



A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Hold Tight!

(more from David's adventures in London ...)

Back in an earlier episode of my London adventures I wrote, "I was very shy, and didn't find it easy to talk to people, so I wasn't able to ride the buses at first, because you had to be able to tell the conductor where you were going." But as autumn moved into winter and the weather became more and more rainy, I eventually had to conquer my shyness and learn how to use the bus system. I suppose the first time I tried it, I got on with a crowd of other people, and just copied what I saw them doing.

The buses on London streets in those days were the famous 'Routemaster' buses - the red double-decker vehicles with the open back platform, which was the only way on and off. Each bus was operated by two people, a driver sealed in a tiny compartment at the front, and a conductor who walked freely around the seating areas. You waited at a bus stop, and when the particular one you wanted came along, raised your hand to flag it down. For someone like an elderly lady, the driver would bring the vehicle to a complete stop for her to climb aboard, but if you were a young man standing by yourself, he would simply bring the bus a bit closer to the curb, slow down a bit, and watch in his mirror, hitting the accelerator again as soon as he saw that you had leaped onto the open platform. You had to really hold on tightly to avoid being thrown off balance as the bus then surged away.

When you wanted to disembark, you rang the bell and moved to the rear platform. The driver of course had no idea who was getting off, so he would always prepare to bring the bus to a complete stop. But it was much more fun to swing on the pole and leap off before the bus was stopped. It needed a bit of experience to be able to know just the right moment for doing this, and I have memories of jumping off a bit too soon, and having to frantically sprint alongside the bus to keep my balance and avoid taking a tumble.

It was this back platform - and the large number of accidents with it, many fatal - that was one of the main reasons that this type of bus is no longer seen on London streets. The other reason is that a type of bus that requires two employees to operate is of course uneconomical, and modern buses are now all the 'one-man' type. But what amazing skills those old conductors had!

Imagine the scene at rush hour ... As the driver brought the bus to a halt, a group of people got off and a fresh crowd of people climbed aboard and scattered to seats and positions all over the bus. When the conductor saw that everybody was aboard she/he signaled the driver with a double tug on the bell cord ... ding, ding ... and then called "Hold tight; Fares please!" as the bus started to move. Then, before the bus reached the next stop, the conductor had to locate every one of those new riders - both upstairs and down - ask them where they were going, collect their fare, issue a ticket, and give change where necessary. In addition to keeping track of the new arrivals, he had to remember where everybody was going, and if any passenger stayed on the bus past their originally announced destination, would ask them for an additional fare.

The Routemasters were great fun to ride, and millions of people treasure their memory, even though it was inevitable that they had to be replaced. I am glad that I was in the 'right place at the right time' to have enjoyed that experience!

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