

Messengers memories by Neil Kinnaird of Lutterworth  
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Neil was a Telegram Boy number T7 - T47 in Leicester in the 1940's  
This is his story.

It was in the Leicester of 1946 that I started work as a telegraph boy at the age of fourteen years. Even though this is not as "bygone" as many older Leicester folk will recall, it was still a Leicester that was very different from that of today.

There were over forty "messengers" as telegraph boys were called, operating from a small section at the back of the Bishop Street Post Office building. The entrance and exit to our area was in fact via Granby Street and Bishop Street and a little lane we used is still there, which also served as a rear entrance to Inglesants the furnishers. (Please See Note)

A steady stream of boys aged fourteen and upwards, could be seen cycling in and out of this entrance. On reaching the age of eighteen messengers became postmen. In that year war time rationing was still with us, including that of clothes. I can still recall my mother's relief when I started a job which gave me a uniform, including boots, which were not only issued free, but saved on precious coupons.

Very few private homes had telephones in those days, and therefore the telegram was a quick and cheap method of sending messages. Depending on the number of words, a telegram could cost as little as two shillings (10p). Hundreds of telegrams were delivered around Leicester each and every day. The forty or so boys were expected to cover the whole of the City area right up to the boundary lines. Each boy was given an area to deliver his telegrams, and this would vary every trip and every day. Consequently a messenger very quickly got to know every road and street in Leicester. And what a City it was. The New Parks estate was the "new" area, and was still being built upon. Netherhall, Thurnby Lodge and the Eyres Monsell were still only a glint in the planners eye.

There were comparatively few traffic lights in 1946 and even fewer one way streets. In fact I can only recall one street which was one way, and that was Belvoir Street. I have often wondered what date it became one way. It is difficult to visualise the streets which were two way, many of them culminating in even busier junctions. Those of you today who are too young to recall should try to imagine what for instance Welford Road (up to John Biggs statue) and Newarke Street, to the same point were like with two busy flows of traffic. Imagine also if you will, High Street, Churchgate, The Haymarket, Humberstone Gate, and the Cheapside, all two way, coming into and around the Clock Tower!

The same imagination needs to be drawn upon to consider what the junction of Horsefair Street, The Market entrance, Gallowtree Gate, Halford Street, and Granby Street must have been like with two way traffic from these points.

So horrendous was the traffic flow and congestion, that many policemen on permanent traffic control were required. There were coppers on "point duty" at John Biggs statue, at the corner of Gallowtree Gate and Horsefair Street and at least two were required at the Clock Tower. The policeman outside Woolworths near Horsefair Street corner was stood on a high box with a permanent spot light on him for the dark winter days. It must have been a tiring spell of duty standing for hours in all weathers with at most times, your arms in the air, either waving on, or holding up traffic.

I would often see the change of shift, when the relief copper would replace his tired

companion. Relief was a very apt description.

On the streets of Leicester that year there may not have been as many private cars about as now, but there were many more public vehicles on the roads, and many hundreds of cyclists. Dotted in amongst all this traffic flow were horse drawn transports, and of course the wonderful trams.

I make no apologies for eulogising about trams. They were a truly marvellous method of travelling around the city. The tram lines radiated from the Clock Tower like spokes of a wheel. The stretch from the Groby Road corner, along Blackbird Road to Parker Drive end was especially laid out for the trams only, along the central reservation and was similar to a railway line. In other parts of the city, the lines ran in pairs and were used in conjunction with all other road users.

In some parts however the roads were too narrow for two lanes of tram lines, so they laid only single lines. To overcome the problem of trams travelling in opposite directions, every now and then "passing points" existed where they had laid a short length of two lines, not much longer than the length of the trams. I can recall that these were evident in Queens Road, Clarendon Park Road and Fosse Road Central.

Tram lines and where they were placed was something of a hazard to both passengers and cyclists. Because the lines were positioned down the centre of the road, there was a quite a distance between the lines and the tram pick up points. At some of the more important stops (and termini) the lines were laid close to the pavement. In all other places however passengers were obliged to cross whatever the flow of traffic there was to board the tram. It should be remembered that because the lines were central to the road, trams were one of the few (if only) vehicles which you were allowed to overtake on the inside! Hence there was a certain amount of passenger dodging.

