

A Videmat Mystery

Sometimes official records contain entries that are baffling and even nonsensical when viewed later. This is one such tale.

It concerns an entry in the minutes of Eastern National's Board of Directors 17 June 1971, "Approval was granted for the purchase of a Videmat Ticket Issuing Machine for use at Chelmsford Bus Station at a total cost of £400.00".

The Videmat ticket machine was manufactured by Ticket Equipment Ltd of Cirencester (but actually invented by the ticket printers, Alfred Williamson Ltd of Ashton-under-Lyne) and designed for self-service use on buses (not in offices). Swindon Corporation was the earliest trial user but Southend were the first to put them into regular use. Other users included Reading, Southampton, Portsmouth, Bournemouth, Cardiff, Sheffield and Leicester, West Midlands and SELNEC PTEs, as did Ribble and Crosville.



Southend Transport used them on all their OMO double deckers at one time, starting in 1971. The picture **above** (courtesy The Bus Archive) shows one brand new as fitted to a Southend Fleetline. To explain, with a Videmat, placed to the right of the doorway, passengers simply put their coins in and pressed a button to obtain a ticket that had an image of each coin on it. The weakness of the Videmats (mechanical issues aside) was that there was no control over what passengers put in – foreign coins, washers and so on. This abuse could only be picked up by Inspectors checking tickets on bus, who in the event had a difficult job working out what had actually been paid. Since the machines only copied one side of each coin, if that was heads, only the size of the coin indicated its value. At the time we had the larger 5p and 10p coins, each not much bigger than the 1p and 2p coins respectively (a 5p was only 1/8th of an inch wider than a 1p, a 10p just 7/64ths of an inch than a 2p), and sometimes images overlapped as well. Having established what had been paid, the Inspector then had to consult the boarding fare stage and fare chart to establish validity for the actual journey. Overriding (ie going further than the fare paid) was clearly an issue but that could apply equally to tickets sold by the driver where the passenger simply asked for the fare, say 30p, rather than stating their destination, so Videmats were not wholly responsible for such underpayments.

In the Southend Coordination Area, services were joint between EN and ST and revenue was pooled and shared 63% EN, 37% ST. EN were therefore very concerned if fares were underpaid, since they suffered 63% of the resultant loss of income. There is a voluminous file at the Essex Record Office of complaints from EN management to ST, citing reports of their Inspectors checking ST buses, as the Coordination Agreement permitted. There was clearly a difference of opinion – ST appeared to be willing to accept a degree of loss as part of the need to speed up fare collection on OMO buses. With Videmats, there were two simultaneous boarding streams, either paying the driver or using the Videmat, thus speeding up boarding and easing the driver's work. EN clearly didn't share this opinion, but the correspondence suggests they were largely banging their heads against a brick wall as ST would not back down.

ST finally withdrew the Videmats in April 1985; they had been fitted to the Lowlanders and all Fleetlines except 231/7/40/1 and rebodied 306-10.

But back to the start of this story: why did EN want to buy a solitary Videmat machine, did it actually come and was it for a static office installation, as the minute suggests: who knows? None of it makes any sense to me or other experts I've spoken to and I've not found any further company records related to it. Do you know?

Below: Could you quickly work out the fare paid here? A typical Videmat ticket.

