

# “OFF the buses!”

## The refusal of the national bus pass in West Yorkshire

The story we have to tell does not make for nice fireside reading and if you can't believe this is happening - well, neither can we!

We are twins and have lived in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in London since the early 1970s. Now 66 we are legally entitled to free local bus travel throughout England though not, it appears, in the area covered by the Metro Authority of West Yorkshire where this binding legal entitlement is being openly flouted. The regional bus pass both for us and many other senior citizens from the English regions is often refused when presented on the buses.

Originally from the north, and with many long-standing friends in West Yorkshire, we now find ourselves virtually excluded from the area on account of our senior citizen status. Over the past 25 years we have been instrumental, through our painstaking researches, in putting the region on the ecology map. It was solely due to our discoveries that the BBC Natural History Film Unit spent a few weeks over summer filming the remarkable insect population in a derelict marshalling yard between Wakefield and Dewsbury. One of our closest friends, who over the years has aided us in our endeavours, is now, at the age of 70, virtually crippled with arthritis and is dependent on our support in getting jobs done round the house, like fitting antitheft devices and in seeing that her much loved garden is properly tended. Such has been the assault on our persons that we have had to leave her to her own devices as we have now both lost our nerve and simply no longer dare board a local bus in West Yorkshire. True, we could pay up but this amounts to a betrayal of senior citizens rights and in truth we feel we could never live down the psychological damage to ourselves if we were to yield to this fascistic, brutal intimidation of senior citizens.

To conclude this preamble, we would like to point out that we have both undergone heart surgery and though we don't look our age - and certainly don't act it (!) - the persistent and endemic assaults we have been experiencing on the West Yorkshire buses since the national pass was introduced is doubly egregious. Despite letter after letter - even to the Dept of Transport in London - the blanket refusal of the West Yorks Metro Authority and First and Arriva buses to do anything about these relentless, pitiless assaults means we are at our wits end. (We have of course all the letters received from the various authorities regarding our complaints if anybody should require them - many dealing with specific incidents the authorities *know* definitely took place).

The first hint of the trouble to come occurred about two weeks after the introduction of the national pass on April 1st 2008. I had a hunch the acceptance of the national pass would be resisted and so arriving at Bradford Interchange I asked at the information desk on the concourse if it was OK to use the pass. The person I consulted was an unreconstructed idler of the old school who spent his entire shift dosing in front of the banks of CCTV screens and was known to almost everyone who was in the habit of travelling by bus from Bradford Interchange. Preferring to look the other way, he was the opposite of an officious zealot and would occasionally raise himself, as required, from his padded office chair to mooch zombie-like around the Interchange, like he was

on heroin. Yet this time he suddenly came to life, as if awakening from a century old sleep, to gruffly inform me that I could not travel very far with the pass! Though close to retirement himself, had he been instructed by his superiors to say this? This reply did not bode well for the future - after all this was the inspectorate - but I shrugged it off as teething troubles. I should not have been so blasé-----.

My first real experience of the trouble to come occurred a couple of days later when, at the height of the rush hour, I was prevented from boarding a First Leeds bus, the engine switched off and inspectors called. The whole of the crowded bus turned against me and it was only with difficulty I stood my ground in the face of hostile comments coming from passengers who were justifiably angry at the delay. Unnerving though it was, to be treated like a criminal would become commonplace.

However this was as nothing compared to what was going to happen. I had spent the entire day of June 9<sup>th</sup> 2008 filming on waste ground high in the Pennines on the Yorkshire/Derbyshire border. Again we had put this spot on the map when we discovered, a few years back, a colony of endangered butterflies there and which was doubly unusual on account of the altitude. Of course I had not dressed up for the occasion and had spent the entire day sprawled out on the ground exposed to the glare of the sun. So with my battered canvas bag, which contained very expensive camera equipment, and sun tanned face I did look somewhat like a tramp.

Alighting from the justly famous Penistone Line that runs from Sheffield to Huddersfield, I proceeded to the Huddersfield bus station to catch the 18.40 X6 to Bradford. On boarding the bus the driver insisted on inspecting the pass more closely, angrily declaring it to be invalid. I replied it was valid and would he please get an inspector. The driver then threatened to call the police and I replied "please do" and went to sit down. Beside himself with rage the driver swept out of his cab, aggressively slamming the door behind him, and thrusting his face in mine spat out "if you don't get off this bus I'll throw you off". A strapping Asian youth, thinking perhaps he was doing something positive for race relations, offered to lend him a hand. At this point the driver snatched my bus pass from my hand saying he was confiscating it and that I would never get it back. I protested that I was also a heart patient but this only served to increase the driver's fury, for here, at long last, was someone he could kick the shit out of with little chance of a comeback. After all, "tramps" are not renowned for writing letters of complaint! I don't doubt it was a case of deflected aggression and what he could not do to management, without suffering the severest consequences; he could safely do to me.

