead the sale of KTF to Taunton based preservationist company Rexquote Ltd was completed during the Friday. It was agreed to store the bus at London Road on the Friday night and on the dot of 1000 the next morning, new owners Stephen and Suzanne Morris arrived to collect the bus that they had bought without ever having seen it!

After a jump-start and replacement of a missing light, KTF was driven out for photos, a final run around the garage and roundabout, and then the lengthy drive back to Taunton. This was completed without a hitch, despite the bus having never ventured further than Purfleet during its stay at Southend (it had never been licenced as a PSV whilst at Southend)

The remaining buses were left until Monday morning, when the maintenance area was finally cleared. 5330 was more of a problem, until the arrival of a large wrecker from Service Garage. Helpfully (!!), the bus had been parked with its front hard up against a pillar, but a quick shove backwards from a forklift truck enabled the wrecker to get into position. At 1055 on Monday morning, 5330 (more familiarly remembered as 230) became the last real Southend Transport bus to leave London Road, albeit on suspended tow and not about to take up service on the 7A, as its blinds suggested! It seemed wholly appropriate that it left its mark - literally - in London Road, when the rear end grounded briefly as the bus passed through the depot gates for the last time.

The demolition contractors were already busy securing the site, a job completed when the last equipment was removed to Short Street. By evening, London Road depot was fenced off and empty, an eerie sight after so many years full of buses.

Demolition

Demolition followed very quickly, BD Demolition having an 8 week contract to demolish the buildings and break up the concrete. By the end of the first week, part of the roof was down and the office block had already been stripped (although it was otherwise still intact at that point), whilst by the end of February the only part left standing was the skeleton of the old office block fronting onto London Road. A concrete crushing plant was installed in early March, to recycle the old garage floor into hardcore for the foundations of the new car park. The remaining demolition took place on the morning of Sunday March 5th, when, amid clouds of dust, the final corner of the building came down at 1125.

Operational issues

With many routes passing the garage, London Road was a very efficient site for operations. A driver could take over a bus only 10 minutes after signing on, and immediately after finishing a meal break. It was therefore inevitable that any other site would be less efficient. In fact, Arriva Southend had had a "dry run", so to speak, with the September 1998 service revisions, which had been prepared on the assumption that the move would have taken place by then and thus featured all crew changes taking place in the bus station. After the shambles of that experience,

which saw the company run out of drivers and buses at critical points during each the day, London Road handovers had been resumed from the November 1998 mini revision.

The January 2000 move was better planned but nonetheless, costs an extra 9 drivers each day, because of the additional travelling time to and from Central Bus Station, where all handovers now take place. On Monday to Saturday daytimes, a regular minibus shuttle runs every 15/20 minutes between Short Street and CBS, crewed in the main by an additional four part time drivers, using a spare Dengie Link Renault (if available), a white LDV Convoy, P698 PRJ (PSV licenced and fitted with a Wayfarer, for emergency use on the Dengie routes) and a Ford Transit crewbus, R580 LVL, from the Arriva van rental fleet. This arrangement seems to work well and is far better than using spare buses for ad-hoc shuttles.

The future - London Road site

As the garage closed and demolition proceeded, planning notices could be seen on the lamp-post outside, drawing attention to the developer's latest plans for the site. These provide for two non-food retail units, at the west side of the site, flanked by parking for 128 cars. Although the adjacent Homebase site is owned by the same developers, it is not currently included in the redevelopment plans. The planning application is currently being considered by the Council and there is no indication who will take up the units.

Short Street - AS's new home

Short Street provides facilities in the modern, minimalist, style. It lacks the character - and accessibility - of London Road, where enthusiasts were spoilt by being able to walk or drive past the whole length of the garage and to see most of the vehicles there. On the other hand, the new depot is in a more suitable site so far as environmental issues are concerned - no longer will there be a queue of buses waiting for the pumps, blocking access to other premises and sometimes, even the roundabout itself.

Not all of the construction defects have yet been addressed, so that it will probably be June or July before the last Portacabins are removed.

Tailpiece

We are almost at the end of an era. With the demise of the London Road premises, the traditional fleetname, livery and numbering system, there is little left to remind us of the Southend (Corporation) Transport that so many of us admired. When the last Fleetlines go in the summer, the only vehicles left to represent the pre-takeover fleet will be the H registered Olympians and some of those acquired second-hand. At least most still display the characteristic three part destination screen so typical of SCT since the 1955 co-ordination agreement, even if Arriva seems to have lost the plot regarding the rationale for intermediate blinds!

Finally, we must remind all enthusiasts that the new depot is private land and should not be entered without permission. Unlike London Road, there is no enquiry office at Short Street, timetable leaflets being available from the Arriva offices in Chichester Road and the Bus Station.