

FIRST-CLASS CARRIAGE

You can tell by a quick flick through the timetables that these aren't any old bus routes: Flotterton Cottages... Old Weston Village Seats... Muckton Bottom.... Not that everyone ends up at such exotic destinations: some of the regulars get dropped at their front door.

There are plenty of other clues: the sign, SMOKING, EATING, DRINKING AND GENERAL BAWDY BEHAVIOUR IS NOT ACCEPTABLE ON THIS BUS. (you have to wonder whether that applies on the service to Pigdon, or Skirl Naked – and what about Faugh?).

And there's the way your fellow-passenger plonks a tray of polyanths on your lap as he clambers aboard - "Hold them for a minute" – then taps you on the knee as he explains how he can't drive since he got arthritis. And because you're sitting nearest to it he instructs you in operating the sliding door. "Give her a good slam. She'll only bounce open otherwise!"

By the time we're halfway to our destination you can hardly see out the front: the space beside the driver is piled high with sacks. But that's the way it is when you share your ride with the afternoon collection from about fifteen rural post-boxes.

Since 1967, when the first service started operating out of Llangurig in Powys, Royal Mail Postbuses have provided a lifeline to thousands of residents in remote communities throughout Britain, and have achieved cult status with certain types of traveller.

What you get for your money is a driver who is familiar with the country, knows his regulars, probably loves his job, and can be relied upon to show up in all but the very worst of weathers. If the mail must get through, then so must the Postbus, whose schedule is generally built around the morning deliveries and afternoon collections in some of Britain's most inaccessible regions.

You'll probably ride in a cramped 14-seater LDV van; but it might be a Land Rover, possibly a shiny red Mondeo estate or a Peugeot 406. You'll also get a degree of flexibility: they have their set stops, as all bus services do, but they can be hailed anywhere it's safe to pull up. You'll also get convenient access to some glorious countryside. And you'll get... company.

The morning service which leaves Malton, North Yorkshire, for Foxholes via Kirby Grindalythe departs from the Post Office yard, an enclosure guarded by a high wall and a rather imposing sign: NO UNAUTHORISED ENTRY. But by the time I arrived the driver already had four or five passengers on board. As soon as I mentioned that I was riding to the end of the line and back they were all ears. It was like one of those bars where you walk in and the conversation stops as pints pause halfway to lips.

"You'll be from the Council, then." someone said. (I half expected him to call me `stranger`.) "Come to see how we're doing." You could almost hear a revolver being cocked and the honky-tonk pausing in mid-tune.

“No, just a day out in the sunshine. I’m planning to write an article.”

“Oh. Well, in that case....”

So that was all right, then. They resumed supping their pints, so to speak, and started telling me the tale as the pianist – I mean the driver – relaxed his grip on the wheel and set off through the Wolds villages.

Three of the passengers were elderly and carless. They had no way of getting into town, other than by taxi. One was on her way to work at Safeway – a nice irony, with the closure of so many village shops making people ever more needy of transport to town. And, it being half-term, there was a family: kids, a mound of shopping and a collapsed buggy. Plus me, making quite a load.

But it’s not always that way. “Sometimes we’re full, sometimes empty,” a driver out in the Yorkshire Dales told me. “There seems to be no rhyme or reason to it.”. Generally, though, he reckoned the worse the weather the busier he is. “People soon get bored with staring at four walls. If they can’t get into the garden they might as well be in town.”

There’s more to it than that, as I found out when I rode the service from Northallerton to Hawes, through James Herriot country. Outside All Pizzas Great And Small, the first passenger on was concerned about the bus. “Running a bit better, is she?”

“Aye.” The driver explained that it was in for service yesterday. “We had a replacement. And they loved it!”

“Why’s that, then?”

It seems it’s all to do with the licencing arrangement, and when they have a stand-in vehicle they can’t charge a fare.

“So we’re mobbed. They can’t resist a free ride into Northallerton.”

“How do they know it’s in the garage?”

“How do they know? Have you ever lived in the country?”

Out there good news spreads fast, not unlike the Post Office Buses. There are now around 230 services in the UK. Over half of them are in Scotland, most of those in the Highlands and Islands, including six on the Hebrides and three on Skye. There’s a wonderfully scenic route that goes right round Arran; and if you want to pay a flying visit to North Uist the driver will drop you off at the airport - by request.

