

Service 164 : Royston - Buntingford - Bishops Stortford

Service 164 is one of the most unusual (geographically speaking) services that Eastern National has ever operated. Although it was withdrawn in 1953 its history is very interesting and encompasses the changes in organisation of many bus Companies over several years. In order to trace its history we must start in 1921.

At this time services in the country area to the north of London were operated by the National Omnibus and Transport Co. Ltd. These services were maintained by "National" on behalf of the London General Omnibus Co. Ltd. as the result of an agreement signed on 21 July 1921. London General vehicles were used to operate the services, these carried "National" fleetnames.

The history of service 164 had its beginnings in Hertford when the first bus services from that town started on 1 January 1921 by Harvey & Burrows (Hertford - Wormley, service 1). A "National" application in March 1921 to operate services in the Hertford area was refused by Hertford Council since they wished to support local industry. By 1924 many services were operated by Harvey and Burrows with their "Hertford & District Motor Services" vehicles in a dark brown and cream livery to destinations including Buntingford and Royston. However, in June of that year all their services were taken over by "General" and "National" was now to operate them in accordance with the 1921 agreement. Operation commenced on 7 July 1924 as route N31, Hertford to Buntingford via Puckeridge and Westmill, daily, extended to Royston on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday via Buckland. There was also another infrequent service, also numbered N31, between Hertford and Royston via Puckeridge, Braughing and Barkway, daily.

Another operator in the Hertford area in later days was Peoples Motor Services Ltd., of Ware which was founded by W. L. Thurgood. Mr. Thurgood still continued as a coach builder and coach dealer after the eventual demise of his omnibus Company. Several services were operated by Peoples including a daily service from Hertford to Royston via Standon, Puckeridge, Braughing, Hare Street, Buntingford and Buckland. Certain journeys were diverted to serve Great Hormead and Peoples were the only operator over the Hare Street - Buntingford road which was not served by "National".

In 1929, "National" service N31 was improved to become daily throughout by both routes and in 1930 part of the Sunday service from Royston (by either route) was diverted at Ware and extended to Enfield over "National" service 310. Since this Sunday extension extended into the Metropolitan Police area it was given service number 316 under the scheme introduced by Chief Constable Bassom.

In 1932, the London General Omnibus Co. Ltd., formed a new subsidiary, London General Country Services Ltd., to operate its country services north and south of the River Thames. Consequently the "National" operated services passed to the new management on 1 March 1932. This arrangement did not last very long, however, as the London Passenger Transport Board assumed control on 1 July 1933. Subsequently the services operated by Peoples Motor Services were transferred to the L.P.T.B. on 30 November.

Meanwhile "National" did not limit themselves to expansion in the area immediately north of London. Networks of services were built up in Essex and also in the West Country. As the operator expanded it became evident that some de-centralisation of the undertakings administration was necessary. In 1929, when several railway Companies acquired holdings in the firm the provincial fleet were given more independence and re-named after the railway Company whose territory was served by the particular fleet. Thus on 28 February 1929, "Eastern National" (after the London & North Eastern Railway) was formed, along with Western National etc.

Returning to the Hertford area in 1933, after the formation of the L.P.T.B. and the absorption of Peoples the services to Royston were all operated under the route number 331. Therefore for a very short period, the services of London Transport and Eastern Counties connected at Royston, the only instance of such a meeting. Operation to Royston was soon withdrawn and all services were curtailed at Buntingford since further north was beyond the L.P.T.B. special area. Since Eastern National was the established operator it provided replacement services 64 (Royston - Buckland - Buntingford) and 65 (Royston - Barley - Puckeridge), both daily. Service 65, however, was shortlived and was withdrawn in 1937. Service 64 was extended to Standon (The Windmill) on weekdays from August 1935 and in July 1937 it was re-numbered 164 and operated daily throughout. At the beginning

of the war, the service was reduced to Wednesday only. A Saturday service between Buntingford and Royston was re-introduced in 1948, and by 1949 a daily service was once more in operation throughout. At about this time short workings displayed service numbers as follows : 164A (Royston - Buntingford) and 164B (Royston - Chipping). The next year the service was extended to Bishops Stortford when the outward garage journey in the morning and return journey in the evening were operated as passenger journeys. The main part of the service operated between Royston and Buntingford (Monday to Friday 3 journeys, Saturday 6 journeys, Sunday 2 journeys) with two single garage journeys between Buntingford and Bishops Stortford. The service operated via Buckland, Buntingford, Hare Street, Great Hornehead, Hare Street, Braughing, Puckeridge, Standon, Horse Cross and Little Hadham. The section to Great Hornehead was operated as a return spur working. By 1951 the Sunday service had been withdrawn.

On 1 May 1952 the Midland area of Eastern National was transferred to the United Counties Omnibus Co. Ltd., including the routes serving Royston, 35B (Royston - Guilden Morden - Ashwell - Biggleswade, Wednesday and Saturday) and 41 (Cambridge - Royston - Ashwell - Baldock - Hitchin, daily). The services from the Eastern National Midland area were initially operated by United Counties under their original service numbers, but on 15 March 1953 the former E.N. services were re-numbered, accordingly 35B became United Counties 188, but 41 retained its former number. (see also Group publication E.P.16) However, service 164 was in a curious position, it was considered to be a Midland area service (although it did appear in both Midland and Eastern area E.N. timetables) but it was operated from an Eastern area garage. The service was not transferred to United Counties on 1 May 1952 but continued to be worked by Eastern National. There was also an even more intriguing situation with this curious service. On Saturdays, a second vehicle was required for the 164 to operate on the section between Royston and Buntingford. This bus interworked with service 35B between Royston and Biggleswade and was provided by the Eastern National garage at Biggleswade. After the transfer of the Midland area to United Counties, the same pattern of operation was continued with the second vehicle still worked by Biggleswade. Accordingly, Eastern National service 164 was, on Saturdays, partially operated by a United Counties vehicle ! In mid-1953, however, the section between Buntingford and Royston passed to United Counties and was combined with service 188 to provide a through Biggleswade - Royston - Buntingford service (as 188) on Wednesday and Saturday only, and it has remained as such to date. The section eastward from Buntingford, which was operated only as garage workings was completely withdrawn.

It should perhaps be mentioned at this point that 164 was not the only Eastern National service which has connected the Eastern and Midland area territories. After the takeover of 'Clavering & District' in May 1938 several replacement Eastern National routes were introduced including service 40 which operated between Wicken and Royston via Arkesden, Clavering and Duddenhoe End. This service, which operated on Wednesdays only, was short lived and was withdrawn in June 1939. (see also NS39)

The portion of withdrawn section between Buntingford and Standon was covered by London Transport service 331. The short spur working to Great Hornehead was not covered, however, this village was still served by another spur working of Premier Travel route 26 (from Brent Pelham in the opposite direction). The section between Standon and Albury Turn was duplicated on Thursday only by the service of B.C.Cannon of Puckeridge between Braughing and Bishops Stortford which had been operated continuously by this concern since the late twenties/early thirties. The short section between Albury Turn and Little Hadham remained unserved but from the latter point into Bishops Stortford the 164 had been paralleled by London Transport services 350/A and 386 as well as by the service of Cannon (which diverts between Albury Turn and Little Hadham via Albury village) and also the service provided by Biss Brothers of Bishops Stortford between their home town and Furneux Pelham.

Thus the connection between the Eastern and Midland areas became severed, nearly twenty years after the formation of the London Passenger Transport Board, the event which initially led to its introduction.