

This is the Age of the Bus

More true jottings from our Midland correspondent

I am sure it is a dream why should a telephone feature in a dream? The ringing seems persistent – it will not stop nor go away I get the feeling it is real. In a dazed stupor I stumble out and down, stub my toes, fall over the furniture, curse the telephone..... "Hello! Hello!"

"Good Morning"; the cheery voice of my Chief Inspector. <For those of you who may be wondering, he is not in the police, but Northampton City Transport – Ed> "Do what?" I react, "what's the time?" "0211, nice morning" is the response. Now my chief is a decent fellow, but not in the middle of the night. "What's up?" I demand, somewhat uncharitable; "Had BR on, they've had trouble – six miles of overhead down and six buses required – see you soon!" Our red transit, complete with yellow flashing beacon, brightens the village at 0300 and we're off down the M1 to the service area for coffee and toast while I get acquainted with the problem.

The chief has already been to the depot and arranged with the night foreman for the six buses. Apparently a freightliner container on a train became dislodged and the result has been the destruction of six miles of AC overhead between Tring and Watford Junction. The main line is closed completely. Express trains are being diverted from Coventry and Nuneaton, and the "Units" (BR parlance for EMUs on the local services) will terminate at Tring with a bus link to Watford for the DC (BR parlance for the third-rail Euston-Watford service). Those passengers for Euston are to be "changed out" of "Units" at Northampton and conveyed by bus to Wellingborough (our job) for the "Midland" to St Pancras.

Arrive at the depot at about 0400 and open offices, now a blaze of light, photo-copy "On hire to British Rail" notices for bus windscreens and pick up pad of Private Hire Work tickets and begin writing. We decide to re-deploy our stand-by drivers to rail replacement duties, taking the risk that the service drivers will all report OK, and change one service working to crew operation (with the one spare open-platform bus) to release another one-man bus for the railway. The other buses are released from the programmed cleaning/greasing/maintenance for the day. The stand-by drivers begin to report at 0508, consequently I start up bus 71 and at 0430 depart for the station to work the 0456 "train" myself. Cheery greetings from the Station supervisor from behind his pornographic magazine. "Hello again" I greet him, "I see you use the same rule book as us!" "I love getting you out and about" he quips. The "unit" arrives and the few passengers (ironically mainly BR staff) change to my bus and we depart, on this first journey to Bedford instead of Wellingborough for an electric train to London. As time develops the Chief has arranged subsequent journeys and on my return to Northampton several buses are ready in the station forecourt, by now about 0645.

The local BBC radio station wants a live interview, which I decline but suggest they can speak to a driver. They choose the Union Branch Secretary who agrees providing he can request a record by "The Flying Pickets"!

As the day wears on the position settles down with buses operating the half-hourly "train" departures, mostly late because of awaiting the connecting "unit" from Birmingham. There is some ribaldry with the station supervisor over "his" trains delaying "my" buses! The Area Manager tells me that it is going to be a long job, so I bring in "rest-day" drivers to continue the bus link until about 1600 when BR intend to operate DMUs (from Tyseley) between Tring and Watford, and hopefully one line on the "juice". It seems like a long day, going home about 1700.....

by David Howard BRS Newsletter 120 August 1984