

Bring Back Our Buses!

The Story of King Alfred Buses

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

In today's episode, Cathy Booth, a fan of vintage buses, will be talking to James Freeman, the founder of the Friends of King Alfred Buses and discovering the fascinating history behind this Winchester family business. Over to you, Cathy.

Cathy: My guest today is James Freeman, the founder of the Friends of King Alfred Buses. He is also the managing director of First West of England Limited, leading a team of 1,800 people who provide the bus services in the Southwest. With a history degree and a lifelong passion for buses, I'm really looking forward to finding out more about the history of buses in Hampshire.

Hello James.

James: Well, good afternoon, Cathy.

The Start of King Alfred Buses

Cathy: Hello. So, what can you tell me about King Alfred Buses? How did they start? How were they typical, or different, from other bus services around the country?

James: The most important thing to say is that they'd start and finish in Winchester, Broadway. And in the Broadway there is a magnificent statue of King Alfred. And, that statue and the name of King Alfred, taken by a chap called Robert Chisnell, as the trademark effectively of his business running local transport services out of Winchester, gave the company that he created a very special personality. He was a clever chap. He knew how to take advantage of that and King Alfred Buses became synonymous with Winchester and seemed to be a municipal operation. But in fact, they were a family business run by local people who had been born and brought up in the city.

Cathy: Fantastic. And how did it start?

James: Well, Mr. Chisnell was quite an entrepreneur, really. He was the sort of chap who, if it got cold, he would put a piece of string around the pond and charge people tuppence to skate on it.

And, as the First World War came along, his business, which involved various types of transporting goods mainly, was inhibited because the War Department took his horses away. And he was forced to switch to mechanically propelled vehicles. And just then a very large military camp was set up in 1915 on Morn Hill to the East of the city. And there were lots and

lots of military personnel up there. And Mr. Chisnell had set up a sausages, potatoes and onions restaurant near the Broadway. And the great issue was how to get people from one to the other. And so he started to provide transport for the soldiers back up the Hill, up Morn Hill and along the top to Morn Hill. And so, that started him going with quite small 15 passenger vehicles. But they quickly learned that you couldn't do what they had thought was the right way to do charging, whereby they said, when we get there we'll take the money off you. The buses were so slow going up the Hill, by the time they got to the top, half the people had got off and not paid at all. Anyway, the First World War, which of course was a dreadful thing in so many other ways, got Mr. Chisnell going. And after the First World War, he really started using the name King Alfred. And at first he ran trips. The first two charabancs that they bought were open top, wooden, solid tire vehicles. And, the first trip was in 1920, off to Bournemouth. A whole day rattling along the road, at not more than 12 miles per hour. Dust in your hair, must've been an incredible thing. And in 1922, he moved into using a bus rather than a charabanc to run a local bus service in Winchester and that was the start of the King Alfred buses in the city.

Cathy: I've got a couple of questions on what you just said. You mentioned that they were 15 passenger buses. So that's 15 passengers per bus or 15 buses?

James: These were 15 seaters and there were four of them in the end. They did good business. I don't suppose they did the work of a railway train or anything like that, but they were the only transport, apart from taxis such as they were, which were only used by officers. So, this was as good as it got.

Cathy: I see. And you mentioned that the charabanc they had solid tires?

James: Yes, oh, yes.

Cathy: So the implications of that were that it was a bit of a bumpy ride?

James: I mean, solid tire vehicles, there are very few around and it's very rare to get the chance to ride in one, but they are surprisingly less bumpy than you'd think. And, they were very basic. The great advantage of a solid tire vehicle was, of course, it didn't get punctures. And as most of the roads were not properly surfaced, that was really quite an important point.

Cathy: And what did the service look like in its heyday?

James: So, they began in 1922 and gradually through the 1920s and 1930s expanded to cover the city. And probably the best time in terms of the scale of the business was after the War, in the 1950s, when the service really reached its peak in terms of its scale. And at that point, there were King Alfred buses running all around the city and to many of the surrounding areas. King Alfred was never the only bus company in Winchester. There were also buses run by Hants & Dorset, Wilts & Dorset, Aldershot & District. There was Mr. Jones from Hursley. There were a number of other operators around the area, but King Alfred nonetheless was the principal local operator.

