

50 YEARS



1973-2023

From DAFFODIL...

...to POPPY & GUS



A Short History of Harting Minibus

By Barry Mackay

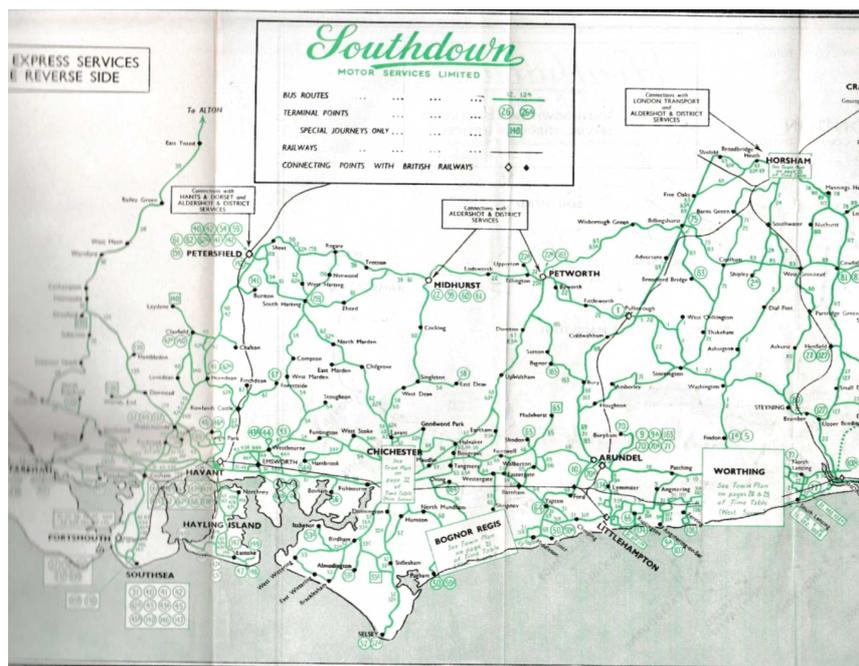
Strange to believe now, but back in the post-war years, public transport bus routes interconnected virtually every town, village and parish in the country. Services were time-tabled with other neighbouring bus operators. Armed with pocket-sized timetable booklets, home-made sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper and a Thermos flask of hot tea, it was pretty much possible to get to and from any populated place on the mainland by scheduled bus services.

Sussex's buses, criss-crossing the county, were operated mainly by Southdown Motor Services (*picture below*). These connected at Petersfield and Midhurst with the adjoining bus operator to the north, the Aldershot and District Traction Company, colloquially known as The Tracco, or, less respectfully, as the 'Ave a Shot and Risk it. Between these two companies you could travel anywhere from London's Victoria Coach Station to the Sussex coast and all points in-between. Other bus companies connected to the east and the west.



A typical Southdown bus of the 1950s

Harting Parish was well served by Southdown, which over the years provided regular bus routes: 22, 54, 59, 61, 60, 62 and 159 (*map below*). Nyewood (Post Office), West Harting (The Greyhound) and East Harting (Turkey Island) were timetabled stopping places, as was South Harting (The Ship). Southdown's single-deck fleet of buses traversed the local lanes covering every village between Chichester, Midhurst and Petersfield.



Southdown bus routes around Harting in the early 1960s

And not just passengers - it was also possible to send parcels, to be collected en route or held by a distant parcel office. South Harting's parcel agency was run by Horace Wall at Harting Garage.

The 1960s were years of great change. The growth of private motor cars was a boon to individual travel but not to the public transport network. The early 1950s had seen the highest ever recorded number of bus passengers carried but these fell dramatically through the next decade. The aim of the 1968 Transport Act was to produce a commercially profitable, integrated transport system, but this only ensured the axing of unprofitable services.

As a consequence, Harting Parish was effectively stripped of a functioning bus service. While there were occasional Southdown buses passing through other parts of the parish, Nyewood was completely ignored by them and so became a particular hotbed of support for a solution to be found, and a source of many future passengers when the service started.

Self-help was the answer. The community should run its own bus! Volunteers were tasked to carry out a feasibility study. The how, what, where and when were discussed and decisions made. Two options were considered:

- 1) running public service approved vehicles with certificated drivers (very expensive) or
- 2) buying a privately owned and insured vehicle driven by volunteers.

The first option was discarded as unfeasible, so the second one it must be.

The world wasn't ready for new-fangled community transport schemes - this was not something any UK Government had seen before, so their default position was negative. A meeting was held in Whitehall between the then Minister of Transport, Norman Fowler, assisted by his deputy Kenneth Clarke, (*pictured below*) and representatives from Harting Minibus committee. Objections to the proposed Harting scheme had been raised by both Southdown Motor Services and by the Transport and General Workers Union who feared further loss of jobs for its members.

The upshot of it all was that Harting could run a minibus so long as it did not directly compete with Southdown's commercial routes - it was also noted that Ken Clarke ate most of the pies provided for the post-meeting lunch!



