

The Isle of Wight Beer and Buses Weekend

By Matt Sprack



*From the grubby sands of Shanklin if ever you should stray
From Yarmouth down to **Ventnor**, from Ryde to Totland Bay
From **Bembridge** to **The Needles**, from **Yaverland** to Brook
You'll find a Southern Vectis bus wherever you may look - if you're lucky...*
- '**The Southern Vectis Bus Song**' by Lauri Say

Since 2014, the annual Isle of Wight Beer and Buses Weekend has been held every October. Organised by the Isle of Wight branch of CAMRA (the CAMpaign for Real Ale) and the Isle of Wight Bus Museum, for these two days the whole of the Isle of Wight is effectively transformed into a giant **pub crawl**. Only instead of having to walk, a fleet of classic 20th Century buses transport you from pub to pub for free along numerous different bus routes stretching across the Isle of Wight. All you are asked to do is purchase a programme (£7 in 2018), the proceeds of which go towards the upkeep of the Isle of Wight Bus Museum and its exhibits. In 2018 the event attracted over 12,000 participants.

On the Omnibus

Over 100 buses take part in the event per year, transporting people to almost 100 participating pubs across the Island. Dating from the 1930s onwards, most of the buses are privately owned and brought down at the owners' expense, some from considerable distance on the Mainland¹, to what is becoming one of the largest preserved bus events in the UK.

Part of the joy of the event is seeing the **buses** from all across the country, proudly displaying the liveries and logos of bus companies that would never normally be seen on the Island. As well as Southern Vectis², the Isle of Wight's bus company with cream and green livery, it is possible to see buses previously operated by Ulsterbus, Brighton & Hove, Wilts & Dorset, **London** or Merseybus. A vehicle originally from New Zealand has even participated.

In 2017 one of the organisers, Tim Marshall, said:

Over the years the popularity of the event has grown and the percentage of Islanders and mainlanders who take part is now thought to be about 50/50. Two programmes have been sold

to residents of Hong Kong, though we don't know if those people are coming.- Interview for the *Isle of Wight County Press*

Having an Ale of a Time

All the **pubs** involved serve **real ale**. A real or cask **ale** is one that gets from the cask to the glass either by gravity feed tap or by hand-pump and has not had carbon dioxide added; any ale that comes in a keg and uses gas to travel to the glass is not considered a real ale. The Isle of Wight has over 300 members of CAMRA who help organise the event, with over 90 pubs and licensed premises participating. 22 pubs on the Isle of Wight are listed in the 2019 CAMRA Good Beer Guide, which lists only the nation's finest real ale pubs.

As the bus routes are based on where there are participating real ale pubs, bus services regularly go to out-of-the-way places such as Culver Haven³, but not the town of **East Cowes**. The small town of Yarmouth has always had a stop but the much-larger neighbouring village of Freshwater did not until 2018. Similarly, buses travel right through the large village of Lake without stopping as the village does not have a real ale pub, but much smaller hamlets may have more than one stop. Most of the pubs involved in the Weekend have special offer prices for people carrying the event programme.

The three award-winning Isle of Wight breweries have wholeheartedly supported the event, in some cases creating special-edition beers. These include **Island Brewery's** 'Hop Aboard' and 'Busman's Holiday', **Yates' Brewery's** 'On the Buses' **Goddard's Brewery** is the oldest brewery on the Island and is well-known for its beer 'Duck's Folly'⁴. All three breweries are listed in the 2019 CAMRA Good Beer Guide. Nearby mainland brewery Ringwood's has also participated, creating the ale 'Double Decker'.

Walkies

The **Isle of Wight Ramblers**⁵ are also involved in the event. They provide a selection of town and country walks, including walks between pubs and circular walks returning to an initial pub. Walking guides have been available from the **event's website** and in 2018 (when the event was known as the Classic Buses, Beer and Walks Weekend) a variety of different walk guides were available to collect. These included many accessible walks designed to be suitable for wheelchairs, pushchairs etc. Pubs participating in the walking and hiking routes were labelled in the main event programme with a 'H' hiking boot symbol.

Letting off Steam

The **Isle of Wight Steam Railway** has also regularly participated in the weekend, running free trains between Wootton and their main station at Havenstreet. The Isle of Wight Bus Weekend's stopping⁶ Newport to Ryde service stops outside Wootton Station to allow passengers to disembark and ride along the steam railway.

