

CUCKMERE IN THE COMMUNITY

Rural bus services are under threat. While that is very true in the post-Covid world with its new travel patterns, the reality is the risk has existed for more than half a century. Indeed, a government committee chaired by Professor D T Jack investigated the subject way back in 1961. Ultimately the Jack Report paved the way to providing subsidy for rural buses, since when they have very much ebbed and flowed as funds are either made available, or more often, cut off.

In an era of inflation and labour shortages – no, not now but the 1970s – and having slashed much rural mileage in 1971 as rising costs took effect, the National Bus Company (NBC) was looking for new ways of operating unremunerative rural services. Aided by local government reorganisation in 1974, which gave greater emphasis to the role of county councils in promoting and subsidising public transport, the outcome resulted in partnerships with local councils and communities to provide services, with the first such established in Norfolk.

Under the banner of National Norfolk, this service used an NBC-supplied and liveried Ford Transit minibus, but driven by volunteers. Based at the Eastern Counties outstation in Fakenham, it provided scheduled public transport to remote areas of rural north Norfolk, with the costs underwritten by the county council. Buses reported on the service way back in October 1975.

Other schemes – not always with volunteer labour – were launched in Bedfordshire (United Counties using Ford A series minibuses) Essex (Eastern National using Peugeot 504 estate cars) and Lancashire (Ribble using a Bristol LHS branded as Betty's Bus). In total, 21 locations were listed in 1978, but almost all have disappeared in the intervening years.

Not so the East Sussex example, the Cuckmere Community Bus (CCB), which in part took its inspiration from the Norfolk scheme. Its impetus was the withdrawal of NBC-owned Southdown's service 98, an eight-times-a-day route from Seaford via the Cuckmere valley to Berwick, with four of those journeys then projected on to Hailsham.

With one exception, every bus from no. 4 onwards has been a Mercedes-Benz. In the late 1980s and 1990s, these were similar to those purchased by major operators. CCB5 (G185 TUF), a Reeve Burgess bodied 609D new in 1990, stands in Alfriston Square. CCB ARCHIVE