I was so shaken I did not have the presence of mind to dial 999 on my mobile, the driver triumphantly returning to his cab and departing for Bradford. Surrounded by passengers who were casting vicious looks at me, I did wonder if the police would be waiting for me on arriving in Bradford and that I would be spending the night in the cells, for nothing made sense any more for wrong was right and right, wrong. At some point during the journey I was aroused from my nightmarish train of thought, and utter stupefaction at what had just taken place, by the driver stopping the bus and coming up to me to say the pass was valid after all, adding that he was not going to apologise because I had been rude to him when I had weakly protested "I should think so"! From then on I noticed how the attitudes of the passengers changed toward me, a number nodding to me as they got off the bus; as if ashamed they had allowed such a thing happen in the first place. Even the Asian lad, who formerly had been so menacing, went out of his way to nod to me.

That night I could barely sleep and was gripped by heart pains, my arthritic friend suggesting we ring for an ambulance to take me to Bradford Royal Infirmary. But I knew what I needed was rest and a chance to unwind and noisy hospital wards are no place for that. So the next day I went to First Bus offices in Bowling Back Lane in Bradford to complain, eventually receiving a two-sentence reply back from First management that virtually exonerated the driver. (Within days I was to run into the driver again. Having just come up from London and weighed down with camera equipment, I debated whether to get on his bus, fearing the worst. I was right to do so for he instantly sneered, "What have we got this week?" In fact I let this insult go only mentioning it by the by in a letter we sent to First Bus listing yet more unacceptable incidents).

On the same day that I complained directly to First Bus I also went into the Metro office in Bradford Interchange to ask for a complaints form. This was to be the one and only time that I got a semblance of truth from the staff behind the counter, a section leader admitting there had been many complaints regarding the non acceptance of the national pass. (The trouble is 99% of these complaints were verbal and simply weren't passed on to the Metro authorities). I very much doubt if this section leader would now admit she said it because she was shortly to turn very vicious, arguing that my national pass was invalid and that I had to get a "proper" one. In fact she and her second in command were eventually to call station security on me to get me evicted from the Interchange for "trouble making", and told I was never to show my face in the office again otherwise I would be in line for an ASBO! In fact we did return in the August of this year (2009) to ask if Mr. Keady, the Metro Fares and Pricing Systems Manager stabled in Leeds, was still in the same job, as we needed to write yet another letter to him. Obviously Mr Keady's appointment was Top Secret for the reply came back "this was privileged information" and therefore could not be divulged to members of the public. We informed Mr Keady of the reply and he was apologetic - or at least pretended to be - and that in due course he would be informing his staff such information was not privileged information. But does the man ever do anything other than squirm and fervently hope that we will remain forever content at being fobbed off, for he has surely already hung himself many times over because of his craven refusal to act decisively - assuming of course that the world has not been totally turned on its head and that 2+2 now make 5, this irrational equation, in Orwell's view, summing up totalitarianism. We have, for good reason, formed the impression that Mr Keady is a straw man, a hollow man, and that his word carries no authority *at all* and that the buck does not stop with him, even though the Metro Authority is supposed to be the presiding authority. But more on this later-----.

We obviously cannot list every incident that has occurred for there are simply too many and judging by the last one in August of this year show no sign of abating and are, if anything, actually increasing. But two in particular are worth mentioning, one falling on our birthday on the 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008 and the other close enough to it in 2009! As previously stated, we both do a great deal of voluntary ecological work in the Bradford metropolitan area and my brother did begin to wonder if my "unsightly" appearance in the late spring and early summer of 2008 was a factor in arousing the hostility of the bus drivers. What happened on August 25<sup>th</sup> 2008 was to disprove that, as we were both dressed in our "Sunday best". On this occasion a packed, infrequent, Sunday service bus was stopped in the centre of Bradford and the police called. In vain did I produce a leaflet issued by Kensington and Chelsea Council that beyond the shadow of a doubt showed the bus pass to be valid. The driver dismissed it as a forgery! By now the situation was turning very ugly indeed and a couple of youths began to act in a very threatening fashion. Were they about to plant one on us? When a policeman arrived he aggressively demanded we get off the bus. Instead, we held up our wrists and said "go

on, arrest us". It was obvious he sided with the driver, remarking to my brother "you've got a lot of lip on you". "Yeah" answered my brother remembering a line from Elvis: "And I was born talking back". However it has to be said plod finally did exercise some restraint because if we had been arrested we would not have gone quietly and would have had to be carried handcuffed off the bus. We would then have sued the West Yorkshire police authority for wrongful arrest. The cop took down details, names and addresses but funnily enough when we went to the cop shop to ask for the names of the policemen, there was no record of the police ever being called. How very surprising and