Cathy: And in its life, apart from at the end, were there any major struggles that they overcame?

James: Life was hard. Latterly particularly. The period of the 1950s and 60s, as England was getting into its sort of stride economically. Winchester was, as it still is really, an area of very, very low unemployment. And so getting enough people to drive the buses and to provide the service was always a challenge. Particularly because in those days, even for a private company like King Alfred, who recognised the trade union, the pay rates were nationally agreed, which meant that it was fine if you were in a part of the world where pay rates generally were low, but in our part of the world, there were things like the Ford factory in Swaythling, which paid very good rates for straightforward work. And being a bus driver and a conductor, then as now, was about getting up at five o'clock in the morning or going to bed at one o'clock in the morning, having done shift work. So, getting staff was always a great challenge. And the other great challenge, which will be no surprise to anybody, was appalling traffic. And Winchester was, in the 1950s, before the motorways and the bypass was really completed, was an appalling place for traffic and the delays to buses were just dreadful. So, it would be nothing for a bus going to Stanmore and back, which would take half an hour generally, to take an hour to make the one journey. So because the queues would run right through the City Centre and the very middle of the city, where the traffic crossed the High Street, was narrow and difficult.

Cathy: And is there any way to overcome that as a problem?

James: The only way to address it is to give public transport priority. And to use bits of road that no other traffic can so that it can get past the queues. So in the days of King Alfred, that was really all in the future and the buses just stood in the queue. The road system in Winchester in those days involved any bus that was going out towards the Railway Station, followed through up North Walls. And the queue for the traffic lights at the top of North Walls would often stretch right back to the Broadway. So, a bus would set off and immediately join a queue and take a quarter of an hour to cover what you could have made three minutes, normally, with no traffic in the way. So, great frustration and difficulty to the company and to the people who ran it.

Cathy: And was there anything that the King Alfred Buses did about this issue of being difficult to get staff?

James: Well, it was a great challenge for them. It's quite a small business, but people became very much part of the family and they were father and son, brothers, sisters. A lot of people were involved for very lengthy periods of time. So it was quite normal for King Alfred staff to have 30/40 years service. And, indeed, Mr. Bill Eyles, who conducted the very first bus in 1922 was still working for the company in 1973 when it closed. So, there was quite a sense of being part of it.

Cathy: I see. And you mentioned it closing. What led to its eventual demise?

James: Well, it was a combination of things that had brought it to the close. It was a family business. It had gone through a generational change just before the Second World War. The governour, as he was called, Mr. Chisnell Senior, had given way to his two sons. Mr. Robert, Mr. Bobby was called, and Mr. Fred. And they were, by the end of the 1960s, they were approaching retirement. And they needed to change over to the next generation. Their sons, Bob and Richard, who are still around and indeed are our joint Presidents of the Friends of King Alfred Buses, but in those days were in there 20s and 30s. But that generational change

came at a time when the business was really up against it organisationally. In the 1970s, there was a sense that the bus industry should be nationalised.

Particularly Barbara Castle coming to power as the Transport Minister in the Labour government of Harold Wilson, 1964/1970, the 1967 Transport Act made big change to the background in which King Alfred operated. And there was a sense that it was a bit of an anachronism. And so they tried to sell it to various different entities. They tried to sell it to the City Council, for example, who were quite interested at one point, but then found that because of the -67 Act, they couldn't actually buy it. And in the end, a company was pretty well brought to its knees by the combination of the traffic, meaning that it couldn't run properly, the absence of skilled staff, which meant that its engineering was beginning to cause a problem. And in the end, what they did was they surrendered their licenses to the traffic commissioner, which is the person who is responsible for overseeing the bus business. And eventually the business was transferred to Hants & Dorset, which is part of the National Bus Company. And although they weren't very keen to take it, they in the end, they had to. And 28th of April, 1973 was the last day of the King Alfred Buses, very sad day, I have to say.

Cathy: Was there anything that they did on that day to sort of commemorate?

