

# The Bus Trip 2014 – Dorset to Norfolk

## Day 0 Getting there – Durham to Lyme Regis

By train from Durham to Kings Cross, then Waterloo to Weymouth. The starting point for the trip was intended to be Lyme Regis, where the nearest station is Axminster. I decided to go via Weymouth instead, for the opportunity of a bus ride along one of the scenic stretches of the Dorset coast.

Weymouth is a former seaside resort patronised by Royalty, but now a ferry port for the Channel Islands and France. There are heavy showers in Weymouth, but the seaside resort tries to stay in business. The sodden deckchairs are set out on the prom, and there is one couple sitting on the beach deckchairs under their umbrellas. I went for a pint in the Globe Inn instead.

First Bus runs the X53 every couple of hours from Poole to Exeter along the coast. It combines being a local bus service, with longer distance connections that are difficult by train. It is also an ideal pensioner's day out so it is a double decker and busy. The journey includes some interesting driving on narrow roads, round sharp corners and up and down steep hills. It is rural as far as Bridport and we pass a bus stop which rejoices in the name 'Knights in the Bottom', have a couple of glimpses of Chesil Beach, and I see more thatched stone cottages than I think I've ever seen before, in pretty villages like Portesham, Abbotsbury and Swyre. After Bridport it is retirement country, until we manage to creep round the final few corners (not easy) into Lyme Regis.



Lyme Regis is built on steep hills. The bus stop and the town centre are by the shore, my hotel is only a few hundred yards away, but a few hundred feet uphill. I climb up, dump the rucky and head back downhill for an explore. Quaint is probably the word, with gift shops and fossil shops galore. I walk along the small prom, past

the beach huts, to the harbour at The Cobb (pictured) and to the end of the harbour wall, look at the views of the coastal cliffs (with obvious recent landslips), then have a fish supper from one of the harbourside huts (Lyme is quite a foodie place, and even the chip shops come with recommendations from well-known chefs). Then I make my way back, stopping for a couple of pints on the way uphill.

## Day 1 Lyme Regis to Shaftesbury

Mainly dry with sunny spells this morning. The bus to Dorchester is at 0935, which means that it is the first one on which the pensioner free pass is valid. By the time we get to Bridport the bus is packed. The inland route is still quite scenic, though much of the journey is along the main A35. The final stretch, however, takes back roads via villages such as Winterbourne Steepleton, where there is a stream between the road and the houses, most of which are an attractive grey stone. Then we hit Poundbury, a horrendous large estate, championed by Prince Charles as what modern architecture should be about. It tries very hard to look traditional, with classical frontages. Despite intentions to reduce car dependency, it has the appearance of large car parks with a few houses behind them, and no-one gets on or off the bus<sup>1</sup>. It appears to be popular, and the main shop is a Waitrose supermarket, so presumably it is fairly upmarket. Worse is to come in the next couple of days as Poundbury has spawned a rash of similar developments, that don't pay even lip service to being any more than a housing estate, attached to towns throughout the area.

From Dorchester the 216 Damory Coaches bus<sup>2</sup> runs every two hours across the Dorset Downs to Yeovil, and I use it to reach Sherborne, stopping off at Cerne Abbas. This one is a minibus, though quite a smart modern one – obviously double deckers and pensioners keep to the coast - and by the time we get to Cerne Abbas I'm the only passenger on the bus. We pass through Charminster (actually we seem to visit



every street in the village), then a sub-Poundbury development in the middle of nowhere (Charlton Down, my guess is an old mental hospital site. There's an area nearby on the map called Charlton Higher Down, but no Charlton Lower Up). The main road to Cerne Abbas is closed, so we divert via back lanes. I go for a walk to have a look at the Giant...it is impressive, though if they'd built it on a steeper hillside it would be easier to get a decent photo of it (This one was not taken by me). There's a fair amount of Giant related tat around the village, and one of the pubs has been renamed the Giant Inn (and of course the pub sign is a white figure with a large willy – quite disconcerting). It's raining so I take shelter in the thatched Royal Oak for lunch.

