

The Conrod



**Winter
2018**



ONO 59 - THE FIRST DOUBLE DECKER TO CIRCUMNAVIGATE THE GLOBE



Most members will know that our Eastern National Bristol K5G ONO 59 owes its survival to its chance selection by a group of young men who wanted to be the first to drive a double decker bus right round the world. After many years of inactivity it has finally been restored to pristine Eastern National livery, and was giving rides at our November Transport Festival. Conrod readers will, we are sure, like to read about that momentous journey, which started 51 years ago. Following contact made through the “Essexbusboys” website your editor enjoyed transatlantic phone calls exceeding 5 hours in duration with one of those intrepid young men, Ken Wilkinson, who shared the story. Most of the account that follows is from Ken, with some further information added from the “Essexbusboys” web site, which contains a very detailed diary of the whole trip, as well as many photographs. Ken shared the first draft of this manuscript with the rest of the Boys who added in some more recollections.

To set the scene, back in 1967 a group of young men were enjoying life to the full. They worked hard and played hard running fast cars such as a Healey 3000, Triumph TR3A and a Jaguar XK140, and visited motor races at the likes of Brands Hatch and Le Mans. On the way back from a weekend in Amsterdam in a 3-cylinder Trojan minibus, discussion centred around what vehicles had never been driven round the world. A fire engine was suggested, but an ambulance seemed a better bet as there would be room to sleep. This idea was further developed and the idea was hatched of taking a double decker bus around the world. The idea came from Ron Sverdlhoff who became the “Energisser bunny” of the team being full of ideas, imagination and energy.

The “Magnificent 7” team comprised Ron who became the navigator, Albert Pidgeon who was the treasurer, Tony Reina or “Skip” who was the mechanic, Rob Carter who kept the detailed diary and took lots of photographs, Ken Wilkinson who was the cook and Derek Jones who handled general maintenance. Sadly 7th member Chris Price had to leave the bus in Kuwait due to medical complications. His place was taken by Ron Still, known as “Twiggy”, who had joined in Beirut, whose task was to be PR. Each team member put £145 in the kitty, the hope being that sponsorship and work would be found along the way.

The first task was to buy a suitable bus. Mr. Bush, the manager of the local bus operator Eastern National told Ron that they sold their old buses to Lincolnshire dealer and co-incidentally pioneer LVVS member Sid Twell, who was duly contacted. He agreed to sell the group a Lowbridge Bristol K5G of which 3 were at Maldon awaiting disposal. Ken was dispatched to check them over and despite not having a clue what to look for chose ONO 59. The £150 asking price was paid in £5 notes and the log book was duly handed over. Mr. Twell then gave £5 back as a contribution to the planned trip, and this is how £145 became the contribution made to the kitty by each of the Boys making the journey.

ONO had to be removed from Eastern National property immediately so even though he had not driven a bus before Ken had to learn quickly. He managed to get it into second gear and drove down Maldon High Street before parking at the Blue Boar pub. Ron was summoned and despite having no insurance or tax drove ONO back to Westcliffe on Sea, just as if he did this every day. Overnight a zealous local police inspector issued a parking ticket which was never paid and the resulting County Court summons is still technically open. The destination was Anderson Caravans in Iver in Buckinghamshire, a company owned by Jimmy Anderson, Ron's uncle. Some of the team were working at the film studios at Iver where filming was under way for “Half a Sixpence” starring Tommy Steele. Skip designed the caravan layout and the Boys were able to use surplus timber and paint from the film set to help with the conversion. Anderson's staff helped to make curtains, mattresses etc. New tyres were the biggest cost in getting ONO ready, and a set of re-treads were obtained. Once completed the bus was taken to The Elms pub in Leigh on Sea where it was parked for a few weeks. Ron Hughes of The Elms, now owned by Weatherspoon's, made a £50 contribution to the kitty.





