

The Award-winning Convertible Bus

Well, I can dream, can't I? Anyway, *The Convertible Bus Substitute Beermat* doesn't look so good. This month, we're out and about on the trains. (Anyone getting this at a convention or the First Thursday can skip to the end; there's a funny bit there.)



"It's not really Tony's fault but I do worry about the future of science fiction fandom."

Sunday July 14th was another beautiful day, so at about lunchtime I decided that, instead of marking some essays, I'd go on a trip somewhere. Thus it was that, armed only with a PDA, a Ben Jeapes novel and an Eyewitness Guide to London, I went to Weybridge station and bought a Travelcard.

After some thought, I decided on Greenwich as my destination. Unfortunately, texting soon revealed that near-local Tanya Brown was not at home, but on a beach somewhere. So I would have no-one to share the day with, but such is the price of spontaneity. Greenwich turned out to be far too full of people, a great deal of whom were idiots, but eventually I bought food (and a beer I didn't drink) and found myself a quiet spot by the river, where I ate my lunch, and phoned Alison Freebairn.

I then headed off up the Thames path – just before Tanya's text arrived telling me to go to Greenwich Park. I was already committed to the trip to North Greenwich, and therefore headed on past the residents of Greenwich, many of whom seemed to be sunbathing in their underwear,¹ as touristy gave way to residential, and residential gave way to post-industrial.

Eventually I fetched up at the Millennium Dome. This is a very odd building. Even viewed from fairly close, it looks like a special effect. Your brain knows it's real, but your eye tells you it's a model, or a matte painting, or CGI.

From North Greenwich bus station (where I phoned my mum) I took a double-decker bus, sitting on the top deck at the front, intending to go all the way back to central London. I tried not to get frustrated with the slow pace of the traffic into Greenwich. After all, I said to myself, the reason for taking the bus in the first place is that you weren't in a hurry, and wanted to watch the world go by.

But as we passed the Maritime Museum, I decided I would take Tanya's advice after all, and got off and went to the park. There I phoned my friend Birgitta, and watched achingly beautiful young women walk past "in their summer clothes," as Mick Jagger would say (sing). I must say I'm not sure of the latest trend for skirts and "hipster" trousers with waistlines such that were they any lower it would make the garments legwarmers, especially when worn with high-cut underwear. I find it a bit off-putting and sexually in-your-face. I think this shows I'm getting old.

Back to Cutty Sark DLR and home. But I decided to do this the long way, and headed north, instead of south to Greenwich. If you're not familiar with the Docklands Light Railway, it's one of the few UK trains where you can still sit at the front and see where you're going. Looking forward into the tunnel as the train went under the Thames is an experience I'm glad I added to the day. They have also turned Poplar, which the last time I was there (pre-Beckton extension) was a quiet, unassuming triangular junction, into a rail Spaghetti junction. (And why bother renovating Herons Quay station when it's no more than a hundred yards from Canary Wharf anyway?)

From Bank on the District line to Wimbledon, and more beautiful young girls (including a couple of Germans – mother and daughter I guess – in thin summer dresses, who sat either side of me and giggled; when they got off the younger one's boyfriend openly groped her behind). At Wimbledon I walked down to

¹ | If I were Jim de Liscard, I would suggest that this should be encouraged. Fortunately for all concerned, I'm not.

the Odeon, with vague thoughts of seeing a film, but decided I didn't want to wait over an hour for *Scooby Doo*, and instead went to Pizza Express, where I was served with such rapidity that I was in and out in about twenty minutes.

And then home.

And no marking. Which is, of course, what I was supposed to be doing.²



"I still want to know why only Tony got a vibrator."