The following day we marched into the Metro centre to complain. We were indignant, as anyone would be, but we were judged to be intimidating despite having gone in fear of our lives less than 24 hours ago. In fact this was all that mattered to the head staff, not the justice of the case, for our anger was indeed righteous anger. On this perverse evaluation it is not the number of Jews that perished in Auschwitz that is the problem but those who deplorably refused to fill out a complaints form to the camp commandant before going quietly to the gas chamber.

The next time I went into complain the officious section leader was waiting for me and pressed a buzzer with her foot, a station security guard, knuckles scraping the floor, appearing at my side in no time at all. Actually he turned out to be a very nice guy and "escorting" me out of the Metro office said if it was up to him he would let everyone travel for free if they looked their age, irrespective whether they had a pass or not. Obviously he was far too intelligent and pragmatic ever to hold a position of responsibility in the Metro authority. (We always now say hello whenever we chance to meet). Incensed, the following day I returned to the Metro centre to get the name of the officious woman who had pressed the buzzer. And that is how I came to be threatened with an ASBO and face violent eviction if I ever dared show my face again in the centre, even though I was now 65 years old. It was no longer becoming a question of my right to free public bus transport but of my right to use public transport per se!

To cut a long story short the rejection of the national pass continued as before but this time with inspectors stepping into the fray. On the frequent occasions we were stopped by drivers, we would always ask that they call an inspector on their mobiles. This they would do, invariably adding that they would allow the passes just this once but, relaying the instructions of the inspectors, we were advised to get the "proper" Metro passes. This became a mantra and whenever we asked for the names of the inspectors we were refused them. (This is still the case and neither is there an identifying tag on a jacket, so anonymity is the name of the game). We even wrote to the transport manager Mr John Keady for a Metro pass, knowing full well he would not be able to supply us with one. (He replied by dodging the question!) And then came a new twist: drivers began to accuse us of stopping senior citizens from the West Yorks area from using their national bus passes on London buses, as though it was our fault! Some would angrily demand "what are you going to do about it"? All I can say in this respect is that we have never witnessed any senior citizen from the English regions denied access to London buses. And if we had, most assuredly we would have gone to their aid. Worst of all West York's inspectors began to take up this refrain in their attempt to single us out and turn local passengers against us. Where was this obscene nonsense coming from? In our opinion it was being put about by rogue aspects of management residing in the Metro authority, themselves in cahoots with the major bus companies that operate in the region, particularly First Bus and Arriva. But why as the bus companies are making a lot of money out of the pass? Or the local authorities hoping to get more money from the pass simply because it isn't ring fenced? Whatever, the entire region is a can of worms

waiting to be opened and with judiciously applied, forensic pressure the truth will eventually come out and someone will break cover and start to blab. The drivers are just unwitting pawns in this nasty business. And considering what we have had to put up with from some of them, one cannot be fairer than that. However we have gone to considerable length to stress that our beef is not with the drivers, despite the fact that a few have behaved atrociously, even writing a letter to Tony Woodley, the Gen.Sec. of Unite. He replied, promising to forward our letter but since then we have heard nothing from the union. This is an important point because bus drivers, beginning in the Grampian region, (the original “home” of First Bus, the Mrs.Thatcher worshipping owner, Moir Lockheed, having arisen through the ranks via an engineering apprenticeship in the now legendary North Rd. Shops in Darlington) have started to take industrial action on a local basis throughout the country in protest against a pay freeze, increasing workloads, a “culture of fear”, attacks on *their* pensions, and a management that claims there is no money left in the kitty when the companies are rolling in money not least because of the compensation they receive from central government vis-à-vis the national pass. In a fraught situation like this scapegoats are needed and pensioners are an easy target, the more backward drivers unfortunately only too eager to swallow management guff that pensioners and concessionary pass holders are the cause of all their mounting work problems. (It has to be said, barring the odd stickler of an exception, we got a much easier “ride” from Asian bus drivers in the West York’s region, the majority waving us through with scarcely a second glance at the proffered pass. It is to be hoped that the various divisions of bus management in West York’s, including the Metro authority, First Bus and Arriva, don’t now launch a disciplinary campaign aimed at rectifying the “laxity” of Asian bus drivers!)