The next 216 bus takes me on to Sherborne. I've got about 35 minutes before my train is due (the bus connections just don't work). On a 3 minute walk around it is a

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia quotes a survey that confirms that car usage is higher in Poundbury than anywhere else in the surrounding area, despite the concept that it would encourage cycling and walking.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the GoAhead Group. Throughout the trip most buses are run by one of the big four bus companies, Stagecoach, First, Arriva and GoAhead.

handsome and historic stone-built market town with an abbey, medieval and Georgian houses and almshouses, but the Good Beer Guide directs me to the Digby Tap....it may be quiet (there is only a couple of old curmudgeons in the bar) but it definitely appeals as my sort of place.

It is fifteen minutes on the train two stops up the line to Gillingham for the connecting bus to Shaftesbury. The bus is late and I'm beginning to wonder whether this is going to be typical (it turns out to be the most delayed bus of the whole trip). It turns up, full of schoolkids telling smutty jokes to one another that I can't hear – 'keep your voice down, there are other passengers on the bus today' - and we head off to Shaftesbury.

I find the hotel by luck – there aren't many street names around - then out for a wander. The highlight is Gold Hill, the steep street which featured in the Hovis ads, and the hilltop situation of the town makes for some excellent views over the surrounding countryside, but I'm not all that impressed. This may be because the Beer Guide pub at the foot of the hill is currently closed as new tenants clean it up. It looks good and will re-open in a couple of weeks, but I've got to walk back up the hill. At the top, outside the Town Hall, there is a giant fibreglass Hovis loaf, which is used as a collection box to help with restoration of the area. The couple of town centre pubs I try are pretty standard tart-up jobs, full of lads in their thirties and forties being too loud about football and their motors. Chutney's, the Indian restaurant, makes up for it. The European elections are due and there are too many UKIP posters around the area for comfort.



*A large Hovis, Shaftesbury*

## Day 2 Shaftesbury – Swindon

First bus of the day is an anonymous minibus to Salisbury, and it turns out to be one of the most interesting journeys. After the first couple of miles it leaves the main road and heads through a series of villages (Berwick St. John, Ebbesbourne Wake, Bowerchalke, Broad Chalke, Bishopstone, Homington) which are straight out of picture postcard rural southern England. Duckponds, hedgerows, finger signs, thatch...the lot). Some of the lanes are single track... possibly more difficult than Highland roads, because the high hedges and banks limit opportunities for passing. Of course it is during this stretch that we meet so fewer than three bin lorries, a fuel

oil tanker and a building suppliers lorry delivering to a cottage. Throughout the journey we are accompanied by the driver talking to himself, and he's not very happy about the traffic this morning.

I change buses in Salisbury and head on to Devizes. The countryside is much more open chalk downland, as we travel via Great Wishford, Stapleford and Shrewton. We meet the western part of Salisbury Plain...red flags are flying because the ranges are in use and the road is intersected by tank crossings. Devizes town centre is over-full of traffic, with a shortage of pedestrian crossings. It could be quite pleasant, helped by the brewing aroma from Wadsworth's brewery just off the centre. I walk out from Devizes past the brewery and along the Kennet and Avon Canal to the Caen Hill locks, which I had seen briefly on television. Built in 1810 it is an impressive sight in real life. There are 29 locks on this stretch of the canal, all hand worked. The central flight (pictured) has 16 locks which, due to the steepness of the hill are adjacent to



one another, and have to be passed through without a break. At the foot of the flight I talk to a bloke sitting by his narrowboat and it has taken his party more than five hours to pass through the 22 locks from the centre of Devizes. Back at the top I have a pint of Wadsworth's in a pub garden by the canal.