James: Well, it was interesting that the two brothers, Bob and Fred, who now by this time, mid-sixties, they just, they were very sad about the whole thing, and they just said, well, it's just another day. But people like me, I was a youngster at the time, and some of the staff, we felt rather differently about it. And in fact we organised some festivities on the night of the last night, the Saturday evening. And we ran a last bus, which was very, very busy. There were a couple of buses, in fact, to Weeke Estate and a 25 to 11 to Weeke Estate. And I remember going on that bus, we must've had twice the number of people on then we should have done. Singing all the songs, Auld Lang Syne, and don't know what. And in the end, the driver who was Richard Chisnell, so the grandson of the governour, and we swept into the depot and took some pictures and, eleven o'clock that night, that was it. Shut the door. And that was the end. Very significant moment, really.

The Friends of King Alfred Buses

Cathy: Yes. But it wasn't the end of King Alfred buses. So, can you tell me about the Friends of King Alfred Buses?

James: So when the company closed, that was it. We all said that's a great shame. I was, what, 17 when it closed, and you know, just beginning to think about what one could do in life and, and all the rest of it. But, I suppose, I was interested from the very start of the matter really. A history graduate I became, amazingly, from University of Southampton. What that taught me was I was always interested in researching the history of a company. And we started talking to all the people who had taken part in the life of the business. And in the late 1970s, most of them were still alive. So we were able to talk to, Mr. Bill Eyles, for example, the man who'd issued the first ticket. Astonishing, really, we could sit with him in 1979/1980 and he could tell us everything about the things that happened way back in the 1920s. We met Mr. Harry Tremlett, who had been the chief engineer. He'd retired, in 1957, and yet he shuffled into the Chisnells house where we were meeting, in his bedroom slippers at the age of 90, I don't know what. And he could tell us in every detail what had been happening in

1921. So that was an amazing aspect to it. Then in 1981 I happened to be going past a pub near Llanelli in South Wales and coming the other way was a bus with a registration number I recognised, WCG 104, a King Alfred bus. Not painted the same way, owned by a company called Eynon's of Trimsaran. And I said: 'Good gracious, that's a King Alfred bus.' And only a few weeks after that, my office door banged open and there was the trade union secretary from Gorseinon depot, the South Welsh transport where I worked. He said: 'Mr. Freeman,' he said, 'that bus is for sale, 600 pounds. You need to ring the bloke today.' And, well, that was the beginning really of the Friends of King Alfred Buses, because I rang him and 600 pounds was a disgracefully large amount of money for what was a real wreck of a vehicle. But nonetheless, it was love at first sight, I had to do it. We got it back to Winchester, we got it back into the proper King Alfred colours with a statue on the side, which Mr. Chisnell gave me. And in 1983, we actually brought it into Winchester. We found an old King Alfred conductress who was nicknamed Blondie, and she'd worked for 30 odd years for the company, and we ran it. On its old routes, free, for people to ride on from the Broadway. Lovely, sunny March day, a Saturday, and we ran full all day long, and we had the TV, I remember TVs, and we had the press and we had a wonderful time, being all nostalgic. At this point, Friends hadn't actually quite happened yet, cause we were still sort of feeling our way. I found a second bus and we went through a huge exercise with that as well. And by 1985, I was finding that owning buses was quite a big deal and we decided that the best thing to do was to see if there were any other people who might be interested in helping to make this a bit more of a wider thing. So we put an advert in the Hampshire Chronicle saying: 'Come to a meeting at the King Alfred pub, in Saxon Road.' And about 35 people turned up, and by the end of the evening we'd formed the Friends of King Alfred Buses. Since then, every time there's a King Alfred bus for sale, we've tried to buy it and we've acquired them from all over, everywhere. A couple of them come from America. One we found in a field in Ireland, several from different parts of Wales, and every bus we've got has got a story behind it as to how we acquired it. None of them just sort of fell into our laps. Most of them were absolutely collapsing and smashed up when they arrived. All needed lots and lots and lots of TLC and quite a bit of money over the years. And gradually we built up a fleet of them and every year we take them out and give rides. And every year we've had more buses so every year the rides it's more and more like it used to be. The great thing about buses is that they are public things and you can share them. I look across at people who have lovely, shiny, restored motorcars, but you can't sit in them really, and you can't really often go for rides. Our buses are there for people to use and we're never happier than when they're full of people, out on the road, rolling along just as they would have been doing 60/70 and longer years ago.

Cathy: That's great. And how many buses does King Alfred's have?

