

125TH ANNIVERSARY OF ROYAL BLUE COACHES –

A WEST COUNTRY CELEBRATION 16/17 SEPTEMBER

On Friday 16th and Saturday 17th of September a major road run to celebrate the 125th anniversary of Royal Blue Coaches will take place when twelve vintage coaches will travel from Exeter to Penzance on the 16th, returning to Exeter the next day by a different route in order to cover both the North and South of Cornwall. This event is being organised by the West Country Historic Omnibus and Transport Trust (WHOTT) and sponsored by First Group, the West Country's major bus and coach operator. On Sunday 18th September the run will be followed by WHOTT's annual Vintage Transport Rally at the Westpoint Showground.

Royal Blue was the premier express coach company in the South and West of England with a network of routes stretching from Penzance to Margate and Bournemouth to London. Following initial development of tours and local services around Bournemouth and the New Forest in the horse drawn era, express coach services were instituted after the First World War. Royal Blue became part of the Tilling Group in 1935 and came under the management of the Western & Southern National Omnibus Companies both now absorbed into First Group. Royal Blue routes were incorporated into the National Express network in the 1970s and the Royal Blue name finally disappeared from service coaches in the late 1980s.

Royal Blue set the standards of service, vehicle maintenance, and professionalism of its workforce. Royal Blue still has a wide following among transport enthusiasts, historians and the older generation of coach travellers. More than 50 Royal Blue vehicles survive, many restored to a high standard.

The concept of the run on 16th and 17th is to extend the display of historic vehicles which followed the old Royal Blue route from London to Exeter via Bournemouth in June. This time the run will cover the length of Devon and Cornwall following, as far as possible, the old routes. The 14 vehicles expected to take part cover the post war era from 1950 to 1980.

The run will leave Exeter's Paris Street Coach Station at about 10.45am and will make a lunchtime stop in Plymouth and an afternoon tea stop in Truro before completing the journey to Penzance Bus Station via Falmouth and Helston.

On Saturday the coaches will leave Penzance Bus Station at 10.00am travelling up the A30 to Hayle and then via the coastal route to Perranporth and Newquay. The route will take the coaches on to Wadebridge, Camelford and Launceston before a tea stop at Jethro's restaurant and club at Lewdown, which, in the 1970's, was a Royal Blue coach interchange. The journey will be completed by following the old A30 into Exeter arriving at the Coach Station in the late afternoon.

A new publication lavishly illustrated with colour photos of Royal Blue vehicles in preservation, including shots taken on the London to Exeter run in June, will be available on the day for £8.00 or by post for £9.00 from WHOTT, c/o Ledger Farm, Forest Green Road, Fifield, Maidenhead SL6 2NR. An illustrated history of Royal Blue published by WHOTT in June is still available from WHOTT at £4.00 or the two together for £12.00 including p&p.

Further details from: Dr Colin J Billington, Chairman of The West Country Historic Omnibus & Transport Trust (WHOTT)

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Further information

The Trust

The West Country Historic Omnibus & Transport Trust (WHOTT) is a charitable company (Registered Charity No. 1079795, Company registered in England No. 3780463) established to preserve the history of commercial road transport from the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset for the education and enjoyment of future generations. WHOTT's ambitions are to build a permanent display hall with archive and restoration facilities near Exeter and a planning application is currently with the authorities. Friends of the Trust receive newsletters with historic articles and the Royal Blue Anniversary run is one of a number of events held through the year. The annual rally takes place this year on Sunday 18th September at Westpoint, the Devon County showground on the outskirts of Exeter, and has attracted a record entry. For further details see www.busmuseum.org.uk, in general, and the 'events' area, in particular. To become involved in WHOTT activities become a Friend of the Trust for a minimum donation of £15 per year and receive our quarterly newsletter, WHOTT's News! which includes historic articles about West Country transport – see our website or send your donation to WHOTT, c/o Ledger Farm, Forest Green Road, Fifield, Maidenhead, Berks, SL6 2NR.

Coaching History

Express coach services in the South and West of England, as we know them, developed from the route network established by Royal Blue Coaches over the 100 years up to 1980. Then, the Centenary, as well as being a tribute to the Royal Blue heritage, heralded the integration of the routes of many famous and long established names into today's national network of white coach uniformity.

But the memories of those colourful days live on and are brought to life by the sight of vintage coaches on the highways and byways of Britain, brought out in the summer by enthusiasts who authentically restore these vehicles to their former glory.

Royal Blue History

Founded in the horse drawn era of wagonettes, landaus, brakes and stagecoaches, Thomas Elliott obtained his hackney-carriage driver's licence in September 1880 and established his business in Avenue Road, Bournemouth. The business expanded rapidly and Royal Blue gained a reputation for attention to detail and the turnout of its coaches and teams of horses.