The day's first double decker is on the Stagecoach 49 route from Trowbridge via Devizes and Avebury to Swindon. I alight at Avebury for an hour - time for a quick walk round the stone circle. I haven't been to Stonehenge and I'm told that the stones here are not so large, but the sheer scale of the site is quite stunning. The large stone circle encircles much of the village, and is

surrounded by a steep bank and deep ditch henge. There are other stones inside the main circle, which are the remains of two smaller stone circles, and what may be a processional way marked by more stones heads off to the south. Just time for a pint in the Red Lion, the thatched pub in the centre of the circle – the nearest table in the beer garden is five feet from the bus stop – then on to another 49, across more chalk downland and into Swindon.

On the route into Swindon I see the first Labour Party poster of the trip in someone's house. Plenty of local farmers have Conservative posters in their fields – presumably to tell the sheep how to vote (I didn't see any UKIP farmers – they know where their subsidies are coming from). Plenty of UKIP posters but very few of them are actually in house windows, which may be reassuring, or maybe people don't want to admit that they are going to vote for them.

I'm breaking the journey in Swindon for no other reason than convenience and I'm not expecting much. The Travelodge has a view of a dual carriageway and a multi-storey car park, the city centre is a concrete jungle and the decrepit bus station is by far the worst of the journey. However, I walk out to the old Great Western Railway workers village which is quite striking. It is a hot evening, many doors are open and people are sitting on the street - despite being historic and a conservation area it doesn't seem to have become over-gentrified and it feels like a good place to live. Into the Good Beer Guide-listed Glue Pot for a pint where the Hop Back Brewery beer was excellent. It's a couple of days after the Eurovision Song Contest. The barmaid, Nicola, is transsexual, and to celebrate her birthday the pub is planning a Conchita Wurst lookalike party. Some very surreal conversation with large middle-aged blokes wondering which size dress will fit them, which charity shop will let them try on women's clothes, which colours will match their hair and so on. Nicola floats around, flicks her hair and does her nails between pulling pints.

## Day 3 Swindon – Buckingham

It's a lovely sunny day...and the remainder of the trip is the same. I'm glad I packed light. Today is Stagecoach country and the first journey is on the 66 to Oxford, mainly along the main A420 road but diverting along the route of the old road through



*Swindon's principal tourist site*

Shrivenham, Faringdon, and Kingston Bagpuize. We leave the concrete bus station along a dual carriageway which has been cut through a solid area of terrace housing and reach the Magic Roundabout – five mini roundabouts in a circle. We pass alongside a short stretch of the Great Western main line and the scale to which it was originally engineered is obvious. Shrivenham turns out to be home of the Defence Academy of the UK, which in true academic style is surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by soldiers. Even the nursery school

attached to the Academy across the road is surrounded by barbed wire. Faringdon seems like a genteel small town and then the villages become more suburban as we approach Oxford.

From Oxford on to the S3 to Chipping Norton. For the first stretch the bus is full of tourists – the route passes Blenheim Palace and Woodstock where they get off. The villages are built of Cotswold stone as is Chipping Norton itself. From Chipping Norton it is back to a more typical rural bus journey along minor roads on the 488 to Banbury. Through Over Norton and Great Rollright to Hook Norton, where I have a break of an hour to have a quick walk through the village, a look at the Hook Norton Victorian tower brewery, which sits along a country lane on the edge of the village, and a pint sitting in the sun outside the brewery tap, the Pear Tree Inn. The other

customers are four couples – several of them lusting after my pint but sipping cokes because they are driving. The bus stops outside the pub and there are eight pairs of eyes on me as I get on board....obviously none of them had considered that it might

be possible to get the bus there, and most of them are of free bus pass age.



*The Brewery, Hook Norton*

Three more buses to reach Buckingham, my stop for the night. The 488 to Banbury, a quick walk round and a pint. On to Brackley, a large housing estate (I think built as London overspill housing) plonked down in the middle of the Northamptonshire countryside, around a small market town. It's a pretty grim place, so is the pub, and there's no information, apart from online, to confirm that my next bus exists, or where it departs from. At 1630 it's the last bus of the day.

