

## **WANDERING WITH THE WANDERERS ...**

### **My First Year with a Freedom Pass.**

I have now been a Freedom Pass holder for more than a year. I obtained it on my sixtieth birthday, at the start of November 2007. Since then I have enjoyed the luxury of free travel on London's public transport - on weekdays after 9.30am and at any time during weekends.

Yes, that is the purpose of owning a Freedom Pass. It comes in a pocket-size open-out wallet that is bright red in colour. It was a gift to me on my sixtieth birthday from Red Ken, but since then the Mayor of London has become Bonkers Boris instead. Will Boris demand that the wallets must now be coloured blue? Not that it is mandatory to carry your Freedom Pass in the regulation red wallet. You can buy your own wallet of any colour and slot your Freedom Pass inside it if you wish. Word reaches my ears that quite a few Londoners, mainly of the female gender, have done exactly that, for fear that the ubiquitous red wallet is too visible a giveaway of their true age if anyone sees them at the ticket barrier for the train or bus.

My vanity does not stretch quite that far, but I must admit to feeling slightly hurt that there has never been an incidence – yet – of a bus driver or railway ticket inspector noticing my remarkably young-looking face and accusing me of nicking my Freedom Pass from my Dad!

Anywhere, there I have it, licence to roam. Goodbye to train fares or to road tax and petrol expenditure! For if I wish to travel to the outermost boundaries of the metropolis I can get there for nothing, by bus, tube or train.

What does this mean in practice? Answer: a crash course in updating myself with bus and rail routes and timetables. Travelling north-east I can get as far as Epping Forest. If I go north-west I can visit Metro-Land, immortalised by Betjeman in 1972 with his railway ride from Baker Street to Amersham (calling at Wembley Stadium on the way). South-east will get me to Swanley, or if I cross the river, to Rainham Marshes - improbably touted as a venue for the new EuroDisney until they chose Paris instead!

But it is largely south-westwards that I have chosen to travel; to Mitcham, Sutton, Walton-on-Thames and such-like places, for the purpose of Wandering with the Wanderers!

It has been my leading pastime, for nigh on fifty years, to watch my local football team Cray Wanderers on Saturday afternoons. I began this in 1959, shortly before my twelfth birthday.

In terms of travelling to the matches, I have come full circle. In my school days and early youth, I mostly travelled by public transport – bus, tube or train. Then for many years I always used my own car. But now, having obtained my Freedom Pass and having considered the rocketing price of

petrol and the growing menace of speed-cameras, I have returned to using public transport again.

I have rediscovered that this can be rather fun. Not only have I returned to bus, train or tube, but there is now the tram that links Kent to Surrey. I can travel on it from David Bowie's home town of Beckenham all the way to find the Wombles of Wimbledon Common!

Permission to travel to Cray Wanderers away games was a hard-won privilege from my parents when I was twelve. If I could give assurances that I would be accompanied by a school friend or two, and I had done all my homework and eaten all my crusts, I was sometimes allowed to travel if the destination was considered to be acceptably safe and near.

I can recall bus journeys to places such as Beckenham and Bexleyheath, and train journeys to Maidstone, Sheppey and Sittingbourne.

In wartime, railway stations displayed a poster: Is Your Journey Really Necessary? On the occasion in 1964 that I journeyed to Sheerness, and within the first twenty minutes of the game Cray were four goals down against Sheppey United, my answer to that question was undoubtedly "No!" The final score was 5-2, and the train broke down on the way home!

By 1966 when I had left school and I had started work in London, I was sufficiently independent, adventurous and capable of using public transport to get myself across London to see the Wanderers play in far-off counties outside Kent.

My expert knowledge of the London transport network did not rival that of a group of our school friends who attempted in the mid-1960s to break the world record for visiting every single London Underground station in one continuous journey within 24 hours. I cannot recall whether they were successful, but I hope that the authorities were kind enough to grant them all a temporary Freedom Pass! – or at any rate a free One-Day Travelcard, or maybe it was called a Red Rover in those days?

My less strenuous "roving" nevertheless enabled me to enjoy an uninterrupted spell of late 1960s watching of the Wanderers in such diverse places as Hampton, Hillingdon and Hornchurch – or, to use the vernacular of many of my fellow Cray-ites home and away, 'Ampton, 'Illingdon and 'Ornchurch.