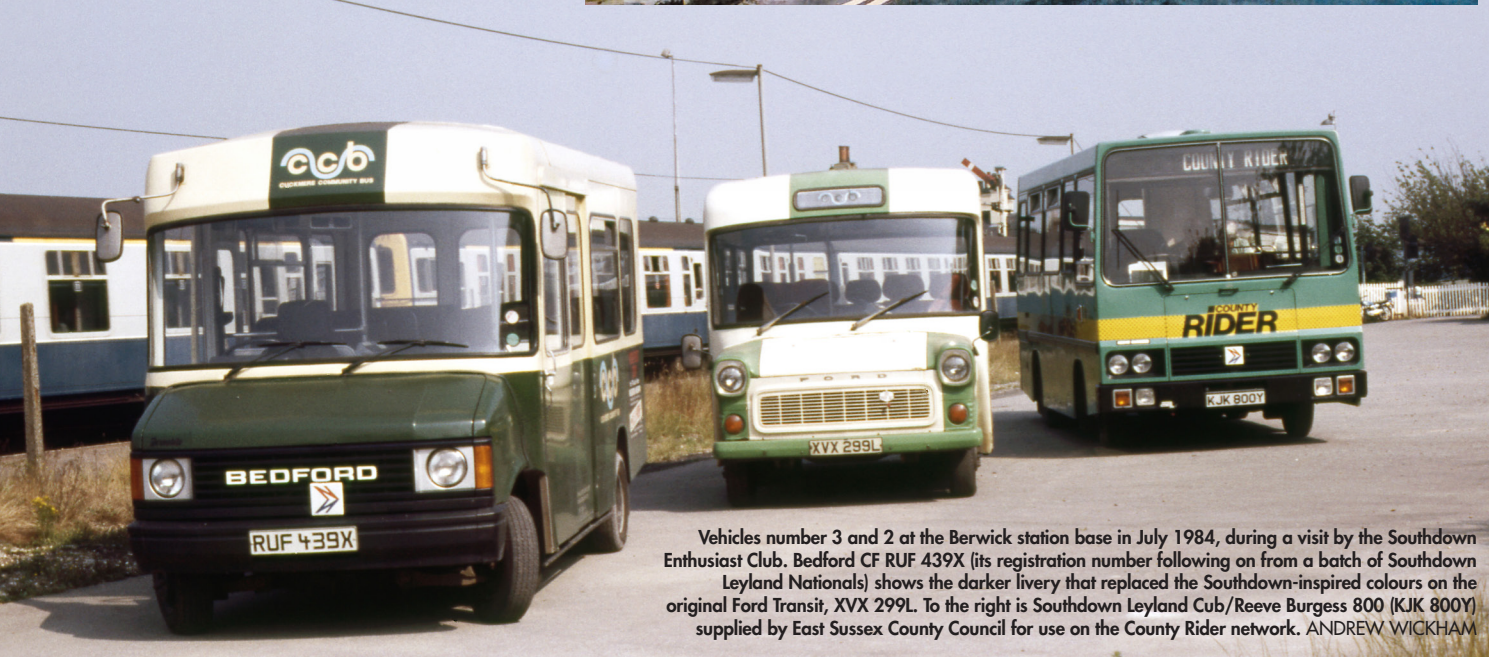


East Sussex-based Cuckmere Community Buses is a fine example of a volunteer-led rural service filling the gaps left by large commercial operations. **DAVID JENKINS** tells the operator's story

The abandoned route left several villages with no public transport services, in an era when around 40% of households had no car (compared to around 15% today, or just 6% in rural areas) and fewer than one-third of women held a driving licence.

So it should come as no surprise that the initial push to 'do something' came from the Women's Institute. Their campaigning brought together the county council, Sussex Rural Community Council and Southdown, to look at providing a volunteer-operated bus service.

The Southdown representative was Philip Ayers, newly arrived from Crosville, and since 1989, Cuckmere's



Vehicles number 3 and 2 at the Berwick station base in July 1984, during a visit by the Southdown Enthusiast Club. Bedford CF RUF 439X (its registration number following on from a batch of Southdown Leyland Nationals) shows the darker livery that replaced the Southdown-inspired colours on the original Ford Transit, XVX 299L. To the right is Southdown Leyland Cub/Reeve Burgess 800 (KJK 800Y) supplied by East Sussex County Council for use on the County Rider network. ANDREW WICKHAM



Passengers of an age group typical of many users of Cuckmere's services board CCB27 (RX70 SOH) on town service H3 in Hailsham High Street. DAVID JENKINS

The growth of the network was such that route numbers were introduced by 2006

managing director. In between times, he was part of Southdown's management buyout team, subsequently selling on to Stagecoach. His long association with the operation is matched by chairman Beryl Smith, who took on the role a few months into CCB's existence, and has held it ever since.

CCB services started operating in 1976, with volunteers driving two Ford Transits owned by East Sussex County Council and redeployed from Eastbourne Borough Transport's dial-a-ride operations. The Transits were painted in the traditional Southdown colours, although a darker green – almost like that of Maidstone & District – was used on the subsequent Mercedes-Benz vehicles until 2020.

Three journeys were offered on each of four days a week, providing links from the northern part of the area to Hailsham on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and adding journeys southwards to Seaford on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Expansion

And so it broadly remained, with deregulation in 1986 barely affecting Cuckmere, with its mission to provide routes that complemented rather than directly competed with established bus companies. Operations remained low key, still only needing two buses. The Berwick-Seaford service continued to run only on Tuesdays and Fridays, Berwick-Hailsham now ran on



CCB 20 (BK65 UBJ) passes Pevensey & Westham railway station on Saturday-only route 37 which links the Beachlands area of Pevensey Bay with Hailsham. DAVID JENKINS



Newest bus CCB28 (RX22 SBO) passes Eastbourne railway station on the Charleston Connection route 25 to Lewes. DAVID JENKINS

Wednesdays and Fridays, while a Polegate town service was provided on Thursdays.

A spurt to growth finally arrived with the introduction of Rural Bus Subsidy Grant in 1998. £32.5m was made available to local authorities, to provide new bus services in rural areas, generally defined as those with less than 3,000 people. East Sussex's share was initially just £300,000 per year, but later increased to over £550,000, and enabled it to expand provision across the county.

Amongst the routes which Cuckmere started up were a shoppers' service to Brighton on the first and third Thursday of each month. Two Rambler routes ran on Sundays, aimed at reducing car dependency and encouraging sustainable tourism in the Cuckmere Valley area. Both were hourly circulars from Berwick station, connecting with trains on the Eastbourne-Lewes-Brighton/London route. The Charleston Rambler lasted just two years, with custom affected by the contemporary foot and mouth outbreak. Its replacement, the Michelham and Middle Farm Rambler, running eastwards to Hailsham and Polegate has also not survived, but the other, the Cuckmere Valley Ramblerbus, is now numbered 47 and a mainstay of the Cuckmere business.

As other services waned, the community operator tried to fill in the gaps. By 2005, Cuckmere's buses could be found in

Eastbourne on Thursdays, with other services following, including extra journeys during what would otherwise be dead time.