However the Redline 131, an old ruin of a minibus, turns up and four of us bump our way to Buckingham. It's only 20 minutes away, through a couple of villages and along the edge of Stowe Park, but there seems little connection between the two places – the few buses each day are council-contracted. It may be something to do with being on the border of Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire...we are in no man's land<sup>3</sup>.

Buckingham is fine as an overnight stop. Despite a by-pass the town centre is ruined by traffic. The White Hart Inn is an eighteenth century Georgian coaching inn, though the ground floor is now a large modern fake-olde-worlde pub. The hotel history boasts of its impressive asparagus beds stretching down to the river. This was written in 1949 and the site is now a block of flats. The food in the pub is freezer-to-microwave, not a spear of asparagus to be seen on the menu. However it is friendly enough, round the corner is the Woolpack which is a decent pub, and the Indian restaurant nearby is passable.

## Day 4 Buckingham – Sudbury

The journey across the middle of the South of England continues. It is relatively easy (though much slower) to do the journey without going through London, by bus, compared with by train. An Arriva minibus takes me to Bletchley. The direct route would be by the A421, however, by bus there is not the option of avoiding Milton Keynes. We meander through MK via the V4, H2, V5 and H5 to stop Y1 at the

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<sup>3</sup> I reckon the service is contracted by Buckinghamshire, but Brackley is just over the border in Northamptonshire, hence the information black hole.

station, stop H3 at the city centre, then via the H6, and V8, stop D at the hospital, and finally along the H8 and V7 to stop A at Bletchley. The romance of it all. En route we pass the new Network Rail HQ in the town most designed around car dependency, but at least it is near the station. I look at the map and the contrast between the Development Corporation estates for the workers, all laid out in a grid pattern, and the newer private estates to the west, all curves, is just too obvious.

I find my way across the building site that was Bletchley Bus Station to the railway station and take the Marston Vale line train from Bletchley to Bedford. The main reason for this journey is that I've never done it before, though I've passed either end of the line umpteen times on my way to or from London. The train is only two coaches and, though it isn't busy, people get on or off at every stop en route. It is not exactly bucolic countryside – we pass the huge Amazon warehouse next to the M1 at Ridgmont and the old London Brick Company brickfields and brick ovens at Stewartby. On the short walk from Bedford station to the town centre I pass the Italian church, a genuine Italian coffee shop, the Polish club and a mosque and I have a beef patty for elevenses from a Jamaican stall in the main street<sup>4</sup>.

The Stagecoach X5 runs every half hour from Oxford to Cambridge taking 3½ hours for the 85 mile journey. I catch it in Bedford – it is a very pukka coach with leather seats, lots of legroom and wifi. We set off across the prairies to St Neots, under the East Coast mainline beyond which there is a huge new housing estate, (Love's Farm - much better than Poundbury, but looking far too urban surrounded by fields on the edge of town) and on to Cambridge.

It is back to double deckers for the remainder of the day. The Cambridge – Bury St Edmunds bus takes me through Newmarket past the racecourses, the national stud, an equine hospital, a statue of a horse in the middle of a roundabout, the horseracing museum, various gallops and stables. Wonder what they do round here?<sup>5</sup>

Bury - the 'jewel in the crown of Suffolk' say the signs - has an enormous sugar factory, a nice little bus station, and looks quite a pleasant place to pass an hour or two, but this is the day with the least spare time to explore.

Back to country lanes for the next stage and the countryside round here is pleasantly hilly. Suffolk seems to have quite a few independent bus companies – The double-deck Chambers 753 from Bury to Sudbury, takes me via Siddesmere, Lavenham, Great Waldingfield, Acton and Long Melford. I take a break in Lavenham – very pretty, lots of half-timbered medieval and Tudor cottages dating from its time as an important centre of the wool trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and after a walk round there is time for a pint in the Greyhound, the one remaining pub that hasn't gone too gastro.