Page 16 I.ONO at The Elms just before departure .Above ..The lower deck interior as designed by Skip

On January 27 1967 the team set off after a delay due to having to replace the passports which had been stolen from the bus. The route was to Dover where Townsend ferries eventually agreed to charge for transporting ONO as caravan not as a bus, and then on to Paris and Lyon. A low 3.7m bridge in Grenoble required a long detour through the snow but eventually the Mediterranean was reached at Nice. Passing into Italy another steep diversion made the engine boil and the locals gawp in amazement. Maximum speed was about 36 mph and the crew took it in turns to drive with 2 hour spells at the wheel. At this time there was still a lot of grating the gears as the Boys got used to the "crash" gearbox. Crossing into Yugoslavia at Trieste there was concern that some of the high mountain passes might be closed due to snow so the team had to keep pressing on and so Dubrovnik was reached in early February. To get to Titograd there was a choice of using a ferry or taking a mountain road with 26 hairpin bends. As the ferry was too expensive the route via the mountain road won which was tackled mostly in second gear with the driver's boot flat to the floor. The Yugoslavian lorry drivers used snow chains and ran in convoy so if one got stuck the others would help. Unfortunately a convoy had just left so the ONO team headed off on their own but without snow chains they slid off the road and got stuck. Luckily another convoy arrived and 2 trucks pulled ONO out. At one point a parked lorry on the narrow road sparked an incident when the Boys moved it out of the way. The owner appeared with a knife and tore a door handle off ONO in his anger. The roads were very rough and were very dark at night, with sheer drops or deep ditches, into one of which ONO skidded. It was very cold at night with no proper heating, and condensation became a problem with water running down the inside of the bus. To start the bus on cold mornings the valve lifters on the bank of 2 cylinders were used so the engine was started on the other bank of 3 which put less load on the batteries. The opportunity was taken to bathe in natural thermal baths in Turkey. At some point at this time the Boys ate some local street food which caused an outbreak of dysentery among the crew, all of whom were feeling very rough by the time they got to Istanbul.

The ferry across the Bosphorus, the narrow straight of water separating Europe and Asia, could just take the height of the bus but an overhanging balcony was “crunched” in the narrow streets of Istanbul. The road to Ankara was good but the Turkish truck drivers drove very badly and too fast. The local people were very poor and the first camels were seen. More steep mountain roads followed which challenged both drivers and vehicle. Reaching the Syrian border at Antakya the team had to wait 6 days for a Carnet de Passage to arrive from England. This was organised by Ron’s uncle Jimmy who also covered the £100 deposit. This Carnet included a description of the bus which included the words “6 cylinders” when of course there were only 5. On this section of the journey various other long distance travellers were met including 2 nuns in a Hillman Imp, 2 Danes in an Austin A40, an elderly English couple in a Landrover caravan and at one point a group of Japanese cyclists!

Finally allowed to “import” their bus into Syria the team stopped to see the huge undercover bazaar and citadel at Aleppo, a city recently much in the news. Syria was another very poor country with roads featuring very large pot holes. Local people tried to swap

