

**Cuckmere Buses – the first 40 years**  
**Philip Ayers**

In July 1975, I was transferred from a job in bus management on Merseyside to become Operations Manager at Southdown, based in Brighton. I was young and keen, my hair was dark brown and I was rather slimmer than I am now.

To find this new recruit something purposeful to do, the Company gave me the job of talking to people over in East Sussex who wanted to re-instate bus services that had been withdrawn in a major re-trenchment by Southdown in 1971, when unprofitable services in deep rural areas had been withdrawn.

The impetus for this came from the local branches and East Sussex Federation of the Women's Institute who put pressure on East Sussex CC to do something about the situation. An experiment in north Norfolk earlier that year had seen services run by volunteer drivers using minibuses provided by the County Council, and I was tasked with investigating whether or not this could work in the Cuckmere Valley.

The first surveys were undertaken in December 1975, principles established early in 1976 and financial support from East Sussex was agreed in June 1976. A public meeting was held in Alfriston Village Hall on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> July under the auspices of the Sussex Rural Community Council with advisers from East Sussex CC and Southdown and agreement was reached to investigate more closely. Plans were firmed up over the next few months, the authority to start services was given and services started running on Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> October 1976. Initially, buses ran on four days a week between Tuesday and Friday, serving villages in the Cuckmere Valley that were not served by the commercial operators.

To start with, 8 volunteer drivers had passed the necessary bus driving test and another 12 following soon after. Today, we have almost 60 volunteer drivers, all qualified under the nationally recognized Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme.

To start the services, two 16 seat Ford Transits were loaned by East Sussex CC. The services were designed to take people living in the rural area into their nearest town for shopping, so services ran to Hailsham and Seaford. In a modified form, those services still exist today as our services 40 and 42.

In the early days, a rack of cardboard tickets was used to collect fares and the most common single fare was 20p. Today we use electronic ticket machines with satellite tracking to know where they are...and the fare is over £4!

CCB bought its first new bus in 1981, a Bedford CF which cost £11,621. New buses followed at regular intervals, the fleet remaining at 2 until 1998 when expansion started. Our most recent high floor minibus purchased in 2002 cost £42,000. Two years later, we started purchasing low floor minibuses to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act. The first one cost £79,000, whilst today our most recent purchases have cost upto £87,000. We have a fleet of 9 low floor buses, which operate on 24 different services extending to Brighton, Eastbourne, Heathfield and Lewes with town services in Hailsham and Seaford. Only our two original two services receive financial support from East Sussex with all other services operating at our own commercial risk, although we have successfully sought funding for our core activities from District Councils, the Department for Transport and the Lottery.

In its first 5 months, CCB made a loss of £725 on a turnover of £1,200, but in our second year, our turnover was £3,068 and there was a surplus of £47. 6,153 passengers were carried and 11,377 miles run. In 2015, our turnover was nearly £229,000, we made a surplus of £7,200, carried 93,000 passengers and ran more than 128,000 miles.

Throughout our history, we have only used volunteers and that continues to this day. It is something of which we are immensely proud.

When we started running, life was very different. Our passengers comprised farm workers, their wives, widows and children. They lived in cottages tied to their employment and most did not own a car. The bus was their lifeline to the outside world. Today, those tied cottages have been sold off and extended. They are often occupied by wealthy commuters with several cars in the household although there are still a small number of people without access to a car and they remain the essential core of our business with other operations designed to contribute towards the cost of continuing those vital links.

Our market changed during the 1990s and that is when our expansion started, adding new services when buses were not already in use thus contributing towards the continuation of those vital links.

As commercial operators pulled off more routes, so demand for our services rose and we needed extra buses and drivers to meet that demand. It is a trend which continues to this day, our most recent expansion being the 125 service between Eastbourne, Alfriston and Lewes on Saturdays from September this year.

Our ability to do more is now seriously constrained by the availability of volunteer drivers and unless or until that is resolved, we cannot realistically take on much more work, so if anyone knows where we can find a pool of new volunteers, we would love to hear from you!

Traffic congestion and inconsiderate parking are problems which afflict our operation every day and deter volunteers from driving more often. Those are problems over which we have no control, yet they pose a serious threat to our continued operation in some areas. The current roadworks in Hailsham are a prime example, requiring a complete re-working of our services to return them to reliable operation.

Services like ours succeed because we operate reliably and consistently if not frequently. We rely on all of our volunteers to do that. We have no disciplinary sanction over them; they do it because they want to, and if that becomes too difficult, they stop volunteering, putting services at risk.

But enough gloom! Along the way, we have had our fair share of success, winning awards from Wealden District Council and East Sussex County Council, a Buses for All award in the UK Bus Awards, and culminating in receiving the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in time for our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 10 years ago.

We are producing a booklet to mark our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary commenting in more detail on how we have got where we are, and a copy will be sent to everyone here once production has been finalized and the booklet published.

Before I close, I should just single out one of our many volunteers for a special mention – our Chairman Beryl Smith who has been involved since the beginning and has led us through many trials and tribulations with calmness, determination and a lot of common sense and for that we owe her a great debt of gratitude.

To close, that keen young man of 1976 is now a plump grey-haired pensioner, very proud to have been involved and wondering where all the time has gone. We are here to celebrate 40

years of the Cuckmere Community Bus, an operation that most pundits thought would fail within its first six months! I'm sure that all of our current volunteers and those in the past are proud to have proved them wrong.

Philip Ayers

Managing Director

Cuckmere Community Bus

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