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<sup>4</sup> 7500 Italians from the south of Italy were recruited by the London Brick Company in the 1950s and Bedford has one of the largest Italian communities in the UK. *The Guardian* 23 Jan 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Newmarket has a human population of 20384 and over 3000 racehorses. *Wikipedia*.

Sudbury is also pleasant enough. I eat in the Black Boy pub where I'm staying, have a walk round town, try the Mauldon's Brewery Tap where the beer is excellent and the company good. It is Friday night and everywhere else seems quiet. I'm told that people don't really go out on a Friday here – I suspect they have a few when they finish work wherever, then pour themselves on and off the Sudbury train and home.

## Day 5 Sudbury to Lowestoft

The 1000 Beeston's 91 to Ipswich is busy – it's Saturday and it's a beautiful day. We pass through Hadleigh, where the annual show is taking place, past a factory proudly proclaiming that the company has bases in Hadleigh, Cape Town and San Francisco. Phew. On the other front seat upstairs is a couple off to Ipswich for a day out to celebrate 30 years since he left his wife for her. 'They all said it would never last' 'I'm still the scarlet woman around town'. He's in his 70s and is a mobile disco entrepreneur....still actively spinning the platters, though trade is not as good as it was.

Next, the 65 from Ipswich to Aldeburgh, single deck and a seat with limited view.



Through the suburbs of Ipswich and on to Woodbridge, where we go round the houses, though in the town centre there are glimpses of yacht masts on the River Deben on other side of the station. This is repeated in Melton – we're getting close to the coast.

Through Rendlesham, largely an estate in the middle of nowhere (old military housing?), then Snape – more water now, this time the River Alde - and into Aldeburgh and the sea front. Aldeburgh is an attractive place, busy with daytrippers. Despite a later start than originally planned – breakfast service didn't start until nine, and I've become too used to full breakfasts to miss one – I have time for a walk along the shingle beach (pictured) towards the fort and the yacht club on the River Alde side of the Orford Ness spit. Back into town past the huge queue outside the fish and chip shop and into the White Hart next door – a smashing pub, and most people are outside so it's quiet and comfortable inside.

The next bus is from Aldeburgh to Saxmundham through Leiston. Leiston was a manufacturing town and more recently the Sizewell nuclear power stations have provided significant employment. Though it tries to look quaint the contrast with Aldeburgh is marked – a bookies and tattoo parlour in the high street and the pub advertises karaoke – very definitely different from the refined tearooms and gift shoppes of Aldeburgh.

Buses are thin on the ground in North Suffolk, so it is train journey from Saxmundham, two stations to Halesworth. I cross the tracks (Halesworth station doesn't stretch to a footbridge) to the bus stop in a quiet back street. The Anglian Bus 88A from Halesworth surprises me by arriving from the wrong direction and disappearing<sup>6</sup>. A minute later it's back, having turned round somewhere out of sight. The bus driver is used to people looking confused, and running after him thinking that they've missed the bus. A ride through pleasant countryside with diversions off the main road through Horton, past some very free range pigs wandering around and lolling in the sun near Wenhaston, through Blythburgh and into Southwold, where the bus terminates at the closed Kings Head.

I have time here for a decent walk round, through the town, along the seafront – sandy beach this time with plenty of beach huts (pictured) and wooden chalets to the harbour. Quaintly scruffy wooden huts selling crabs, lobsters and fishing gear, past the rowing boat ferry across the harbour to and from Walberswick, lots of boats. It's spoiled only by too many fit and healthy people driving along the unmade roads kicking up clouds of dust with their Chelsea tractors, when they could walk a couple of hundred yards. Sizewell nuclear power station lurks in the distance, but doesn't dominate the view. A pint outside the Harbour Inn, then back to town across the marsh, through a herd of cows and into the Lord Nelson. The town is busy and there are a few groups of lads out on the piss, but it's enjoyable. Though the town is basically owned by Adnams, I don't pass the brewery on this occasion.