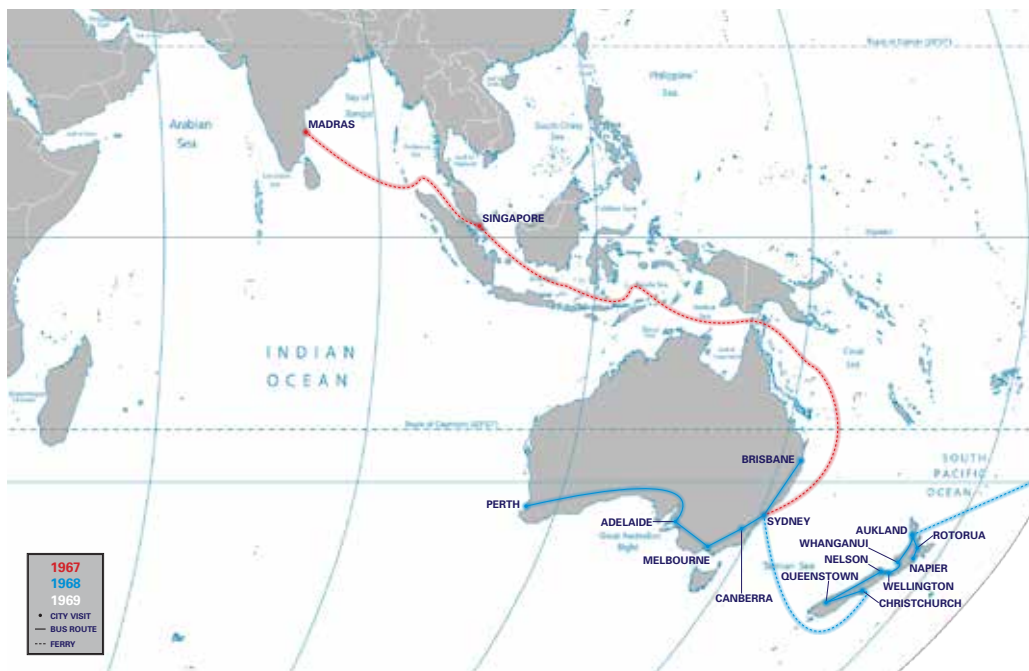


clothing from the crew in exchange for almost anything including knives. By contrast the next country Lebanon was very “western” with newspapers, shops and launderettes. It was in Beirut during a 10 day wait that the world map was painted on the rear panels.

Ron points at the newly applied map at Beirut



Adelaide, Derek, Skip, Ron, Albert, Ken, Rob, Twiggy



In Beirut the crew came across Ron Still, otherwise known as “Twiggy”, who was hitch-hiking and wanted a lift to Kuwait, for which he offered a “fare” of £20. The team had agreed from the beginning that all decisions would be democratic and in Twiggy’s case the vote was in favour of taking him, Twiggy in fact became a real asset to the team. In Beirut the team made some oil bath air cleaners which worked very well in the desert stages which came next.

Heading back into Syria, Damascus was visited where a “welcome to Syria” banner strung across the road was too low for ONO and was torn down. A steep hill on the way to Amman in Jordan was too steep and the crew literally had to get out and push. Petra, now well known as a tourist attraction was visited and there was almost no-one there with but one stall selling expensive souvenirs. Luckily a local shepherd shared his lunch of bread and oranges.

This was the time of the 6-Day War so Israel could not be visited, Jerusalem was viewed rather than visited from the other side of the wall separating it from what was once Palestine. An overnight stop was made at the Dead Sea, at 1300 feet below sea level the lowest place on Earth. The Boys tried swimming in the very salty waters. At Baghdad in Iraq another double decker bus was seen, the first seen since leaving Dover. Baghdad was at one time an enthusiastic user of British double deckers, as was Tehran in Iran. Near Basra a pontoon bridge had to be crossed which had high level cross-members under which ONO stuck fast. The roof vents were torn off and the bus could only be released by letting down the tyres. Kuwait marked the end of the first section of the journey as by now funds were low and the crew had to stop travelling and find work so as to replenish the kitty. Ken for example found work as an engineer for Otis, a company which made oil field equipment.

While in Kuwait Chris Price sought help from a doctor to help resolve some complications which were a consequence of the dysentery he suffered from and from which he had not recovered. He was so ill he was advised he needed surgery and sadly had to leave the bus and the journey.

On 4 September baking-hot Kuwait was finally left behind and travelling recommenced, crossing into Iran where Tehran was visited. More very poor and steep roads saw 4 days spent doing no more than 10mph. Afghanistan was passed through on the way into Pakistan, where ONO was the first double decker to pass over the Khyber Pass. The roads were very corrugated and every panel and screw could be seen to be moving, especially upstairs where the beading on the ceiling was moving by up to an eighth of an inch. The fresh water tanks were leaking again and had to be repaired for the fourth time.

Arriving in New Delhi the bus got tangled up in the web of overhead telephone and electricity lines which shorted out spectacularly. Bombay was the next destination, taking in an evening visit to the Taj Mahal on the way. Everywhere in India low hanging trees were a nuisance and the upper deck roof soon bore the scars, some of which are still visible today. In Bombay there was another major incident regarding overhead wires. It had been planned to ship ONO from Bombay to Australia but this proved to be impossible. Instead, ONO was driven right across the sub-continent to Madras on India's east coast, travelling via Bangalore.