My grandparents, my dad's parents, lived in a terraced council house in Fareham, one of the towns that line the Solent between Southampton and Portsmouth, that even in the 1970s formed a continuous link between those keen rivals. They had bought a house in the 1930s, but its proximity to Lee-on-Solent airfield led to its destruction in an air raid (my grandmother used to tell a story of an earlier raid spent sitting inside the Anderson shelter in the garden, my father in her arms, as the machine-gun bullets bounced off the corrugated steel roof). Thatcher's council house revolution, well-intentioned in theory, but put into practice in a way that inevitably led – as I recall thinking at the time – to today's housing crisis, came too late for them.

It was, nonetheless, a nice house, properly looked after, and comfortable. Every summer, pretty much, me and my brother would be sent down from our home in Derbyshire, and be spoilt rotten for a week, driven around the sights of southern England. (Though we rarely went to Southampton – I think my grandparents felt their allegiance was to Portsmouth.)

But what excited us most was that there was a railway line at the bottom of their garden. We were young boys, and we were into trains. It ran on a raised embankment across from the track that ran along the back of the gardens, and provided access to the road for their garage. Looking back, part of the appeal was the mystery of the spot. We couldn't see the track, and had only a brief space of about two hundred feet in which we could see the trains, before trees or other buildings hid them again. Since we never actually travelled on the local trains, I had no idea what Fareham station, which lay to the west of my grandparents', looked like until much later. I used to have dreams about what I might find if I ascended the embankment and explored along the trackside; great vistas of multiple tracks, station platforms and locomotives (none of which, incidentally, was borne out by the reality, when I later found what it was).

I remember an exotic variety of trains – Inter-City services going into or out of Portsmouth, late-night Freightliners and goods trains of continental rolling stock, that had come over on ferries in the days before EuroTunnel. I have one clear recollection of seeing a locomotive run past in the dark with a pantograph on its top – one of the Southern Region's "Electro-Diesels", locomotives that could run off their own diesel generators or off overhead or third-rail electricity. I in particular, with the selfishness only an eight year old boy is capable of, always used to resent the fact that the bedroom we slept in was at the front of the house, away from the railway – I wanted the bedroom facing the railway. Why shouldn't my grandparents give up their bedroom so that I could watch trains long past my bedtime?

What I most associate with those days are the DEMUs, the Diesel-Electric Multiple Units.

I have to pause now for some boring technical stuff. Please bear with me; it's necessary, and I'll try to keep it short.³ There are two main methods employed in which the power of a diesel engine is used to move a train. In mechanical transmission, the diesel engine

² This piece originally appeared in slightly different form in my LiveJournal.

³ Also, bear in mind that I don't really know what I'm talking about.

powers the driving wheels directly through crankshafts and the like, as a car engine drives a car. In electric transmission, which is more powerful, but tends to be bulkier, the diesel engine acts as a generator, and the electricity is fed to traction motors that drive the wheels. Most diesel locomotives, except for some small shunters, have electric transmission.⁴ Most first-generation diesel multiple-units, those built in the 1950s and 1960s, aiming to maximize passenger space by slinging the engines under the carriages, have mechanical.

Except on the Southern Region. The Southern Region didn't use diesel multiple units much at all; an intensive electrification project, begun and largely completed by the Southern Railway, and continued by Southern Region, meant that what were needed to cover their suburban services were electric multiple units. One or two lines, however, had yet to be included. So for these, the Southern Region acquired diesel multiple units. But instead of diesel-mechanicals, with the underslung engines, they chose, for reasons I know not, diesel-electric, with the engine filling a significant area behind the driver's compartment.

Portsmouth-Southampton was one of the lines yet to be electrified. So every day, about twice an hour in each direction, Rail Blue DEMUs passed by my grandparents' house. (Except on Sundays, when locomotives and push-pull rolling stock, a rarity in Britain in those days, worked the services.)

A diesel-mechanical unit pretty much sounds like a bus. A diesel-electric unit sounds like nothing you have ever heard before, certainly not a diesel-electric locomotive. It's very difficult to describe (especially for a non-descriptive writer like your correspondent), but one thing that strikes me is the sheer enthusiasm of the engine sound. Your average DMU sounds like it is simply doing a mundane job – a DEMU sounds like it loves to carry passengers about. It is a sound that rises above the general morass of railway sounds; people turn their head when a DEMU passes.