Onto the last bus of the day (at 1740) and into Lowestoft. The Hotel Victoria is a grand hotel on the cliffs above the beach south of the town centre. The area has been classy and genteel but it has the slightly desperate air and rundown feel of some seaside resorts. The town itself is much as I expected – some attempts at regeneration around the harbour but a long way to go. I have a wander round and the pubs and restaurants are quiet on a Saturday night – there's no bus service and precious few taxis around The Triangle Tavern gets good reviews but I'm

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<sup>6</sup> Anglian Bus is another part of the Go-Ahead Group.

underwhelmed. Presumably the kids are drinking vodka at home before going out late, but where's everyone else?

## Day 6 Lowestoft to Hunstanton

Yet another full breakfast then I catch the First X2 more or less outside the hotel to Norwich via Beccles. I have a half hour walk round the city centre then on to the Sander's Coaches bus to Cromer via Aylsham. The buses follow main roads except for the main towns and though Norfolk seems pleasant enough I'm not getting a feel for it. It is Sunday and bus services are limited - there's no chance of getting away from main routes.

In Cromer have a break in yet another Red Lion, a fine old pub. From the town above the prom and the pier look packed – it's another hot, sunny day. Then on to the Coasthopper bus<sup>7</sup> – there are frequent comfortable minibuses along the North Norfolk coast – through Sheringham (also packed), alongside the North Norfolk Railway, through Weybourne, Cley, Blakeney and Stiffkey to Wells-next-the-Sea. Once past the caravan sites it's an enjoyable journey – the coast road isn't too busy, most people must drive straight to the main resorts. The North Norfolk Coast Path is nearby and looks like a good option for future walks. There are some beach and sand dune views, long stretches of saltmarsh and the tide is out so there is a huge expanse of mudflats. The village houses are made of flint cobbles and pebbles framed by brick and crabs, lobsters and tea are available everywhere.

I stop in Wells for a couple of hours. The main street and the harbour front are crammed, but away from the sea around The Buttlands it is a bit more peaceful. The bar of the Edinburgh Inn is fine. Then another Coasthopper, past Holkham Hall (a couple get on and are looking through the guide book, and it looks very impressive) through Burnham Overy Staithe, Burnham Market and Brancaster Staithe, names that I recognise from the Sunday travel supplement pages and self-catering cottage guides. They are obviously upmarket, and look like good places for a long weekend. An offshore windfarm is just visible in the distance, then we pass Old Hunstanton and into Hunstanton, a Victorian seaside resort built along with the railway by the local landowner, and packed with daytrippers.

I have to make a telephone call – I can get no signal and the battery is so low I have to leave the mobile charging in my room. I find a phone box – I ask in the bar and no one knows where one is (it's more or less directly across the road). I've forgotten the number (it's in the phonebook on my mobile) so I have to return and write it down but I manage to remember how to make a call. The glass on the phone box door has been smashed into little bits, but is all still in situ. Leaving the box I accidentally brush against the door with my elbow and the glass smithereens fall out and crash on the pavement - much to the amazement and enjoyment of the groups of people sitting nearby eating their fish and chips. I have to explain to them that I haven't

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<sup>7</sup> Coasthopper is operated by Norfolk Green, part of the Stagecoach group. There is no escape.

vandalised the box (I think they believe me) and they help check my arm and shirt for fragments of glass.

Hunstanton is one of the few west facing places on the east coast of the UK and is named after Attila the Hun, who may have visited in the fifth century<sup>8</sup>. My room is above a pub on the front with a view of an amusement arcade and a car park – both empty once the daytrippers go home. I have a quick nap and when I wake up the tide is in – it must move quickly. A walk around (there are some handsome stone buildings in the town centre) and a curry, then a couple of pints in the pub. In the pub opposite someone is crooning Neil Diamond songs to an audience of five. The people who visit Brancaster Staithe and those who visit Hunstanton live in two parallel universes.

