

Heavenly bus all the way from Shetland



David Clayton is in heaven on the buses. Here he tells the story of a bus from the Shetland Islands but living and breathing in Norfolk ...

My affection for old buses is well known now. I came out of the closet, so to speak, years ago. I've written about them here in Let's Talk and I've taken any excuse to wax lyrical about buses on the radio.

I've even been invited to give a talk to a bus enthusiasts' meeting. A few months ago I was 'guest of honour' at the Old Buckenham Bus Rally. So an excuse to look at, climb aboard and talk endlessly about buses to like-minded people. My idea of Sunday afternoon Heaven!

When I got there I was asked if I minded selecting the best in show. I've managed to avoid the terrors of judging a Bonny Baby competition but I have sat on judging panels for many a talent show. Making the decision is relatively easy, articulating your reasons and pacifying any dissenters is harder.

I walked down the line of gleaming buses some, if I'm honest, a bit too modern to float my boat/



VERSATILE: The bus not only carried passengers but also did deliveries.

bus but there nestling among some of the double-decker giants was a little old Bedford 29-seater, single-deck country bus of an age and style very familiar to me.

I climbed aboard to be welcomed by the owner munching on his lunchtime sandwich. Ah, the smell. Not of his sandwich but the pure, heady aroma of vintage bus. Hard to define, but probably essence of well-used upholstery and polish and wood and ... well, I'm not sure, but I took in a few lungs-full which owner Nick Taylor understood.

I tried not to convey I was sitting in what I'd instantly decided was the winner and probably spent so long on the lovely old Bedford that every other bus owner could have legitimately called 'foul.' But Nick's story of his bus was as fascinating as it was compelling.

His forebears were Taylors of Cringleford and among many other activities, they were coachbuilders. Between the wars, when the basis of most bodies were ash frames, their reputation grew for making all sorts of vehicles including buses.

It's a history Nick has researched and has even produced a website all about his family business (www.taylorsofcringleford.com). So alongside a penchant for classic cars (he has a few) was a deep affection for old buses.

When he moved to a barn-conversion property in South Norfolk he confessed to being



RESTORED: The refurbished 1950s Bedford bus is going back to the Shetland Islands.

equally interested in another adjacent barn where he could easily house his vehicles and perhaps a bus?

The chance of buying one of the last three known buses made by his old family firm still in existence was going to be slim, but he spotted a 1950 Bedford bus for sale in Wincanton, went to see it, fell for it, did the deed and brought it back to Norfolk.

It had been partly restored but Nick set about replacing the gearbox, the leaky fuel tank and generally getting the bus back to full, reliable, working order. The bus has late 1930s styling inside and out because Bedford stopped making it to turn their factories over to war production in 1939. After the war they simply carried on with the pre-war design as a stop-gap before more modern



designs were ready.

But it was the history of the bus which fascinated him and now is uniquely about to define the bus's future.

Nick discovered it was ordered new in 1950 by a firm in Glasgow but in the end never saw service there. It was sold straight on to an operator on the Shetland Islands where it spent 29 years ferrying the islanders hither and thither. Nick has been in regular contact with people on the island as he's unearthed photos and stories about the bus.

One day he got a call from the original driver, John Watt, who wondered if he could come to see it. He did, at a bus rally here in East Anglia and Nick recalls him stepping on to the bus and getting very emotional.

"It was his life – he'd drive it every



AT HOME: The bus in its original livery during its 29 years on the Shetlands.

day across the island," said Nick. "He took children to school and relatives to weddings and funerals. He even did impromptu deliveries across the island. In many ways the Bedford was a life-line to the islanders and so many of the Shetland folk would have travelled in it at some time."

Shetland winters can be a bit

harsh and 1950's buses didn't have heaters so John would take it upon himself to personally issue blankets to each and every passenger. It was a cherished personal service which, as Nick delved further into the history, found that so many islanders of a certain age remember the bus and driver, John Watt.

That fact was proved by a remarkable coincidence. Nick's wife Kay happened to mention the bus to a work colleague here in Norfolk, who she discovered was from the Shetlands. She came to see it and walked straight to the exact seat at the back where she sat to travel to school – more emotion!

So Nick has this special bus and has been genuinely touched by the fond memories the older islanders have for it. He's enjoyed it for the six or so years he's had it. He's



GOING HOME: The Bedford Duple bodied "OB" model bus will be driven back to the Shetland Islands in June next year.

taken it to rallies, the family have been out in it and so many people have come to talk to him about their own bus memories, because no matter whether you're from the Shetland Islands or not, this old Bedford Duple bodied "OB" model represents the country buses many of us would have seen and travelled on back in our more innocent days.

It certainly touched a strong, nostalgic chord for me. As a lad, I took trips up and down a Yorkshire Dale in a similar bus. It certainly wasn't quick, you could see the driver wrestle with the large steering wheel as well as the crash gear-box, especially if you got to sit on the front seats right next to him. Bus stops were haphazard and random.

The Dales drivers, rather like John Watt, would pretty much know everyone and care what was happening in their lives.

I've been on a Dales bus where a driver stopped by a farm gate,



INTERIOR: David Clayton breathed in the "heady aroma of vintage bus". turned the engine off, shouted to the passengers, "Back in a minute," and ran up a track to drop off a parcel and pick up another one!

I've listened as drivers exchanged gossip about characters up and down the Dale in an early form of social media!

So Nick is giving his bus back to the Shetland Islanders and in June next year is planning a two-week expedition to drive the bus back there where a preservation trust will look after it for the benefit of the Islanders and visitors for ever more.

Nick will share the driving with John Watt and a few privileged others on the mammoth trek.

The Bishop of Norwich will wave it off from the Cathedral Close on the morning of Monday, June 12 and all being well it will (thanks, of course, to a Ferry) land back on the Shetland Islands on Friday, June 23. Such is the modern world we'll be able to follow its progress on-line.

Will he miss it? Nick feels passionately about the act of giving: "The more you give, the more you get back," he says and the remarkable friendships he's now forged with so many people on the Shetlands is reward enough for him. 