The growth of the network was such that route numbers were introduced by 2006. The Cuckmere Valley Ramblerbus became route 47, by now so successful that it ran on Saturdays too. Most other routes were numbered in the 40s, but others adapted the county council numbering, such that subsidised weekday 126 (Seaford – Alfriston – Eastbourne) became Cuckmere's commercial 26 on a Sunday. Bizarrely, the council's leaflets of the time made no mention of the community bus element of the service.

Other expansion has taken place on routes once run by failed operators Countryliner and Renown, saving East Sussex County Council money in the process. Cuckmere now reaches Lewes on six days a week, and also operates Seaford town services on the same basis, except on a Saturday afternoon, when they are subsidised and run by Compass Travel instead. The Brighton services have now disappeared, but other parts of rural East Sussex have joined the network. Cuckmere's buses now travelling as far north as Heathfield on a Wednesday.

Vehicles

CCB has continued to be faithful to the minibus, with a change in driver

licensing obviating the need for a PCV licence since 1997, as long as the seating capacity remains below 17. In some cases, that has required downseating. Each acquisition is numbered in a continuous series, with the most recent arrival being the operator's 28th bus.

Following on from the Ford Transits was Cuckmere's first new bus, a Dormobile-bodied Bedford CF which arrived in 1981. For many years, the fleet remained at two vehicles, so as a new one arrived, another one left. The second Transit was replaced by a Reebur-bodied Mercedes-Benz 608D in 1986, which in conventional PSV use would have been a 20 seater. Facilitated by Southdown, and almost identical to their own examples, bus no. 4 was downseated to have 16 seats.

Since then, with one exception (bus 23 – a Fiat Ducato) Cuckmere has stayed faithful to Mercedes-Benz. The introduction of new rural funding in the late 1990s led to fleet expansion, some of which was met by purchasing second-hand buses, including a pair of Alexander-bodied 709Ds from near neighbour Eastbourne Buses, which in turn had acquired them from Stagecoach.

The first low-floor bus arrived in 2004, with another six Mercedes-Benz 616i, mainly with Mellor bodies, entering service over the following seven years. Since 2014, the choice has (excepting

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bus 23) been the slightly smaller 516i, virtually identical to those in some of the big group fleets, with a total of seven now in use. The newest entered service in March this year, and another is planned for 2023.

Covid

Covid struck not only at Cuckmere's passenger base, but also at some of its more elderly volunteer drivers, who were forced into shielding. All services were suspended for almost three months, with a limited operation starting up again in June 2020. The 12 volunteers who initially returned encountered exactly the same kind of precautions as drivers of bigger buses – enhanced cleaning, reduced capacity, and screens to separate them from the passengers. Notably the lack of perspex supplies meant that to begin with, only enough was available for two buses to be so equipped.

In time, all but two of the 45 drivers have returned, with weekly Zoom meetings being held to keep in touch with everybody. A full timetable was finally run again in the summer of 2021, with

buses still equipped with hand sanitisers, and ticket machines upgraded, so that contactless transactions can be made anywhere.

Despite significantly reduced passenger numbers, revenue and expenditure was carefully monitored, such that the deficit for the year was only £62. Cuckmere was eligible for the initial CBSSG funding provided by the Department for Transport to support bus operators, but was deterred from joining the follow up Bus Recovery Grant scheme because of the extensive administrative time it required. Nonetheless, it managed to reverse the deficit in 2021.

Cuckmere today

Look on the side of the buses, and the legal lettering reads Cuckmere Community Buses Ltd. The registered charity was restructured into this format – a limited company without share capital – in 2006, a move prompted by ever tightening regulation. The organising committee was replaced by a board of directors – all still volunteers – plus a stakeholder group meeting held every

six months, at which all of the parishes served are represented. Since 2013, it has adopted the trading title of Cuckmere Buses, deleting the word 'community', which Philip Ayers says puts younger passengers off from using the services.

The operator's image has been overhauled too, replacing that used since the start of operations. Still using green and cream, the former is now in multiple shades, representing the South Downs. The CCB logo, with the River Cuckmere entwining the initials has gone too, and the Best Impressions design also extends to a revamped timetable book. Not quite as many are printed these days, against which Cuckmere's web and social media presence is increasing.

