

Eastern Counties Connections

By Stephen Bullock

Though not a busman myself, much of my Cambridge childhood was spent on, in, and around Eastern Counties buses. Both my father, Tony, and his father, Harry Bullock, spent most of their working lives with the company and, as a child, my mum and I would often visit the Hills Road depot if we were passing on our way to town.

After a spell as a motorcycle courier and chauffeur Grandad joined the Ortona Motor Company in the 1930s as a driver, mostly on medium distance runs to Huntingdon, Newmarket and so on. During the war he volunteered to drive troops around the South coast to various ports and spent many months billeted in Southampton. Family lore had it that he did so to get away from my rather formidable grandmother – but that's another story. He also became a special constable for the duration and I still have his armband and whistle. After hostilities ceased, he returned to his peacetime job, his regular run now being the Southend Express service – down into Eastern National territory. While there he became very friendly with another busman and his family; so friendly in fact that it is said that one of their sons bore a remarkable resemblance to Grandad! Sadly, his driving career was cut short when he had a massive stroke in, I think, about 1954. He never recovered fully and died in 1960 at the age of 58.

My dad followed his father to Hills Road in 1946, initially as a driver but, having done fairly well at the old Central School in Cambridge, with ambitions to progress to management. One of his early memories was of the bitter winter of 1947 when the diesel fuel solidified and to keep the service going they had to take blowlamps to the fuel lines: no health and safety nonsense in those days! Any plans for advancement within the company were soon thwarted by the arrival of his call up papers. Conscription being still in force, Dad was cordially invited to enlist in His Majesties Army. Well, he didn't much fancy being a soldier, so instead applied, successfully, to join the RAF, where he stayed for the next seven years, working as an air traffic controller. One of his missions was the Berlin Airlift, for which he had to fly to Germany in a Dakota. The experience put him off flying forever and he somehow arranged things so that all his subsequent postings were in East Anglia!

Upon demob it was straight back to the Eastern Counties and there, with the exception of a couple of years managing our local service station in the mid 1960s, he was to remain until his retirement. Although at first, he went back on the road, regularly taking the 151 service to Peterborough, he now really wanted to go into the 'works' and so he trained as a fitter, which suited him far better. He never actually enjoyed driving, apparently! Life at Hills Road was busy and enjoyable, but any early ambition had faded and he was quite happy with his eventual role as chargehand fitter. There weren't many perks to the job, but one I remember well was that Dad, who always came home for lunch, would usually arrive in a bus 'on test' and would often take me back to school in it (Queen Edith's Way part of the test route, apparently). It always seemed an incongruous sight, a bus – usually an LM as I recall – parked outside our little council house. He would sometimes take us into town but would never go too near Drummer Street in case there were any inspectors about. Later, when our mother went back to work and he no longer spent lunch time at home, he and his great pal and fellow chargehand, Len Morley, could usually be found in the Osborne Arms, adjacent to the depot. There they would eat their sandwiches (brought from home), have a couple of pints, then go back to work. I suspect afternoon productivity was somewhat diminished!

Dad had very firm views on the buses in his care; he was a massive fan of the Gardner engine: anything with a Gardner was ok with him, though the four cylinder jobs were underpowered in his opinion. He had a particular fondness for 'fluffs', (Bristol FLF Lodekkas) which he regarded as the acme of the Bristol / ECW / Gardner collaboration. The ex Mansfield Bristol LS stage carriage vehicles were 'poor things' though: badly maintained

and in need of a lot of attention to bring them up to scratch. He was not at all keen on the VRs and especially the Leyland 'Nationals'. They were, apparently, difficult to work on and unreliable. The semi-automatic gearboxes were particularly troublesome, though he was of the opinion that it was largely because, despite their enthusiasm for them, the drivers didn't know how to use them. He believed that NBC only bought them because, at that time Leyland was in the process of being bailed out by the Government, so it was politically expedient. The later single deckers came in for equally harsh criticism: he hadn't a good word for those!

As the years passed, he spent less and less time 'spannering' and more time on admin. tasks, often working five and a half days a week to keep up with the workload as staff cuts bit. By then the depot had moved out of the increasingly valuable Hills Road site, to Cowley Road at Milton. Albeit state of the art, the new premises lacked the atmosphere of the old place, many people left voluntarily, or were made redundant, and the creation of Cambus did little to improve the *esprit de corps*. Even so, when retirement came, in 1994, Dad was a very reluctant pensioner – and he continued to wear his Cambus shirts until he passed away in 2005.