

Girton Buses Remembered

“Never get on a bus with a red number,” my mother warned. “Red numbered buses go into the country and you might get carried off to some outlandish place like Willingham or Cottenham and never get home again.” Buses displaying black numbered destination boards served the town area, a lesser hazard for a small boy of wandering instinct and uncertain reading ability.

In the 1940s Girton had two bus routes into Cambridge, both operated by the Eastern Counties Omnibus Company. Bus 152 ran into the village centre, but whether it was a red or black numbered service I can't recall; it was too infrequent to be of much use. Also, the route to the terminus at Peas Hill (opposite the Arts Theatre) via Storey's Way and Grange Road was too circuitous, unless we were to have a joyous sunny afternoon at the Newnham paddling pool. On one such journey the bus towed a small, two-wheeled trailer on which a device like a large dustbin was mounted. The contraption supplied the bus engine with 'producer gas' fuel; a war-time measure to save precious petrol. In later years the service was re-numbered 129 and extended to Oakington, but by then the sharp distinction between town and country life had lessened and the more modern buses showed their destination by roller-blinds with white numerals.

The other Girton bus was black numbered town service 106. It ran directly through the town centre every 12 mins., but ventured no further into the rural area than the terminus at Girton Corner, a weary mile from the village centre for people carrying shopping. Bikes could be parked in the yard of a house nearby, for which voluntary donations were asked, more in hope than expectation.

Commuters from St Margaret's Road or Thornton Road were adept at pacing their walk to the nearest bus stop so that roadside waiting time was as brief as possible; no seats or shelters were provided. But timekeeping by buses was often disrupted by traffic jams in the unregulated town centre and “Damn - just missed the bus!” was frequently heard.

At Girton Corner the bus pulled off the main Huntingdon Road to the stop near the telephone box where the last remaining passengers got off, many of them 'Girton Girls' from the college. The bus then backed awkwardly into the main road before drawing forward to wait at the side of the small triangle of land which formed the junction. The driver switched off the engine and gratefully squeezed out of the small cab, but then had to climb precariously on to the radiator to reach up to flip the metal destination board to show '106 Red Cross' ready for the return journey. Time perhaps for a quick smoke and a grumble about traffic conditions; then back into the confines of *his* cab – I never recall there being a female driver.

The junior partner of the two-person crew was the conductor; a role which females were permitted to fulfil, probably as a result of war-time staff shortages. Their main job was to collect fares and issue tickets as the journey progressed, deftly squeezing between standing passengers and endlessly climbing the steps to the top deck where smoking was permitted but 'Spitting forbidden'. Keeping order among the passengers was another duty. “Pass right down inside,” and “We're full up, you will have get off,” were orders often barked as shoppers, office workers and school pupils surged on to the Girton-bound bus at the town centre stop outside Holy Trinity church.

Only the conductor was allowed to press the button to stop the bus. Any passenger who presumed to do this themselves risked strict censure or even abuse from the outraged conductor. On one memorable journey the conductor had the bus halted between stops to demand the identity of the offender! Visitors from other places found this stricture rather odd, so perhaps it was confined to bus staff at Cambridge? We soon learned to ask politely for the stop bell to be rung, especially at the approach to the penultimate stop at Thornton Road, otherwise the driver would go speeding past, eager to have a slightly longer rest at 'The Corner.'

Another duty of the conductor was to call out the names of the stops. A new conductor on the 106 route had been provided with a list of stops from which he correctly called "...Oxford Road, Priory Street, Histon Road Corner, Shire Hall..."; then down the hill to the narrow street beyond the traffic lights where the bus stopped outside a college. He looked at the list and called, "Mag-da-len Street." There was a stunned silence among the regular passengers, followed by peals of uncontrolled laughter and "Fancy not knowing about Maudlin!" The poor chap turned red with embarrassment, but failed to understand his error.

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Roger Wolfe
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