Royal Blue converted from horsedrawn carriages to motorised char-a-bancs before the First World War and was a pioneer in the development of long distance express services in competition with the railways. Continued by Thomas Elliott's sons, the business was

eventually sold, on 1 January 1935, to Thomas Tilling Ltd and merged with the express services of subsidiaries Western and Southern National who continued to use the Royal Blue name. The Tilling Group was nationalised in 1948 and formed a major constituent of the National Bus Company from January 1969. Royal Blue routes were absorbed into the National Express Network in the 1970s but the Royal Blue name continued to be used on Western and Southern National coaches even after de-nationalisation, the final Royal Blue liveried vehicle being withdrawn in 1994.

For those interested in following the history in more detail, WHOTT has recently produced an illustrated publication 'Royal Blue – 125 years' for £4.00 and a new all colour publication 'Royal Blue Preserved' for £8.00 plus £1.00 p&p. There are four other books on the subject:

- 'Glory Days: Royal Blue' by Colin Morris published by Ian Allan.
- 'A history of Royal Blue Express Services' by R C Anderson and G Frankis published by David & Charles.
- 'The years between 1909 and 1969. Volume 3, the story from 1929' by Robert Crawley published by Calton Promotions.
- 'Wheels to the West' by Clem Preece published by Travel & Transport

All but the first are now out of print but are available for Friends of WHOTT in its extensive archive on West Country transport.

Route information

Exeter information

The run will start from Exeter's Paris Street Coach Station, departing at 11a.m on Friday 16th via Heavitree Road, Barrack Road, Topsham Road, Exeter By-Pass to Countess Weir, Matford Roundabout, Devon Hotel, Kenn, Kennford, A38 Devon Expressway, Exeter Racecourse and on to Chudleigh.

On Saturday 17th the coaches will return to Exeter along the old A30 from Okehampton via Sticklepath, Whiddon Down, Cheriton Bishop, Tedburn St Mary, Pathfinder Village, B3212 into Cowick St, Exe Bridge, New Bridge St, Bartholomew St, Paul St (site of the coach station until 1964), Queen St (site of the head office of the Western & Southern National Omnibus Companies, first at 48-50 and then at National House by the clock tower), New North Road and Paris St back to the coach station.

Plymouth information

On Friday 16th September, the coaches will travel from Ivybridge along the A38 to Marsh Mills and along the A374 then crossing Laira Bridge for a stop at First Devon & Cornwall's depot at Chelson Meadow at lunchtime before continuing into Plymouth (Bretonside) and along Royal Parade, Western Approach, Saltash Road, Alma Road, to Milehouse, Wolsey Road to Kings Tamerton, St Budeaux By-Pass to A38, Tamar Bridge, Saltash (New Road) and A38 to Liskeard.

Truro information

On Friday 16th September the coaches are expected to arrive around 3.30 to 4pm and will park in the coach park adjacent to Marks & Spencer at the end of Lemon Quay. They will then leave to take the A39 to Falmouth.

Penzance information

The coaches are expected to start arriving in Penzance from Helston on the 16th from about 5pm and will be on show in the Bus Station until 6.30pm and again the next morning (Saturday 17th) from 9am until departure up the A30 for Hayle at 10am.

Vehicles taking part

Royal Blue vehicles are well represented in preservation with more than 50 ranging from a 1929 AEC Reliance to a 1980 Leyland Leopard. 30 former Royal Blue coaches are believed to be currently roadworthy and a small selection of these will provide a spectacle for the public when they travel from London to Bournemouth on 24 June.

Vehicles joining the run include an early post-war Bristol coach with traditional Royal Blue features such as the 'half-cab' with the driver sitting alongside the front mounted engine, with side destination blinds showing the details of the route and with a large roof-mounted luggage rack in a streamlined housing.

Other vehicles, mainly with Bristol chassis will be of the LS and MW types with mid-mounted underfloor engines from the 1950s and early 60s, the RELH with rear mounted engine giving an almost silent ride from the 1960s and 70s and a Leyland Leopard which entered service in the Royal Blue centenary year of 1980.

The Royal Blues will be joined by a small selection of other West Country vehicles which would have operated 'on-hire' to Royal Blue at peak summer holiday weekends from companies like Hawkeys of Newquay and Greenslades of Exeter and later in the 1980s National Travel South West when Royal Blues like everything else became white!.

Accompanying Photographs



Traditional Royal Blue coach of 1951 climbs out of Charmouth, Dorset on a commemorative run in June from London to Exeter. [Tudor Thomas]



A line up of preserved Royal Blue coaches in Bournemouth about to set off for the West Country in June. [Jacky Lee]



The scene at Exeter's Paris Street coach station on 25th June at the end of the run from London recreating the hey day of Royal Blue when Exeter was a major coach interchange [Colin Billington]