Years later I discovered these units were commonly referred to as "Thumpers". The name fits them well; there is a distinctive thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump when they are running, especially when they are straining.

Leaving Fareham, they had to strain. There is a significant incline out of Fareham station heading east. The trains coming from Portsmouth heading towards Fareham we had hardly any warning of – they glided almost silently down the incline, before dashing past at speed, leaving nothing behind them but ringing rails. The trains coming from Fareham were a different matter. We heard them about five minutes away as they struggled up the incline, over a distance which must have been (indeed in all probability still is) less than a mile. Thump-thump-thump-thump as they stormed up the incline, my brother and I watching as they rushed past.

Now, thirty years later, my grandparents are both dead, the house went to an unknown new tenant (who has probably bought it by now), and family holidays with my brother are very much a thing of the past. I'm on a train passing through Clapham Junction. Another train passes in the other direction, and I hear it, thump-thump-thump, the distinct sound of a "Thumper". And it sets off the memories. And those set off this piece.

"Thumpers" have long since left the Pompey-So'ton route, which was electrified in the 1980s. But Connex still has a few, operating to obscure locations like Uckfield and Oxted in Kent.⁵ Soon enough electrifica-

⁴ I leave out Diesel-Hydraulic transmission, employed with much success in locomotives on Deutsche Bundesbahn, a success the Western Region, always inclined to go its own way from the rest of British Railways, tried, with indifferent results, to replicate, and now used in so-called "Second Generation" DMUs – partly because I've never been quite sure how it worked.

⁵ Ironic footnote: Many of those still in service were built for narrow loading gauge lines running out of Tonbridge, an area I'll soon become more familiar with, as my girlfriend lives there. (Though the narrow loading gauge problem has

tion or new rolling stock will send them to the scrapyard. And then one more sound of my childhood, a sound that to me instantly says "summer", will be extinguished forever.



Two Class 203 'Hastings' units



"The lesbian shower sex scene was an accident"

Oh no, a fannish bit! It has been established recently that I am the new Dave Hicks, the "new premiere fannish game show host"⁶ (according to Dave). It has also been suggested that I am Dave Hicks' idiot son (for reasons Dave claims to understand fully but which I find paper-thin).

At Max's barbecue in August, I complained that I seemed to have become the master of the pub idea that was then taken up by other people and got out of hand (viz. Kettering in '57, though that wasn't entirely me). "Ah," says Claire, "not just the new Dave Hicks but also the new Jim de Liscard." From there, the conversation went mad.

The following concepts were discussed: Jim de Liscard, Dave Hicks and myself are all aspects of the same person. Dave is the Dave Hicks That Was, Jim is the Dave Hicks That Will Be, and I am the Dave Hicks That Will Be. In fact, this is a Moorcockian concept: the Eternal Dave Hicks. Then again, perhaps it's Arthurian. When Fandom is threatened, the Once and Future Dave Hicks will rise to defend it.

Claire finished by saying, "if you don't write this up, I'll have to."

The Convertible Bus, No. 12, produced by "Britain's most frequent fanzine publisher."⁷ LoCs, postcards and indecent proposals (shipping law experts living in Kent only, please) to **Tony Keen [address deleted]**. I've been to the IKEA in Croydon, so apparently this is a Croydon fanzine after all. That'll be the Nova sewn up then. ☺ **keentony@hotmail.com**. "Stand it up before you suck it." Website: <http://www.geocities.com/keentonyuk>. October/November 2002. "Noel is sexually ambiguous in America."

long been done away with by reducing the lines to single-track working.)

⁶ I think this means I'm about to be dropped in the shit.

⁷ Except Alan Sullivan, obviously. And Dave Langford.