All messengers at that time delivered their telegrams on push bikes (motor cycles were a luxury which came much later). Large, bright red, heavy duty government issued bicycles they were too, requiring much energy to propel.

Tram lines were a hazard to all cyclists, especially on wet days, as it was too easy to slip into the tram line. Although it was rare that a bike would actually get stuck, it still was quite a feat to ride the cycle out of the rut! We all became adept at crossing the lines at a greater angle, without riding too closely parallel to them. It was quite a sight to see the cyclists of the day weaving backwards and forwards across the tracks.

The termini of the tram routes were landmarks in their own rights, such as at Melton Road just before the duel carriageway, in Uppingham Road by the Humberstone Park Gates near to the Trocadero Cinema, in London road right were the Transport Museum now is, on Welford Road just by the Co-op near Chapel Lane, in Aylestone Road just before Coalpit Lane turn off, in Narborough Road just before Braunstone Lane East and in Hinckley Road just outside Western Park Gates.

As a tram lover I could ramble on for hours about the tram, how the seats would be all turned from facing one way to facing the opposite way by pivoted seat backs chained together, how each end of the tram was exactly the same whichever way it was facing, with a set of stairs to the upper deck at each end, and a set of driver controls at each end, with his two levers which he would waggle round in a seemingly haphazard way. The rattle of these knights of the road is something that will always remain in my memory. The one big disadvantage that I can easily recall, is that they were exceedingly cold in the winter, both to the passengers and the driver and his conductor. There were no doors on trams, and the wind would whistle straight

through from one end to the other.

Although in 1946 electrified floats were coming in for milk etc, there were still many horse drawn carts about for milk, bread rounds and particularly the railway goods delivery drays (L.M.S. then) which were drawn by lovely large cart horses.

The entrance for these animals was at the bottom of Swain Street bridge. I loved the slow clip clop of these horses dragging their flat topped drays along, with what seemed at times precious few parcels on the back, open to all weathers.

I recall one time being bored with life, and not too keen to return to base (the quicker you returned the quicker you would be sent out again with another stack of messages).

The drays had hanging down at the back a heavy hook which could be used to pull along two or more drays at the same time. I came up behind this particular vehicle with its driver hunched up at the front, obviously as bored as I was, and to pass the time of the day, and to prove to myself the prowess I had with my bike, I played at tapping the swinging hook with my front wheel as we both were moving. I would first tap it one way and then when the momentum had subsided I would knock it the other way.

This went on for several hundred yards until suddenly the hook got caught in my wheel and I was upended and fell off. The sight of me running after a horse drawn dray, my bike being dragged along behind and me hollering at the driver to stop must have caused some eyebrows to be raised, and not a few smiles.

When he stopped the drivers face was a picture and I had great difficulty in explaining how it had happened. He did not believe me.

The life of a messenger at the tender age of fourteen, was quite tough. The initiation ceremony was to have one's head put down the toilet and have the chain pulled. We all had nicknames, and some were quite cruel. There was Killer Kilby, Tojo because his hooked nose and pointed chin. Bonzo because he had ears that stuck out and I for my sins was called Egbert (Egbert no bacon) because they discovered my middle name was Edgar.

Messengers were not allowed to go in pairs (popping as it was called) and the older boys used to stand at the exit and ask a younger boy where he was going, and on receiving an answer would hand over to the latter messages for him to take. This was also taboo but very difficult to control. The older boys would hardly ever deliver any of their own telegrams.

There are many memories that come flooding back to me when I recall my days as a messenger. For instance the smell of ground coffee in the market area, from I believe a little shop called Sainsbury's. Another small shop called Liptons (or was it Home and Colonial) used to show in their window a sculpture in butter.

In the markey a man had a pea stall where he sold only peas and sausages, and was always busy. There was the multi storied fish and chip shop/restaurant at the corner by Lewis's. Wasn't it called Ollerenshaws? And as for the cinemas of those days I could write about them, as much as I have written. There must have been nearly thirty of them in their heyday with queues nearly every night.

Has anything changed for the better?