## Day 7 Hunstanton – Peterborough

It is Monday so the 0930 pensioner rush hour is back – I'm on the 0948 from Hunstanton to Kings Lynn and it's packed. Plenty of caravans, park homes and bungalows as we head along the old main road through a series of bypassed villages to Kings Lynn. Some handsome Georgian brick terraces in Lynn, though it looks like sandy soil must be causing problems as several are leaning at noticeable angles.

The First X1 from Kings Lynn to Wisbech is double decker luxury with leather seats, plenty of legroom, air conditioning and wifi. Out through the wasteland on the edge of Lynn, past the huge, modern Palm Paper Mill, across the Great Ouse and then across the Fens on the old A47 through Terrington St. John and Walpole Highway (where an abandoned and rusty kids trampoline in a garden looks desperately sad) and into Wisbech.

Wisbech turns out to be a good-looking town - Georgian houses round the site of the castle and along the banks of the River Nene – which has obviously been prosperous in the past, as a port exporting the agricultural produce of East Anglia and the Fens. Most of the younger blokes around today look pumped up by working out at the gym, so maybe there's not a lot else to do. I walk along North Brink, the bank of the Nene as far as the Elgood's brewery, then have a pint of their bitter in yet another Red Lion. A couple of Gregg's sausage rolls for lunch (luxury, huh?), then back on to an X1 for the journey to Peterborough.

For the final journey of the trip it's one of the least remarkable. The outskirts of Wisbech aren't up to much – we pass the petfood factory, then a strip mall along the main road then along the bank of the Nene. From Guyhirn we head across the Bedford Level and into Peterborough along dual carriageways. The bus arrives at Queensgate Bus Station at 1410, a week less 82 minutes since I boarded the X53 in Weymouth. Time for a pint in the Oakham Brewery Tap brewpub, then on to a train to Durham and in to the Colpitts.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this piece of conjectural historiography see *Great British Bus Journeys*, David McKie, Atlantic Books, 2006, chapter 4.

## How this trip came about

We had planned visits to the Dorset and Norfolk/Suffolk coasts, renting a cottage and walking the coast paths, but they never reached the top of our list – it has always been a long list. I had some qualms about going ahead with these plans on my own – cottages are expensive for one, what if the local pub was unfriendly, would I get bored and lonely in the same place for a week. I recently read *Move Along Please*, in which the author Mark Mason travels by bus from Land's End to John O'Groats, and the germ of an idea was born<sup>9</sup>. I've been to both Land's End and John O'Groats (by bus) and many of the places he visited along the way so I decided to adapt the idea and spend a week that included a recce of both coasts and visiting other places in between, travelling by bus<sup>10</sup>.

I decided that I didn't want to travel via London and instead would follow roughly an arc to the west and north. I also decided to focus on places new to me and therefore wouldn't stay or spend time in places that we or I had been to before. This meant, for example, that Salisbury, Oxford, Cambridge and Norfolk, all of which I passed through, were only places to change buses.

Gradually the plans came together and the route more or less settled. I had originally planned to stay in Southwold and Wells-next-the-Sea (or nearby) rather than Lowestoft and Hunstanton. However they are popular for couples having a romantic weekend break, and the chance of a room for one night for a single person anywhere near a price I could afford was zero. A pity, as my original choices would have been better. Otherwise everything worked out pretty much as planned.

## Practicalities

I'm not going into detail about the precise details of hotels, prices, fares and times because I don't expect anyone else to be crazy enough to want to repeat this specific trip. It could be adapted to focus on places such as the cities I only passed through, or to cater for specific interests (for example my route took me past Blenheim Palace, Holkham Hall and Sandringham). However, for anyone mad enough to want to do something similar here are a few pointers:

- take it easy. I aimed to start each day between 0900 and 1000, made sure I had a couple of hours break in the middle of the day and aimed to finish travelling between 1600 and 1700. I didn't feel that it was hard going, though if I was to take a similar trip again I would build in a rest day in the middle – two nights in the same place with time for a decent walk;
- take it slow. Local buses are just that, and the point is to see places off the main roads, while listening into local gossip. Using buses that claim to be