Predominantly a Victorian branch line, uniquely, the Isle of Wight Steam Railway is the only steam railway to operate compartment **carriages** rather than corridor carriages⁷. A marquee in Havenstreet's event field serves a range of real ales. The event sometimes coincides with bird flight displays by **Haven Falconry**⁸ who are also based at Havenstreet.

Additionally, Island Line rail service have offered discounted travel to travellers carrying the Beer & Buses Event Programme. As the Island Line trains date from 1938 they also can be considered to be heritage transport, albeit still in daily use.

Move Over, Buster

The event has two hubs from which it is possible to catch buses to all over the Island.

Quay to the Island



The main hub is located at the Riverside Centre at Newport Quay in Newport, next to the former home of the Isle of Wight Bus Museum. Riverside Centre is located in the Island's capital in the very middle of the Island, making it the ideal place to access the rest. As the event has grown so has the organisation. A large marquee allows separate queues for passengers wishing to travel to different destinations, and entertainment in the form of Morris Dancers is provided.

Ticket to Ryde

The second, smaller transport hub of the event is located outside the [Isle of Wight Bus Museum](#) in Ryde. Formed in 1997, the museum contains many exhibits and over 20 vehicles covering a 110-year period. Their oldest is *Civility*, a Newport-built stagecoach dating from the 1880s, which is the oldest-surviving road vehicle on the Island and was designed for a three-day Round the Island tour. Although not a bus its restoration was funded by money raised at the 2017 Beer and Bus Weekend event. The newest exhibit had the same role a century later. An open-top 1993 Leyland Olympian, when in service, offered a four-hour round-the-Island hop-on/hop-off tour and was donated to the museum by Southern Vectis in 2017.

The collection includes the bus that ran over singer Adam Faith, whose father was a bus driver. The museum also has dressing up areas and a bus converted into a café.

Omnipresent Omnibuses

The number of routes served by the Beer and Bus Weekend has grown substantially. In 2014 there were seven routes, and by 2018 this had almost trebled to 19 routes. The different services' total journey times vary from 15 minutes to 120 minutes with buses varying in size from 40 to 70 seaters. Relief buses operate in addition to the timetabled service at peak times. The buses run 10am – 7pm on Saturday and 10am – 5pm on Sunday. A wide range of accommodation is available for visitors from the mainland or abroad needing somewhere to stay, from camping to luxury hotels in many spectacular locations⁹.

As participants are spread out, riding on the numerous buses and dining and drinking in the various pubs across the whole Island, it is not an event that has a strict limit on the number of people who can participate. Due to Transport and Insurance Regulations bus drivers are not

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Local History



A noteworthy local bus is 1939 Bristol K5G *The Old Girl*, an open-top bus that is the oldest bus in the country to still belong to its original company. She is the oldest bus in the Southern Vectis fleet and is still in service more than 75 years after they first bought her.

The 2017 event was especially poignant for local bus enthusiasts as it marked the first time for 20 years that the former closed-top Southern Vectis Vintage Fleet had been reunited. Operating on the Island between 1986 and 1996, the four members of the double-decker fleet preserved in the Isle of Wight Bus Museum were reunited with the three owned privately. You will never see a finer collection of well-preserved 1950s-60s Bristols.

Sadly the most famous bus on the Isle of Wight, the **Spice Bus** featured in *Spiceworld: The Movie*, has yet to take part as it requires refurbishment. Another noteworthy Isle of Wight bus

became famous at the 2012 London Olympics as **London Booster**. This is a former Southern Vectis bus that was modified to do push-ups.

Harbouring Bus Enthusiasts

The weekend attracts a wide variety of participants, from those enjoying a day out away from the car to dedicated fans of classic buses and real ale drinkers. It is common to see participants writing and comparing lists not only including the type and number plates of buses they travelled on, but also the pubs they have visited and what real ales they have sampled. To cater for this interest a wide range of merchandise is available from Newport Harbour and Ryde's Bus Museum, including official Beer & Bus Weekend clothing.

Publications

Event publications and programmes have included:

- A detailed full-colour Event Programme, which is up to 100 pages in length.
- A 54-page Vehicle Supplement, which provides more information as to the vehicles taking part.
- A 24-page beer guide, listing exactly what ale is sold at each participating pub.

The Programme lists all participating **pubs**, their addresses and contact details, opening times, which **bus stops** are nearby, a summary of available beer, and whether they serve food, are family friendly, have a children's play area, provide accommodation or have special offers during the event. It also contains a basic map of each of the main town centres showing **bus stop** locations and those of participating pubs, as well as an event bus timetable. A more detailed bus timetable stating exactly which bus is due to be operating which routes is provided in the Vehicle Supplement.