James: Now, we have about 15. So, that's quite a big fleet really. And requires a lot of TLC and maintenance and cleaning and licensing and insuring and driving come to that. So, it's a serious operation. Albeit we don't run very often, so it's not like a bus company. But nonetheless, sometimes we can conjure up the sense of what it might've been like.

Cathy: And the bus fleet that you have, do they represent all the main types of buses or is there a gap that you'd like to fill?

James: Inevitably the more recent types. So, we have two very old buses from before the War, 1931/1935. So that's a connection with the bits that really nobody can remember now, in fairness. And then we have most of our fleet date from 1950 onwards. And quite a lot of them

would have been around at or near the end of the business in the 60s and early 70s. So it's reasonably representative and certainly it's quite possible for us to recapture of what it was like when I was little. And in the 1960s, that's definitely the era that we can recapture easiest.

Cathy: And which is your favourite bus, and why?

James: Well, if I'm honest, the one that I always end up going back to is that first one, which we've owned now for 39 years. Incredible. I mean, it only ran for King Alfred for 14, so it's been in preservation for greatly longer than ever it was in real life service. But it still has its original seating moquette, chosen by Mrs. Hilda Chisnell all those years ago in 1958. And, yeah, I still love to take that out and I'm back in my mind's eye 50 years ago.

Cathy: You said the seating was chosen by Mrs. Chisnell. Can you describe it?

James: The seats are made up of a moquette, which is a sort of material, trimmed with red leather around the edges. And the actual pattern is a combination of blacks and browns in a particular style, which was, I mean, it must've been chosen out of a book. But, King Alfred had it for quite a few years like that, so it's very characteristic. But that's the only bus we've got with that particular moquette in it still. And it, although it's getting a bit threadbare, we are very, very low to replace it because you can see it's very much of its time.

Cathy: Is there any strange or common lost property that you get on the King Alfred buses?

James: Generally, it's extraordinary what people leave behind. We've never had what we've had on the real buses you know, prosthetic legs left on the bus. Generally the things that people leave on our buses, amazingly, their camera, their gloves, I'm always finding those. If it's a wet day that's become dry, we'll pick up waterproof clothing, umbrellas. I don't think anyone's ever left their baby behind, but certainly on the real buses people leave their pushchairs quite often.

Cathy: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the Friends of King Alfred Buses?

James: Well, I suppose that one of the nice things about it is that we run these events. For many, many years, we ran them on the 1st of January, New Year's Day, which was a wonderful time to get out because actually the city was very empty and therefore we didn't have problems of congestion and other traffic getting in the way. And so you really could recreate the feel of it. And people used to come from all over or everywhere to those events. And they still come, we hold it in May now because it's not quite so cold and wet, but it's much busier from the traffic point of view. But one of the nice things was, and is, that these events bring people back who are connected. So it's still possible for people to come up to us and say: 'I used to work here' or 'my dad used to work with these buses', or something like that. Or 'I know where there is a King Alfred bus is that you don't have.' That hasn't happened for many, many years. But, it used to happen. In the 1990s people would appear with contacts for buses. But, but that personal linkup I think is absolutely fascinating. And the fact is that the buses are a proxy for the people, really. The buses themselves are fun and are nice. But the real things that people remember and what the nostalgia is for, is for the people that were around it and the people who worked it. One of our members is a guy called Dave Shawyer, who is a quintessential bus conductor. Who worked for the company for nearly 20 years. He was a natural bus conductor. Tremendously good with people, knew everybody in Winchester. And an extraordinary sort of moment from the Friends of King Alfred Buses,

more recent history, is that I'm driving a King Alfred bus through Springvale in Winchester and Dave Shawyer is conducting it. He's now aged 88. And, we pull up at a bus stop randomly, at Fraser Road as it happens. And there's a chap standing there and he says: 'Oh, hello Dave.' And it turns out that this guy knew Dave Shawyer from when he was conducting King Alfred buses 40 years before. And that experience repeats endlessly as we go through. Now, clearly it's changing because when we were first doing this in the 1980s, many people in Winchester remembered the King Alfred buses. Now, people see in the old buses what they remember from their lives, not necessarily the Winchester scene, but wherever they were when they were young. The journeys they took, the people they met, the people they knew. Those are the things that people remember. So it's the people bit which actually makes this all work, and it's what keeps it all going. And of course, that reflects in the actual members. We've got 250 odd members of the Friends of the King Alfred Buses and they are all people with their own interests and their own angle on things. But they can see that by working together, we can do much more than just them as individuals. And that's why it works.