At Madras the crew split into 2 groups, Ken stayed with the bus to organise shipping while on the 20th of October the rest of the group sailed on the ship "State of Madras", heading for Penang in Malaysia. From there a series of trains took them via Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, and then a BOAC Boeing 707 flew them to Darwin, where work had to be found.



ONO still in green livery on the docks at Madras just before shipping to Singapore

Readers might recall the delay at the Turkish/Syrian border where the vehicle's description document described the Gardner engine as having 6 cylinders. This error now came back to haunt Ken. The local authorities took the view that "when you have 6 cylinders you can leave". It was planned to load ONO onto a Yugoslavian ship on the 14th of November. Ken had made useful contacts in Madras, one of whom was the Commodore of the Madras Yacht club. This officer put on his best uniform and went to see the head of customs and ordered him to sign the clearance documents, which he duly did!

Ken flew to Singapore via a stopover in Colombo, the capital of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. On arrival in Singapore Ken found a well organised and very “western” city which did not like the look of its new visitor who looked suspiciously like a Hippie. Ken found lodgings with a charity called TOC H, which looked after British servicemen overseas. ONO arrived on 22 November and Ken parked the bus at TOC H on Orchard Road.

This was the time when Singapore was being given independence. Ken spent 10 weeks in Singapore while the rest of the crew worked in Darwin to pay for the next shipping leg. Ken spent some of the time helping staff of the War Graves Commission find the graves of servicemen in Upper Malaysia and bringing them back to Changi Military Cemetery.

At this point fate intervened. Most of the Boys were working in Darwin to earn money to pay for the shipping. They were staying in a boarding house where their hard-earned money was stolen. The local paper picked up the story which was spotted by an advertising agency. Ron was in Sydney and thanks to the publicity following the ill-fortune of the robbery, was able to negotiate a sponsorship deal with Qantas the Australian national airline. Qantas was offering air

tickets from Australia to the UK for Australians wanting to visit their “roots”. Qantas paid to have the bus painted in its iconic Union Jack overall livery, and for it to be shipped to Australia on the Norwegian ship “Thor Scape”. Ron contacted Ken in Singapore who arranged for the painting to take place. The paintshop designed the Union Jack livery taking the complicated dimensions from a book of flags.

Horsham, South Australia, Skip, Rob, Ken, Derek, Twiggy , with Ron and Albert inset.





ONO wearing its newly applied union jack livery

The expectation was that the bus would then spend 6 weeks doing various PR duties in Australia for Qantas. Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra and Melbourne were all visited. Other sponsors included Lucas, Goodyear, Schweppes and Ampol, an Australian petroleum company who paid for the diesel. Ampol paid \$5 for every one of their filling stations ONO visited, whether or not fuel was required. While in Australia a new set of tyres was fitted by Goodyear. To raise funds the crew sold 20,000 postcards of ONO at 25 cents each. A lot of PR work was undertaken in both Australia and NZ, for among others Lucas batteries and Schweppes which caused much positive comment in the local press. Several letters or recommendation exist including such remarks as "First class and energetic sales promotion" and "Conduct and deportment of the highest quality".



ONO visiting an Ampol filling station, meeting the locals and no doubt claiming the \$5!



In the Australian outback.

ONO was driven all the way across the Nullarbor Plain to Perth in the extreme west of Australia. The dirt road was 2000 miles long and ONO, as well as the local lorries making the journey, got stuck in thick mud. In the middle of the Plain was a motel where a Dutchman asked for help to get his car going. All that was required was pushing the distributor rotor right down. The Dutchman was so grateful he paid for all the boys to have a shower and a meal. After arriving in Perth Albert took the bus to Kalgoorlie from where it was shipped back to Sydney by train. The railway back to Perth included the longest straight railway track in the world, 2000 miles back over the Nullarbor Plain. The Boys took an Italian ship from Perth to Christchurch in New Zealand via Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Another freighter ship took the bus to Christchurch, where the bus was unloaded using a large crane.