While most people enjoying the Isle of Wight Beer and Bus Weekend are happy to refer to buses as 'that blue double-decker heading to Ryde', for example, bus enthusiasts are provided with a more convoluted and informative way of identifying each bus, which can seem strange to the non-enthusiast. This method is used, but not fully explained, in many of the event publications.

Buses are referred to by codes incorporating:

- **Registration:** This is the bus's **registration** (number plate).
- **Year:** the year the bus was constructed
- **Chassis:** The manufacturer who made the bus frame and mechanical running base and the model.
- **Body:** The company that built the bus body.
- **Body Type:** A letter that indicates the type of body:
 - B: Single-deck bus
 - C: Coach
 - DP: Dual Purpose (cross between bus and coach)
 - H: Highbridge double-decker
 - O: Open-top
 - PO: Partly Open-top
- **Capacity:** The number of seated passengers.
- **Passenger Entrance:** Where do passengers get in? F: Front or R: Rear
- **Livery:** In which operator's livery is the bus running?

So using this system the Southern Vectis Bus called *The Old Girl* is referred to as 'CDL899 1939 Bristol K5G/ECW O56R Southern Vectis'. This shows that her number plate is CDL899, she was built in 1939 and is a Bristol model K5G but her body was built by Eastern Coach Works¹⁰, she is an Open Top bus that can carry 56 seated passengers, has a rear entrance and is in the livery of Southern Vectis.

It is far, far easier just to call her *The Old Girl*.

Isle of Wight Roads are Different



There really is no substitute for seeing the Isle of Wight from the top-deck of an open-top double-decker bus. With the sun on your face and the wind in your hair, you can enjoy an unbridled view of chalk cliffs over the hedgerows either side of the narrow, twisty-turny roads and see why most of the Island is an official Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This was recognised in 2018 when two of the Island's bus routes featured in the **Top Ten most beautiful**

bus routes in England. Of course, the driver, who likely came over from the mainland, is sat on the bottom deck driving a large bus round narrow, unfamiliar, winding country lanes with hedges either side, completely unaware of what is round each bend. When all of a sudden another bus with decades-old braking technology is seen travelling in the opposite direction round a corner and down a hill, you get a chance to appreciate how well classic bus brakes work.

Many words have been used to describe the Island's roads in areas such as Ventnor; however, 'smooth', 'flat', 'straight' and 'wide' have never been among them. When it comes to twisty, bumpy, narrow, zig-zagging steep roads with sharp drops inches away, Ventnor has more than its fair share. These are best experienced on a classic double-decker bus with an ancient engine and braking system, not to mention slippery leather seats. In order to experience the full effect, with every twist, turn and bump magnified, it is best to sit over the rear wheels. Sitting on an old bus with very little suspension as it drives over a cattle-grid is not an experience that is granted every day. No wonder the Beer and Bus Weekend is proud to be part of the Green Star Scheme for encouraging car-free holidays on the Isle of Wight.

¹ Bus drivers also participate at their own expense, apart from compensation for fuel costs incurred during the actual event.

² Southern Vectis has offered discounted Weekend Rover tickets to participants.

³ An isolated pub at the top of Culver Cliff.

⁴ Anthony Goddard was an underwriter and lost a large sum of money and his farm to Lloyd's of London. As a lasting memorial to this bunch of bankers, Goddard's named one of their beers 'Duck's Folly' in their honour. This is an anagram with the second word being 'Lloyd's'.

⁵ An organisation dedicated to both helping people to enjoy walking and looking after and protecting the places to walk.

⁶ A direct service also runs which does not stop at Wootton Station.

⁷ In a corridor carriage, passengers can wander up and down the length of the carriage via a corridor that runs along one side of the coach with access to each of the compartments. A compartment carriage has no corridor. Once inside a compartment, there is no access to any of the other compartments except by exiting the train.

⁸ Technically falconry involves using a bird to hunt, whereas a bird display involves flying the birds.

⁹ **Visit Isle of Wight**, the Island's official tourism website, has further information.

¹⁰ ECW were based at Lowestoft in Suffolk, 250 miles away from Bristol Commercial Vehicles' Brislington-based bus-building headquarters. It was quite a regular occurrence for a bus chassis to be driven across the country to wherever the coach builder was located before being united with its upper section.

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