

Royal Blue Coach Transfer

A remarkably generous gesture on the part of the Dorset Transport Circle (DTC) has seen the ownership of its former ECW-bodied 1953 Royal Blue Bristol LSG6 coach No.1299 (OTT 98) transferred to The West Country Historic Omnibus and Transport Trust (WHOTT), reports John Hobbs.

Colin Billington, Chairman of the latter and a Member of the former, discovered the vehicle, withdrawn in the latter part of 1972 by its then small operator Knightswood, near Watford and secured it for DTC, which, at the time, was looking for a rather more luxurious and speedy vehicle than the former Southern National service bus that it then owned.

No.1299 was soon restored to the Royal Blue Livery that it had lost, and has been on the road every year since 1972, travelling many thousands of miles in the process, carrying members and friends to a multitude of rallies and road runs. Last year it took part in the WHOTT celebrations of Royal Blue's significant dates in its history, but it then became evident that the engine was in need of attention, and something that the ageing maintenance team and other DTC members began to ponder. Examination of the engine revealed falling oil pressure due to bearing wear, and a knock that suggested potential piston trouble, further evidenced by smoke! The cost of restoration was thought to be £6,000. Whilst existing and pledged funds would have covered that, the reserves would have been eaten into to the extent that the future of the vehicle could not necessarily have been assured.

After much discussion, the DTC Committee invited its membership to consider three options:

1. To undertake the engine repairs and support the costs of so doing, and to fund the ongoing costs of ownership and driver training, having mind the content of forthcoming EU legislation.
2. To place 1299 with a museum.
3. To sell the vehicle on the open market.

Following an EGM of the DTC Membership held in December last, the DTC Committee was given the task itself of deciding the future of No.1299. In front of them was a tentative proposal from WHOTT and, after much discussion, it unanimously agreed that to secure the priorities it needed for their vehicle:

1. No.1299 should be preserved in good condition for as long as possible,
2. No.1299 should be restored to running order and kept active,
3. That the DTC should remain in contact with No.1299.

It was thus agreed that DTC should continue negotiations with WHOTT, with a view to WHOTT taking on the coach and the very long term commitment for its restoration and continuing maintenance in accordance with the priorities so identified by DTC.

The outcome is that DTC has agreed to donate the coach to WHOTT together with a significant quantity of spares and a substantial dowry to assist in providing long term security for No.1299. A further substantial sum has been pledged by DTC members to enable the rebuild of the engine to be carried out. Consequently John Grigg, a Friend of WHOTT, has agreed to take on the role of sponsor and custodian of the coach, including

its maintenance in running order, on behalf of WHOTT. John, WHOTT and the DTC have agreed that No.1299 would be made available to the DTC for outings each year – a very familiar use for it!

In announcing the arrangement to Friends of WHOTT Colin Billington said, "The long term future of the Bristol is assured and all parties will be able to enjoy seeing and riding on this special vehicle through the West Country for years to come. Our grateful thanks go to the Dorset Transport Circle for donating 1299 to WHOTT with the financial assistance already announced. This is indeed a major vote of confidence from a highly regarded group who have kept 1299 continually active and in a very presentable condition for such a long period."



*Dorset Transport Circle tour with Ribblehead viaduct in the background
10 August 1988 © Colin Caddy*



Royal Blue 125th Anniversary run from Bournemouth to Exeter. No 1299 seen here at
Bridport
25 June 2005 © Jacky Lee