Sydney Harbour bridge in the background as Albert, Ken, Twiggy, Rob, Ron, Derek and Skip pose



Unloading by crane in Christchurch

In Christchurch the clutch started slipping, which required the services of a local workshop to repair. It transpired that Eastern National had removed some of the clutch springs, possibly to make changing gear easier. The workshop made some new springs and the pressure plate was refurbished. With practice it was possible to change gear without using the clutch. In NZ in 1968 there were still lots of old cars in daily service including Model T Fords and Austin 7's. The Ferry from Nelson to Wellington was used so as to visit North Island. The furthest south ONO got was Dunedin.



Cruising in New Zealand



A very "British" scene in Auckland, New Zealand with ONO queuing up behind a Vauxhall FA Victor with an Austin 1800 "Landcrab" to the left and a Bedford TK lorry to the right. The single deck BUT trolleybus is now preserved.



The most expensive shipping route was from New Zealand to the west coast of the Americas. The plan was to take the bus to Santiago in Chile but the roads there were thought to be questionable. It was known there was no road from Bogota in Colombia to Panama which would have required another sea journey. An Italian ship was used to take ONO over the Pacific Ocean to Panama. We think was the SS Fair Sky which started life in 1942 as an aircraft carrier. The Boys took a different passenger ship which stopped briefly in Tahiti.

After leaving Panama the route was through Honduras, El Salvador to Mexico. Another British party was briefly encountered in a Burlingham Seagull coach in El Salvador heading from New York to Brazil. The roads in Central America were not too bad but the mountains at up to 8000 feet were the highest encountered on the whole circumnavigation. To get extra power the cold start button was held in, which eventually burnt out 2 cylinders. In Nicaragua a volcano was seen erupting and in Mexico City the Olympic stadium was visited. The Boys found the people in Central America very friendly and welcoming.



ONO on the high seas, we think on the trans-Pacific leg.



At the Mexico City Olympic stadium

Efforts were made to find sponsorship in the USA, which involved Ken flying to New York to meet potential sponsors. This was time of social unrest in the USA, especially among students and several possible sponsors thought the bus trip offered PR possibilities. But the whole subject of featuring young men in advertising was found to be just “too hot” at that time. Only Schweppes gave the Boys \$500 in sponsorship. To raise further funds Ken agreed to deliver a car from Eastern USA to Portland in Oregon on the West coast, the car being a 1966 Volvo 122S Amazon estate.



Above - At the Olympic Stadium at Mexico City. The 1968 Olympics were notable as they were the first in Latin America and at 7250 feet above sea level the highest ever held, which must have caused issues for the athletes. The USA won the medals table followed by Russia and Hungary, with the UK in 10th place with 8 medals. These games were also notable as the first time East Germany competed as a separate nation. Right - The Boys climbing an Inca pyramid in central America.

