

Routemaster Redux (they always come in pairs)



Routemaster outside the Marshall Field and Company store. ©David Hamer

transport to the playing fields, which were some distance from the town centre location of the school itself. On one occasion a neophyte driver attempted to get the vehicle under a low bridge over which passed the main north-south railway line: he did so while ignoring the large placard indicating that this manoeuvre should only be performed with the vehicle on the centre line of the bridge arch. In today's 'nanny state' environment the resulting

impact of bridge and a busload of schoolboys would have been on the TV news and upon the front-page of every newspaper in the land...in this instance, due to the fortunate, 'no serious injuries' outcome I think it was buried down around page four of the local evening paper..!

Time passed, I moved on. Nearly two decades later I was living in Chicago and was called by an English friend from the British Consulate. It seems that she had volunteered to act as a 'bus conductress' on a Routemaster that had been hired locally for two weeks of sales promotion by one of the city's largest department stores,

Marshall Field and Company at the intersection of State and Washington Streets. The driver was sick: could I drive a double-decker bus? Now at that time I was much involved at the other end of the vehicle size spectrum – driving, at weekends, a modified MG-Midget in regional sports car events. My response: "I can drive anything" expressed hope rather than any demonstrated fact. The route to be followed by the 'promo bus' was not a long one, confined within a ten-or-so-block area of downtown Chicago, an area known as 'the Loop' and so called because it sits under a loop of the elevated urban rail system known locally as 'The El'. There were thus at least two points at which the bus would have to pass under the rails and a number of ninety degree turns. How I would have fared is conjecture because, perhaps spurred by the thought of a British amateur driving his precious charge, the driver made a remarkable recovery and the offer for me to drive was withdrawn. Providence had triumphed over youthful ego and 'The El' remained unscathed!

Just a few years ago, when passing through London, we found that, though the Routemaster had been retired from service, a few had been retained on a couple of routes because of visitor demand and out of nostalgia. We rode one across the Thames to the vicinity of the Tate Modern and then were fortunate enough to hop on to another for the return. I even got off 'between stops' when the bus halted before entering The Strand...that's something you just can't do on one of those prissy modern replacements! ●

Envoy is not an emotion that rises easily within me but when I read in the spring 2010 issue of this journal Dr Sue Black's description of her experience in learning to drive a Routemaster – I saw a green glow! I became especially verdant in this regard because for much of my early life this particular classic bus was my favourite form of transport and only once in my life was I ever offered the opportunity to drive one – but negotiations collapsed before I was able to take up the challenge.

When I was a grammar school pupil my daily commute was by Routemaster: except for those days when I elected to walk the three miles into town. Once I had even a smattering of applied mathematics and physics I never ceased to be amazed at how stable the vehicle remained even while the upper deck [one **never** rode on the 'ground floor' if at all possible] was populated by a highly mobile mass of juvenile hooligans. On 'sports days' a hired Routemaster was our



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