Countless incidents remain vividly fixed in my mind. At Hornchurch – sorry, 'Ornchurch – a first-ever experience of hearing a live pop group provide the pre-match and half-time musical entertainment. At Brentwood Town, at a now built-over ground named The Hive, a shattering 7-1 defeat. At Hillingdon Borough FC, the discovery that (against logic) the tube station named Hillingdon, in the far reaches of Metro-Land, was miles away from the ground. If I had researched this properly beforehand, I would have alighted at a different station that required only a walk instead of having to catch a bus.

My most long-distance journey was Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. A pitch at Kings Road with an astonishing tilt from one side to the other. If you had been playing a board game on your dining-room table you would have corrected such a slope by inserting a folded-up paper wedge beneath one of the legs. Bury needed to win this game in May 1968 to be crowned as league champions. Cray stubbornly held them to a 1-1 draw, to the intense frustration of one thousand local supporters, for whom the name "Tractor Boys" was yet to be invented.

With the advent of marriage, family life and an increasingly busy job, the frequency of my Cray-watching became less for a twenty-year period starting in the early 1970s. Then from 1993 onwards my attendance rate gradually increased again.

Having become a car-owner in the early 1970s, I always drove to Cray matches home or away, and it never crossed my mind to use public transport, apart from the day in 2000 when a national shortage of petrol coincided with Cray's away match at Deal Town.

But then came my Freedom Pass, in November 2007, and I thought "Why not?" Cray had achieved promotion into the Ryman League Division One South in 2004. The annual fixture list contained several away matches on the Surrey side of Greater London. A whole new Saturday agenda presented itself to me for attending these matches. The car stayed at home, parked in the drive. The 12.30 train from Orpington. "Change at Waterloo". A pint or two in the station bar with fellow geriatrics like Barry, Dave and Kerry, then rattle down the tracks through the leafy suburbs of Surrey, where Betjeman wrote poems about places such as Camberley and Coulsdon when he was giving himself a break from the Metropolitan Line.

And why do I claim that such a mode of transportation to Cray Wanderers away matches is rediscovered fun?

Well, it costs nothing, for a start! But it's much more than that. When he wrote his famous poem about the thrill of railway journeys, looking out of the carriage window as the world flashes past, Robert Louis Stevenson certainly spoke for me. I don't imagine that I will ever be cured of that possibly rather juvenile feeling of excitement:

*Faster than fairies, faster than witches,  
Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;  
And charging along like troops in a battle,  
All through the meadows, the horses and cattle ...*

I also feel an indefinable buzz when I arrive on the platform at Orpington at 12.30 and I see the great throng of people also heading up to London for their Saturday afternoon sport or other entertainment. This is something that is missed when making solitary journeys by car. An infectious enthusiasm is engendered by the sight of all the replica football shirts, scarves, hats or other apparel identifying that the wearer is on his or her way to watch Arsenal, Charlton, Chelsea, Millwall – or alternatively Harlequins, London Irish or Wasps for those of the oval ball persuasion.

Friendly banter is engaged. "Who are you playing today?" From this one learns that Nick Hornby was spot-on when he described the mental state of every football supporter as one of permanent disgruntlement and anxiety. Question: "How is your team doing lately?" Typical Reply (1): "Absolute crap. The manager hasn't got a clue. I don't know why we keep going every week." Or – Typical Reply (2): "We've won our last two games, but we are not playing well, sooner or later we are going to get a right hammering!"

For my own part, whether journeying to the match by train or car, I have learned that if the Wanderers have had a run of good results and I am confidently expecting another win, I am often in for a jarring experience. For, as Robert Louis Stevenson also wrote: "It is sometimes better to travel hopefully than to arrive!"

If you were to draw a diagram of the directions in which I have travelled to date when using my Freedom Pass for social purposes, rather like those diagrams that show where a batsman has scored his runs during a cricket match, you would see a concentration of lines stretching into deepest Surrey. In cricketing terms, I have been hitting the ball mostly in an arc between square leg and mid-on!

Will this continue? Well, now that Jenko's Army has famously won promotion into the Ryman Premier Division, the new fixture list will embrace other Home Counties including north of the Thames. I must now learn some new batting strokes – straight drives and shots to leg. So watch out 'Endon and 'Ornchurch, there is a man heading your way with an amber & black scarf round his neck and a red wallet in his hand!

Jerry Dowlen  
May 2009