Cathy: How do bus services decide where to run their services and how did the original King Alfred buses decide where to run?

James: Basically, what people are trying to do with bus services is to carry passengers and generally to make enough money carrying the passengers to pay for the activity. And if you're lucky, make a bit of profit as well. And so the service pattern would follow where people lived, generally. So where there were lots of people, you tend to get bus services. So that's why the busiest buses are in places where there are lots of people, and why in the sort of country areas, and nowadays certainly there are far fewer buses, are very interesting to see how in the last 50 years the country areas have often lost their buses because where buses would have been absolutely full of people going to work, going about their business. In the country areas, those people don't travel by public transport anymore, they use their own transport, and the buses are empty, if they exist at all. But in the cities, we still have lots of people who need to travel and public transport can often get to the place that you want to be, and that's basically how the pattern of routes evolves. But nowadays there are two types of route. The sort of which has enough passengers to pay its way. And the others, which are routes where there frankly aren't enough people and where the local authority has to decide whether it wants to step in and actually pay towards providing that service. There were lots of those a few years ago, but nowadays there's no public money for them, and therefore they've tended to disappear.

The Different Buses

Cathy: Moving on to the buses themselves, how has the design of buses changed over the years?

James: Well, it's very interesting that the design has changed more subtly, more recently, and the big changes happened quite quickly. So, for example, you were asking about solid tires before and solid tire vehicles were around until the mid-1920s, but they disappeared completely by 1930. And so a vehicle that was 40 years old in 1960 even, would have been a solid tire vehicle. Nowadays, we drive around in our buses, the King Alfred buses, which are 60 years old and people cheerfully want to get on them because they look much the same as a modern bus. Generally, what's happened, is that buses have become much easier to get onto.

Some of the older buses have lots of steps and are awkward to clamber up into, whereas nowadays, all our buses are flat floor, single entrance. You can't get a wheelchair on to any of the King Alfred buses. So, they've become more convenient, they've become warmer. So nowadays buses have heating, ventilation, even air conditioning in some cases while the idea of a heater in a bus was considered to be completely pansy until about 1960. People just wore their coats, it was simple. So, in fact, most buses didn't have doors and if they did have doors ran with them open for most of the time. And so they've become quieter and smoother. But the most obvious change was, in the old buses the engines were always at the front. So there was this big noisy thing at the front of the bus which kind of signalled its arrival. And then somewhere on the line, somebody thought it would be better to get the engine away to the back or underneath and to make the front easier for people getting on and off. And so you've got buses that were fundamentally the other way around. And nowadays they are designed so that the driver can supervise the loading. That never was the case in the very early days. So, many of the King Alfred buses, the double-decker's, had open backs and the staircase was at the back end. And that was much better as a conductor by the way, cause you could stand at the back and you could pick your nose and you could do what you like, whereas where the doors at the front and you're a conductor, you're in front of all the passengers and they're all looking at you. Not so fun.

Cathy: What about double-deckers? When did they first come in?

James: Well, in Winchester, the first double-decker wasn't until 1942. So, double-deckers are more expensive, used more fuel, all those sorts of things. I mean, double-decker buses have existed from the very earliest days in Great Britain. In London, there were double-deck horse-buses right the way back to the 1840s. So the idea of having two decks was a very British thing, really. There's not much repetition or replication of it in other parts of the world. Of course, the great thing about it is, it's a much more efficient user of space. And so the first double-deckers in Winchester were built to utility specification during the War and they allowed 55 people to travel instead of 35. With one engine and one crew. And so that was really why double-deckers became popular and of course they're very efficient use of road space, cause there are two decks. And I always liked them, always did from the very youngest moments, because the view from upstairs is so much better than from downstairs. You know, you have a superior view over everybody, you can look down on people and you can see over hedges. You can see the long distance. It's a great way to ride.

Restorations

Cathy: And what's involved in restoring a bus?