And so finally to the last crucial incident that has broken our will to keep on fighting. The battle is too unequal and Goliath has slain David (and Stuart!). Might is right once more, despite that “right” being blatantly illegal. Without wider support we are never going to win, even though it is patently not a question of human rights or natural justice but simply *an open and shut case* of adherence to the law. That it has gone unreported for so long simply reflects the growing power of management to do as it please, a power ratified by their airhead “see/hear no evil” cohorts in the national media. Drunk with the right to do wrong, it is able to break the law just as it chooses and with complete impunity, for nothing will ever come to light. Following the final horrendous incident and unbelievable judgement that followed and which amounts to open war on senior citizens, we wrote to the self serving, pensioners’ Tsarina, Joan Bakewell, enclosing copies, at some considerable expense, of all the letters and documents we had at our disposal. We even sent the packet by registered mail. Result? Silence, silence and yet more silence. It is as though we are living in a quantum world where nothing is as it seems, only our perceptions making it so.

However the events of that fateful day on July 25<sup>th</sup> 2009 are still horribly real to us. We had been filming with the BBC Natural History Unit in the Healey Mills Marshalling Yards. It had been an arduous day as we were determined to outdo the film unit in quality of shots, and, though it may sound arrogant, we believe we bested them not only in terms of telling shots but also as regards the superiority of the script, for we are not engaged in making marketable commodities. Around 5/30 in the early evening we decided to call it a day and so supported by hiking sticks and carrying heavy tripods and packs of camera equipment we trudged back to the Sowood Avenue bus stop we were familiar with as kids on the Wakefield to Dewsbury road.

More dead than alive we clambered onto an Arriva bus when it eventually arrived; only

to be told our passes weren't valid! We simply couldn't believe it! My brother wearily fished into his bag for a letter from John Keady of the Metro authority which clearly explained the passes were valid. "I'm not having this" the driver expostulated and we began to raise our voices in protest. It was now clear to us the driver was hell bent on confrontation and ordered us off the bus, thinking we were a couple of red faced winos and just too dumb to wonder why we were carrying expensive tripods. We continued to push our passes at him and asked that he return the letter from John Keady for it would have taken a team of shire horses to dislodge us from that bus. Realising *he* would have to physically evict us and fearing our height and brawny arms, the driver let us through only to suddenly stop the bus and storm out of the cab, demanding he inspect my pass all over again. At this point my brother, under the most intense provocation, completely lost it (though it is the one and only time that one of us has exploded with anger throughout the entire ordeal), though I stayed silent throughout, aware that management was looking for any excuse to dismiss us as psychos. When we arrived at Dewsbury bus station I asked for a ticket as proof of the journey, the driver initially refusing to give it to me. Dismissing me as a "grumpy old bastard" and "a minnow" he finally yielded to my request and I thanked him.

In due course we wrote to Arriva complaining of our treatment and to John Keady of the Metro Authority. When the letter came back from Arriva, it simply said that there was no case to answer and that we had been abusive, Correction! Only one of us had got angry, I had maintained a steely composure. No mention was made of the driver reading the letter from John Keady and his taking it into his head to ignore it. This was the judgement of a kangaroo court and we said so and asked that the case be reopened. So far there has been no reply. We did, however, complain to John Keady and asked what he intended to do about it, seeing that two fingers had been stuck up to his "authority". Nothing came the reply as he couldn't interfere in the judgement of another bus company even though, from what we understand, a PFI ( for essentially the deregulation of municipal bus services was the first major PFI) does not mean the relinquishing of overall control with each subcontracted firm free to do as it thinks fit. What we are confronted with here is free market anarchy of the worst sort with the left hand not knowing, or caring, what the right is doing. Meanwhile horrible monsters are born.

We have reached the end of the road and all the pathways of redress, other than bringing in the law, are now blocked to us. We have raised this issue with pensioners' organisations and they don't seem to be all that interested. It's as though it's too fantastical and therefore we must be lying, or else we have wild imaginations! We feel naked and defenceless and without some kind of support I dare not venture north again, despite conservationists pleading we give them a hand and the arthritic lady wanting her vegetables pulled up, her locks changing and drains clearing. So much for the £50 billion estimate in voluntary effort pensioners contribute to the economy.

***But try finding a lawyer with principle in this money obsessed world!***

***Stuart Wise***