The timetables show that 14 of the original villages are still served, now part of a network of around 20 routes. Several run on only one day a week – the most frequent runs six days per week – and one runs only on New Year's Day when Stagecoach doesn't. Cuckmere has a policy not to compete with commercial operators, or for tenders, and as a result, the majority of the network



Cuckmere's first low floor bus arrived in 2004. It was joined in 2007 by CCB12, OU05 LWP, a Koch-bodied Mercedes-Benz 616i with a Koch body which first ran with Thames Travel. In Hailsham in 2011, it still displayed the full Cuckmere Community Bus fleetname, and a selection of paces served along the top of the windows. DAVID JENKINS



CCB24 (RK68 GVI) has just dropped off Cuckmere Valley Rambler passengers at Seaford, before returning to Berwick. Route 47 connects with trains at both ends of the route. DAVID JENKINS

is commercial, with only Tuesday and Friday route 40 between Berwick and Seaford, and the Wednesday-only 42 from Berwick to Hailsham being subsidised by East Sussex County Council. These two routes are in fact the direct successors to the original operations of 1976.

There is a bigger presence in and around Eastbourne, some of it replacing the Westham & Pevensey community bus which ceased at the end of 2013; CCB acquired its 10-year-old Mercedes-Benz 616i as well as the routes it operated.

Cuckmere participates in the local PlusBus schemes, and just like its larger commercial cousins, is taking part in the county council-led scheme for lower fares in East Sussex. Nonetheless, passenger numbers are only slowly recovering to pre-Covid levels. Like other operators, it is experiencing a loss of concessionary passengers, who previously made up around 85% of boardings. Philip explains that the loss of some customers was due to Covid-inspired changes in lifestyles, with a big increase in delivery services replacing personal trips, while some other elderly residents have moved away. Fare-paying passengers though now exceed 2019 levels.

Since Cuckmere cannot cut costs – as a voluntary operation, it already avoids the 65% cost of labour – it is necessary to grow revenue instead. This summer saw a tourist-oriented leaflet, supplementing the operator's long established timetable book, promoting routes 25, 26 and 47, all of which serve the tourist honeypot destination of Alfriston. Also included was the 49 from Eastbourne to Herstmonceux, where Cuckmere passengers can get money off entry to the castle and the Observatory Science Centre.

To try and stimulate demand on all year routes in locations where patronage

is especially lower, a door-to-door leaflet drop was made along route 41 in Friston and East Dean, and along the 44 in Polegate. The targeted marketing campaign was achieved with some financial assistance from the county council.

In addition to regular timetabled services, Cuckmere also gains income from services to special events, such as tennis week in Eastbourne and the Charleston Festival at the historic house of that name. Private hire is also offered, with all of these operations still relying on volunteers. Many of the parish councils on the patch give small grants which help to keep services running, but fares remain the biggest source of revenue.

Traffic congestion and inconsiderate parking are problems which afflict the operation every day

The future

Alongside the challenge of finding more passengers, Philip highlights the issues of a transition to carbon neutral operation. The fleet of seven buses – all low-floor Mercedes-Benz Sprinters – is regularly replaced, with experience showing a lower fleet age (the oldest is not yet seven years old) saves substantially on maintenance costs. But a battery-electric minibus costs roughly double that of its diesel equivalent, and thus far, government grant funding has excluded buses with fewer than 23 seats.

One has been inspected, but there are significant challenges about charging a fleet of such buses if they are to remain at the current rural base. A possible alternative may be hydrogen power – not that such a small bus exists yet – using facilities elsewhere to fill up, in a similar way to diesel. A potential option was to piggyback on to a Go-Ahead proposal for hydrogen refuelling facilities at its Newhaven depot, but so far this has not received funding, although the government has indicated that further rounds of ZEBRA bidding (the zero emission bus fund) are expected to take place.

Philip's other headache is a diminishing pool of volunteer labour. Although the original operation required everyone to obtain a PSV driving licence, subsequent changes have enabled holders of car licences with D1 entitlement to drive the smaller buses used by Cuckmere. But automatic D1 entitlement was taken away in 1997 – although a recent government consultation is reconsidering the issue – and anyone who passed their driving test since then would now need to undergo expensive training to upgrade their licences. He also observes that traffic congestion and inconsiderate parking are problems which afflict the operation every day, and deter volunteers from driving more often.

Around 40 half-shifts have to be covered every week, and although the managing director may have to grapple with Bus Service Improvement Plans and Enhanced Partnerships, don't be surprised to find Philip Ayers himself behind the wheel. This is truly a community operation, now counting down the time to its 50th anniversary.

This article is partly based on a talk by Philip Ayers to the Omnibus Society

Before settling on the Mercedes-Benz 515/516, the standard bus was a Mellor-bodied 616i. Last to be acquired was CCB18 (KE07 HXK) which started life as a demonstrator and ran for Cuckmere between 2014 and 2021. Displaying the post-2016 Cuckmere Buses fleename, it is passing Eastbourne's distinctive railway station, although its ultimate destination is the suburban Sainsburys at Hampden Park. DAVID JENKINS