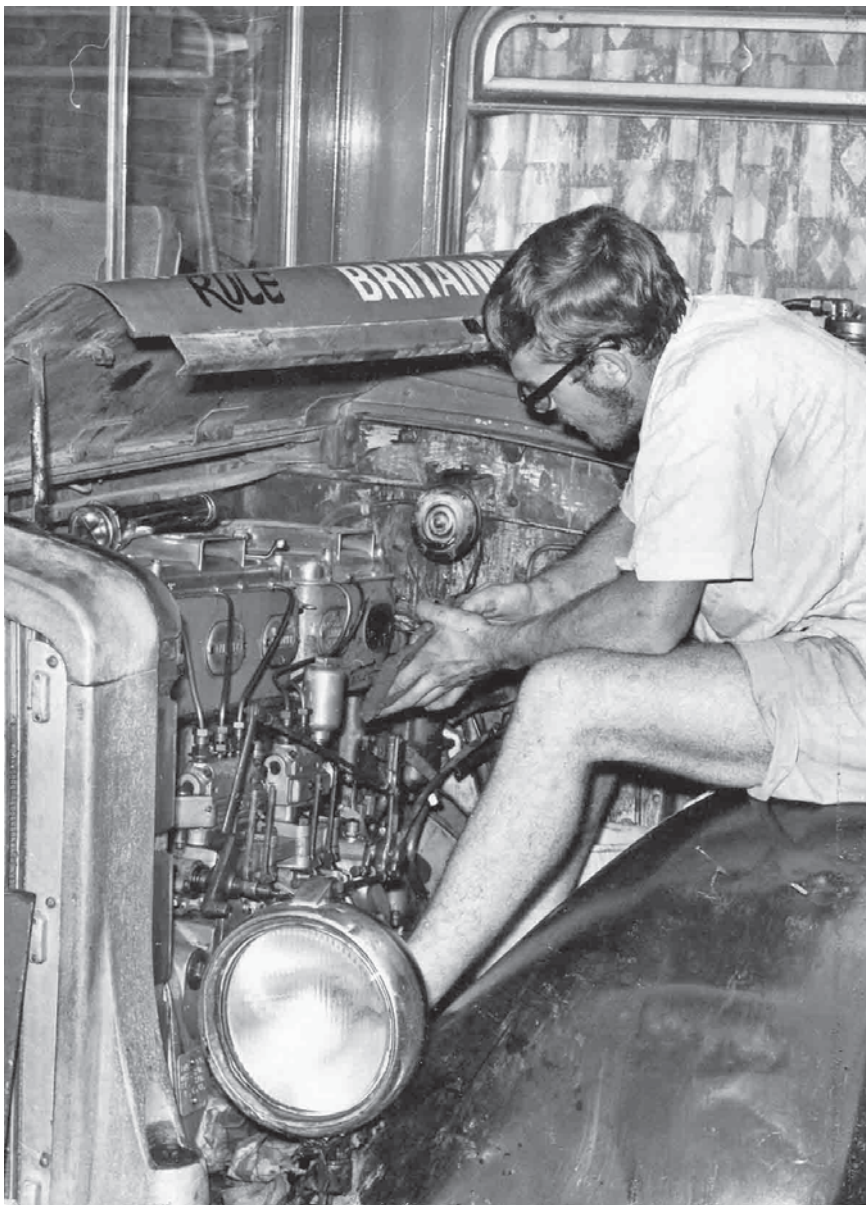


The cable car incident in San Francisco.

While in San Francisco ONO made the local papers when it collided with one of the famous cable cars partly because there was not enough power on the steep hills to get out of the way. The local Cop's only comment was "Aw guys, why did you have to pick my precinct?!". Later inspection of the damage showed the the second near-side lower deck panel was cut, jagged and buckled, while the next panels were badly scored, with buckled beading. The cable car company's breakdown truck had to disentangle the bus and tram. In Vancouver a British car show was in progress and a local radio station shamed the organisers into giving the Boys a little sponsorship, especially after it was pointed out that ONO was in fact the biggest attraction.



ONO on the quayside in San Francisco with the Golden Gate bridge just visible through the mist.



Engine repairs under way in Denver.

A call to Gardner's in Manchester resulted in a set of new pistons and bearings being flown out on a BOAC cargo flight. These were fitted in 2 days while parked at a gas station in University Boulevard in Denver, Colorado. Ron and Skip overhauled the pistons and cylinders which was done without removing the crankshaft. Ken overhauled the valves. The cylinders were badly scored so had to be polished using a special machine which used various grades of abrasive. The owner of the polishing machine was on hand for the test run and quickly diagnosed a tappet as being too tight which needed a slight adjustment, after the which the engine ran very sweetly, as it still does.