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<sup>9</sup> *Move Along Please, Land's End to John O'Groats by local bus*, Mark Mason, Random House, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> And this trip included a visit to the most easterly point in the UK, at Lowestoft.

expresses may be unavoidable, though in fact many of them act as local buses for much of their route and are certainly not very fast ( for example the X1 from Lowestoft to Peterborough – which I used for the Kings Lynn – Wisbech – Peterborough stretch takes 4 hours 40 minutes for the 107 mile journey);

- pack light – you are going to be carrying your bag. I managed with my small rucky. I did the trip in May so didn't need heavy clothes. If I had needed to buy extra clothing there's a Primark somewhere nearby. I packed my oldest socks and knickers and jettisoned some of them along the way (a few hoteliers are probably still puzzled by this) so my bag became lighter as the trip progressed;
- to plan the trip I used Traveline journey planners at [www.traveline.info](http://www.traveline.info) . Once you learn how to use them – they have their quirks - the information is good and up-to-date. For most of the country they allow you to print off full timetables for each service– it is worth taking key timetables with you, just in case there is no written information or phone signal when you need it;
- don't be purist. If a bus connection is really awkward find a way round it. My train journeys from Sherborne to Gillingham, and Saxmundham to Halesworth each took less than 15 minutes but each saved at least two hours.
- best to allow 20 minutes for connections between buses, particularly if the bus services are infrequent. Buses are often a few minutes late, you may have to locate the stop for the second bus, and you may need time for a comfort break;
- evening bus services are now non-existent over large areas of the country. Sunday services are very limited outside tourist areas. Be sure to check when planning whether your bus is the final service of the day and ensure that you have the time to catch it;
- timetable information en route. Use the main bus stop or bus station, where timetable information is normally accurate and up-to-date. Bus companies and Councils have vastly improved the information provided. There was only one instance (Brackley, where Northamptonshire County Council have responsibility) where there was no information at the bus stops except an out of date timetable for a service that I was not going to use. The 'Catch that bus' app will find the next buses due from each nearby stop, and many stops display the reference needed to send a text for the same information. It is important to know (from Traveline) the route number and final destination of the bus as information at stops may not show intermediate stops;
- free travel for pensioners commences at 0930 Mon-Fri. Beware the rush. This is exactly when you are setting off after breakfast. If there is a bus departing at about 0915, catch it, have your choice of the best seat, and watch the bus fill up en route;
- have plenty of change. Break a note when you buy a meal or drink and set off each day with plenty of pound coins. £20 notes are hated, even £10 can be difficult to change. You may need information from the driver, so keep them happy;

- I booked accommodation in advance. It would have been possible to just turn up during the week, but not at the weekend. Given how early in the day bus services can finish, not booking is a risk which could cause problems.



The trip involved 33 bus journeys. Every bus turned up and only 2 were as much as 10 minutes late. Most of the buses were new, clean and comfortable, particularly on the longer cross-country routes. There was the occasional knackered old minibus in rural areas but they were the exception. Fares were very reasonable – in many cases lower than they are in my home territory around Durham. The plethora of companies limits the opportunities for day tickets. I only used one £7.80 day ticket – from Oxford via Chipping Norton, Hook Norton and Banbury to Brackley on four successive Stagecoach services.

I visited 31 pubs en route, 30 of which I had not been in before. Most, but not all, were in the Camra Good Beer Guide, and having the phone app version of the guide was very useful. All 31 served real ale, and there were only 5 or 6 that I wouldn't go back to, and 13 that I would go out of my way to visit again. Too many pubs now look identical - computer printed pub signs, painted grey and pastel shades inside, renamed an inn and eating house, and untrained kids behind the bar. So to an old fart like me, being able to find the exceptions is key to a good trip. I lost count of the number of bus stops still called Rose and Crown or Three Tuns which now stand outside Tesco Metros.

Having done the recce I would go back to both coasts for walking breaks. Not sure yet about where or when the next bus trip will be...but it is probably the turn of Wales.

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