James: Well, it depends on the bus of course. So, generally, what is involved is quite a lot of expertise, first of all. And, over the years we've been fortunate to have lots and lots of people either directly involved or able to help us, who knew a lot about the technology. And increasingly now we're finding that the experts in various different types of the things that we operate are beginning to die away. So we're finding having to learn the techniques and make sure we know what they are. So, that knowledge is a key. A good understanding of what the vehicle should look like. So trying to get hold of drawings and things like that so you can see what it should be and then a place to do it. That's always the issue. Now, for many, many years we did all our restoration work in the outdoors. We had a space near Chandler's Ford. It

was a lovely place in so many ways, except that it was outdoors. Although in most of the time it wasn't raining and actually is great place to work. But you do need a place where you're secure or your bits are secure and where you can get on with your work cause quite often these restoration jobs are very long jobs. Quite often five, six, seven, some of our buses have taken 20 years to fix. You have to resist the temptation faced with a grubby old vehicle to take it to bits. Because, if you're not careful, you take it all to bits and then you can't remember how to put it back together. And actually, we had one bus that came from America where that's exactly what has happened. The owner had taken it to a technical school and arranged for them to fix this bus. And what had happened is the apprentices of year one took the bus to bits and then left. And the apprentices of year two then had to put it back together again and they couldn't. So actually you have to pick away at the thing and then just be very patient really. And there's so many aspects to it. There's the engine, there's the body work, there's the seating, the coverings of the seating, all the details, the destination scrolls and all kinds of detail. And the devil is in the detail, you want the thing to look right. It's got to be right in every detail and we pride ourselves on making the things look like they would have looked as they came out of the manufacturers shed.

Cathy: And that bus, the one that came from America. Have you managed to put that back together?

James: Oh, yes. We had to persuade the guy to let us have it in the first place. I mean, he didn't actually want to part with it. And we had a five year task to persuade him, and in the end he said: 'Okay, you can have it as long as you bring me another bus. And it needs to be much the same.' So we had to buy an old bus, paint it green, put King Alfred on the side, drive it to Southampton docks, sail it across the Atlantic, pick it up in Florida, drive it in to Augusta, Georgia, swap it over for the bus he had, which by this time was hardly drivable. Fix that bus in a week and drive it back to Jacksonville, put it on a boat, bring it back to Britain. And then when it got back to Britain, took us five years to rebuild it. And yet it's been running now since 1998 or thereabouts. And when people go on it today I always tell them the story and they look around them in wonder because it just doesn't look as though it's ever been anywhere else. As I say, all of these buses have a tale to tell. And if they could speak, my goodness, what they'd say.

Cathy: Are there any others with tales as extreme as that one?

James: Well, there is the bus called the Leyland Olympic, which 30 years ago, a bloke sidled up to me on the 1st of January, on one of our events and said: 'I know where the Olympic is.' And I said: 'What? It's burnt. It's gone, it doesn't exist.' He said: 'I know where it is. It's all right.' And it was in Ireland. And we ended up having to go to Ireland to find this bus. And when we got to County Wicklow, as we neared it, we could tell, we could see buses on their side in the field and so on. And we arrived at the place and the man said: 'Oh, yes, our bus, it's in the showroom', which was a field with trees growing through the buses. And he said to us: 'Oh well, you know you can have our bus', but then disappeared until five minutes before we absolutely had to leave to catch our ferry back. And he reappeared and said: 'It's a thousand pounds in sterling.' So we had to pay a thousand pounds for it. And then, somehow we had to extract this bus from its field in Ireland and get it towed to the ferry, and then towed on a truck to bring it all the way through Wales and across to Winchester. And then it took us practically 20 years to rebuild that vehicle, it was absolutely ruined. It was finally done in 2012, I think we got it in 1992. So, it was a massive, massive job, but by the time we'd

finished it, it was amazing. I mean, it was a bus that I never knew. It finished in Winchester in 1966, so I wasn't really taking notice at that point. I was only 10 then and it'd been in Ireland, being a school bus for a long time and then it sat in this field for 20 years.

Cathy: And why did that one take so much longer to restore than the one that had been taken to pieces?