The route across the USA was via Flagstaff, Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, Houston, New Orleans and Florida. During their time in the USA Ron, Skip and Ken all met the girls who would later become their wives. In Houston a local guy approached the crew about buying a bus to operate a pizza delivery service. Sid Twell was contacted who sold them a bus for £275 and shipped it to Houston, where our team had to show the new owner how to drive it. In Oklahoma road works were encountered where the lanes were narrow. A wheel came off a lorry going the other way and hit the bus, damaging it in the same place as the cable car incident. The local sheriff called the owner of the lorry who arrived in a Lincoln Continental complete with cow horns on the bonnet. The sheriff made the lorry owner pay the \$500 repair bill, which he did by peeling dollar bills off an enormous wad of cash.

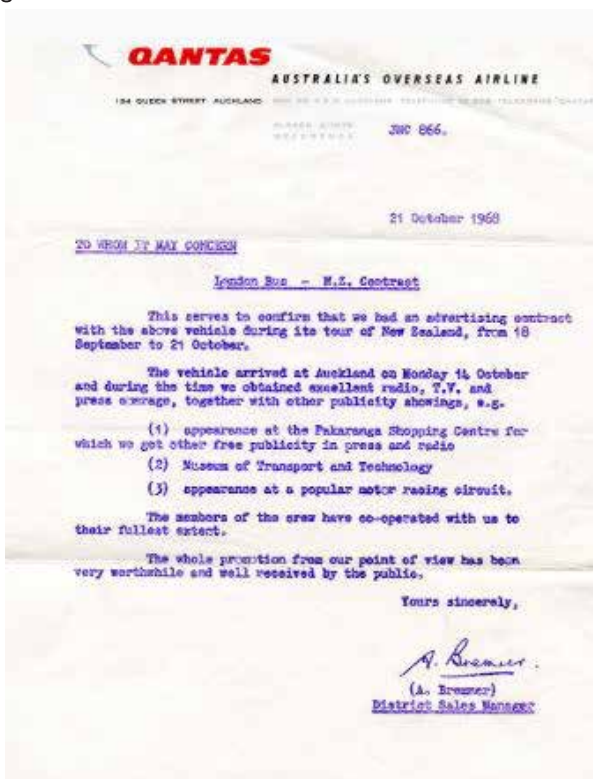
ONO was shipped from Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Antwerp for \$1000, while the crew flew to Luxembourg via Reykjavik on Icelandic Airways. On arrival at Dover the Boys were welcomed home by friends and family who went down from Southend in a coach organised by Mr. Bush. The Boys and the bus all then went their separate ways though they do stay in touch to this day.

The Boys were living on the bus for around 2 years and 7 months. Ken tells us that while there was a lot of ribaldry and leg-pulling between the team members, there were only 3 very minor punch-ups throughout the whole journey. There was absolutely no privacy and living in such close proximity for so long must have been very trying at times. Having got into a routine the presence of occasional visitors staying on the bus must have been awkward for both hosts and guests. Ken reports that the team ate very well, a mixture of dried and tinned foods taken with them and locally purchased meat and vegetables sourced from local markets.

Thanks very much to Ken for sharing his story and to the others who chipped in, and also to Lynn Horsky who maintains the Essexbusboys.com web site and provided the photographs and map. If any readers have any more information, photos or press clippings regarding the journey do please get in touch so we can all share them through Conrod and the Essexbusboys website.

Stephen Dodsworth

Letter of commendation
From Qantas Airlines



As a postscript, in 2012 the 6 surviving ONO Boys visited the Museum as part of their reunion. Here we see Ken, Albert, Ron aka Twiggy, Tony aka Skip and Ron posing alongside ONO. At that time restoration of the bus was very much on the horizon with other projects taking priority. Here it still wears its mock Midland General dark blue and cream, which superseded the light blue which in turn followed the Union Jack livery. Unfortunately ONO member Derek Jones passed away a few months before the reunion.

At the reunion the Boys presented the Society with one of the actual postcards they had printed and sold to raise funds in Australia. Both front view of Sydney Harbour Bridge and the signed back are shown here.

it goes without saying that we would be delighted to welcome the ONO Boys back, this time however ONO is fully roadworthy for them to enjoy.

If we can get enough support we plan to take ONO back to "The Elms" this year to celebrate 50 years since they returned from their circumnavigation.