Ninety per cent of Postbuses are subsidised, by County Councils, District Councils and the Countryside Agency. They’re not exclusively out in the wilds: indeed, there are a number of routes in the Greater London area, at Dorking, Redhill, Reigate, Oxted, and further out at Canterbury, Tunbridge Wells, Gravesend and Newbury.

But most, of course, are in what we regard as the more picturesque areas: the northern hills, Wales, Scotland. Which must mean they're full of knobbly-kneed hikers all summer long. Not so. Gary Bramley, Post Bus Co-ordinator at Chesterfield, agrees that they're "a reasonably well-kept secret": they're not widely advertised. All the same they clearly represent good P.R. The Post Office prides itself on a commitment to rural communities, and the bus service offers tangible evidence.

So – they're little known, but that's not to say that people aren't interested. Mike De Rouffignac, who's been operating the Malton-Foxholes run for three years, was one day tailed for several miles by a man in a saloon car. "He didn't seem to want to pass me. I was starting to wonder whether he might be some kind of hi-jacker." When Mike got to Foxholes, his pursuer got out of the car and approached the bus. A long black metallic object in his hand glinted in the sunlight.

"Can I get your photograph?" he asked, whipping out a telephoto lens. The armed terrorist turned out to be a Post Office Bus Spotter – which is in itself slightly scary, but hardly life-threatening. He probably belonged to the Spotters' club, whose quarterly organ, *Ride The Royal Mail Post Bus*, is edited by an 86-year-old enthusiast and mailed out to one hundred members nationwide. Robin Farmer, of the Post Bus Appreciation Society, claims to know at least one enthusiast who has ridden the entire fleet for charity. "Mind you, it took him three years."

But the Foxholes experience is about as exciting as it gets, despite the fact that the buses I rode on carried a shovel and two bags of sand – in case of snow. "Never had to use it," I was told by the driver up in Wensleydale as he took a fare from a man who was off to the next village to collect his pension. Service NE007, a scenic two-hour run from Northallerton to Hawes via Leyburn, has been stopped by the weather "maybe twice in eleven years". And it was completely unaffected by last year's fuel crisis.

For the drivers, it's a great job. Especially when you have a day like I had in the Dales: bright February sun, a nice breeze and the first lambs skipping around in the bottoms. "Look at it!" The driver was manoeuvring around Bolton Castle so that he could make the pick-up from the post-box there. The crumbling stonework was glowing in the afternoon light; the surrounding hills were streaked with shadows. "Why, it's criminal to take money for the job." And then he made me promise not to tell the boss. The Foxholes man felt the same – even though he had misgivings when he first took over. "Took me about six weeks to win back the previous driver's customers. They weren't sure about a new man at all."

With such an idiosyncratic service, there's already a folklore building up. "Some daft bugger wrote an article saying that we'll do a spot of shopping for people," one driver complained. "And I know how that got out: I once picked up an old lady's pension for her when she was poorly."

This latter-day descendant of the packet-boat and the horse-drawn mail coach is a handy little service - but it's not that handy!

Information on Post Buses can be obtained from the Tourist Information Centres in the regions where they operate. For the four regional timetables – Northern, Southern, Wales and Scotland – call the **Postbus Helpline (01246 546 329)** or **Customer Services (0845 7740740)**. Or visit the website (www.royalmail.co.uk)

With one or two exceptions, **Post Buses do *not* run on Sundays**. And not all services follow the same route home as they take going out. So be prepared to walk, or find other means of transport.

It may be obvious, but **Post Buses carry mail, so long legs beware:** space is at a premium, especially in the front seats of the LDV vans.

On popular routes you might do well to start out from the depot. Once all the seats are taken, that's it: **there is absolutely no standing!**

Fares are very reasonable: I paid £2.80 for a ninety-minute round trip in North Yorkshire which covered some forty miles. In the Yorkshire Dales I paid £4.60 for an epic four-hour trip - of eighty miles! North of the border, a typical fare might be the fifty-six miles from Lairg to Durness, which costs just £4.45 single.

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