James: Well, partly because the one that had been taken to pieces got in front of it. So for five years, one just sat in the corner and waited. We can only do one at a time. So in fairness, probably actual elapsed time spent working on it, it's probably about 10 years, from 2002 to - 12. If you had endless time to do it and everybody was doing nothing else, then it would be much quicker. But, a lot of our enthusiasts are people with other things to do in their lives, although increasingly nowadays of course our membership has retired and therefore is able to do more.

Conductresses, Winchester and the Buses

Cathy: How has the role of women on the buses evolved?

James: Well, it's interesting to see how it has evolved really, because in the very early days, Mr. Robert Chisnell had three children, two sons and a daughter. It was always assumed back in the 1920s that the daughter would just get married and go and do her own thing. Whereas the sons were going to take over the business. It's interesting, isn't it. The moment when women really got involved in the business was during the Second World War, when bus conductresses were taken on, there were five of them taking on first in 1941. And, unlike in some places where they were expected to finish at the end of the Second World War, at King Alfred's they stayed. And conductresses became part of the team and very much part of the way things worked. But the idea of a bus driver being a female only really surfaced just after the King Alfred actually finished. So there are two women who are both still going strong, who were King Alfred conductresses, who became drivers early on after Hants & Dorset took over and they were the first women drivers in Winchester. And of course, nowadays it is quite normal for people to be bus drivers, whatever gender. But, at that time, that was quite a development. So it's been a slow thing, but we have female members in Friends of King Alfred Buses. Not the majority in all fairness, but we have more than you might think. And it's interesting how it evolves and that's because it's not just about the buses, it's about the people.

Cathy: And what started your passion?

James: I have always been interested in buses since I can remember. As a very small boy, I was pointing at buses and saying look at that. And I've been very, very fortunate, really, that I've been able to convert what I enjoyed as a small boy into a career. So, I early on got involved with the King Alfred buses in Winchester because my mother used to go to the annual general meeting of the Jane Austen Society in Chawton, and that used to lead us through Winchester. And I was left with two wonderful maiden aunts. Mrs. Freeman, aunt Marjorie Andina, and I used to stand in their front window and watch the King Alfred buses go by, and they were so different from what I remembered from where I lived in Bath. They had the statue on the side and they went to exotic sounding places like King's Somborne and

Sparsholt and Teg Down. And they just captivated me. And I was fortunate really that I was a bit indulged by my aunties, but I was able to stay there and go out and ride on the buses and I met this wonderful guy called Dave Shawyer, who as a conductor was without parallel, really, I realised afterwards. And he taught me so much over the next few years about what it was like to work on buses and just introduced me to everybody and was an amazing influence, really. And so, it's kind of got into my blood.

Cathy: Thank you. James, is there anything else that you particularly wanted to mention?

James: Well, I suppose that the one thing that I think sets us apart as Friends of King Alfred Buses, just as it set the King Alfred motor services apart.

There's been the involvement of the Chisnell family, actually. So, runs right through this story from the governour himself first starting with a few buses and a few of his trusted colleagues in the middle of the First World War right up to today when his grandsons are still, and proudly, Presidents of the Friends of King Alfred Buses and take a positive interest, come out and see what we're doing, and support us in every which way. And I hope that they get a little bit of pleasure from the thought that all these years after the firm finished in 1973, there's still a real memory for King Alfred motor services kept alive, in Winchester, by us, the Friends of King Alfred Buses.

And we're absolutely delighted that we have the opportunity to bring out our buses and put them on display, given that this year of lockdown has meant that people haven't been able to get out and experience things. It's delightful that we have an outdoor exhibition, really, of our buses in the Cattle Market, between 10 o'clock in the morning and 4 o'clock in the afternoon on Saturday 19 September, and as any of our buses as we can possibly get together, which will probably be about 8 or 9 of the King Alfred collection will be on display. So it's a great opportunity to come and have a look, come and have a feel, come and have a smell, actually, cause the inside smell quite interesting. And as long as we're socially distanced while we're doing it, we can share these buses with everybody and we love doing it, so we hope you will.

So that's going to be in the Cattle Market, which is just off the Andover Road, opposite the Tesco garage. So it's very easy to find, very easy to get to, close to the City Centre, and it's a wonderful place to display the buses, we've used it many times before, and they're very visible from the road. So if you go up Andover Road, you'll see the buses, they're beckoning you in.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

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