Norman Fowler and Kenneth Clarke, 1970s

There was one big fly in the ointment - while we could legally carry passengers in our privately bought and insured vehicle, it was not lawful to charge fares.

Necessity being the mother of invention, a Minibus Tote was initiated which, along with grants and contributions from clubs and individuals in the parish, ensured adequate funding to run the new enterprise. All that remained was to find the money to buy a bus.

The village was galvanised into action and a functioning, self-financing system came into being. Many volunteers were needed to set this up and run it. Some came and went as their role was fulfilled, while others remained as volunteers for many years. Notable among these were Eunice Spicer running the Tote; Stan Hornerstone, described by those who remember him as a financial genius at raising funds for future operations; and Roger Bricknell, the chairman who guided it through those early years.

A generous contribution was made by the 1972 Harting Festivities committee under the chairmanship of Michael Casement, who raised £1,300, of which £1,000 was made over to the Harting Minibus project. This was supplemented by an anonymous loan of £600 - interest free for one year - and enabled our first minibus, named Daffodil (*pictured below*), a yellow diesel-engined, second-hand crew bus, to be purchased from Oakley's Garage in Petersfield. It was an early, Mk 1 Ford Transit with two rows of basic bench seats, one each side, facing each other in the back. Drivers were recruited and a management committee was formed. Daffodil began bus operations as an offshoot of the Parish Council in May 1973.



Daffodil with passengers, March 1973

Humphrey Sladden, whose parish council sub-committee kicked the whole thing off, recalls that it took “literally dozens of willing people” to ensure the success of Harting’s first minibus, adding that “it was village pride at its best”. Minty O’Kelly, a volunteer driver for 30 years and who managed the drivers’ rota for 20 years, remembers a steady and varied supply of volunteers - at one time she had three retired admirals among her contingent!

The £600 loan was repaid the following year when the Festivities committee again stepped up with the required cash, this year under the chairmanship of Ken Hughes. The Festivities committee then, as always, has proved to be a staunch supporter of Harting Minibus.

Daffodil ran for the next few years, until January 1977 when, after 44,500 miles, she was replaced by another Ford Transit, a light blue one immediately named Bluebell, but this time with a petrol engine and far more comfortable forward facing passenger seats - Daffodil’s unreliable diesel engine and sideways facing seats with no seat belts were carefully avoided in the replacement vehicle. Local press were in attendance for Bluebell’s arrival and handover (*see press cutting below*), but the promised TV cameras failed to show.

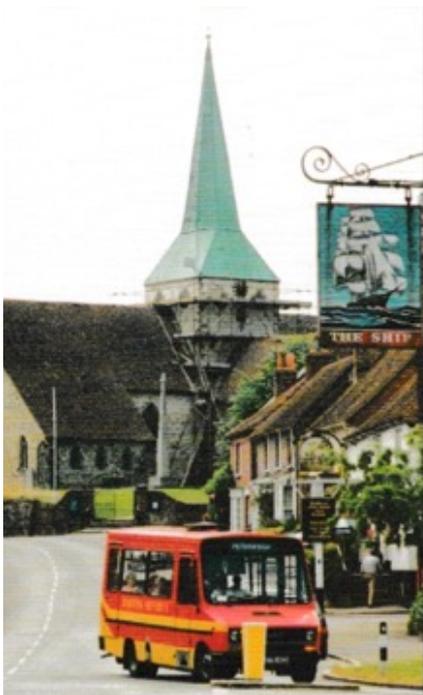


Bluebell replaces Daffodil, 1977

Bluebell complied with the recently enacted Minibus Act of 1977, and a permit from the Office of the Traffic Commissioners was obtained. The Harting Minibus was now running under the discipline of the Commissioners, like any other (commercial) operator.

As community transport organisations mushroomed over the next few years, their place within society became recognised and formalised which, of course, meant increasing bureaucracy. New laws, such as the Transport Act 1985 and other regulations were imposed both nationally and Europe-wide. Vehicles were licensed and could now legally collect fares, becoming answerable to the Traffic Commissioner's Office. Just like the commercial operators, they became subject to mandatory regular safety inspections and routing/timetable disciplines - in other words, a fully professional service that continues to this day.

Through the ensuing years various vehicles, such as Robin (*pictured below*), have been used thanks to some pretty generous grants from various sources, most notably West Sussex County Council, which gave its first grant to Harting Minibus some 22 years after the bus services started (*see press cutting below*). On one occasion a second-hand Renault minibus was gifted to us by a London charity that was closing down. Harting then had two minibuses!



Robin in 1999



Our first grant from WSCC, July 1995

It wasn't all plain sailing: sometimes vehicles played up or were off-road for repairs. Daffodil was notoriously reluctant to start some mornings, while a particularly troublesome Volkswagen minibus (pictured below) had an expensive habit of periodically breaking windscreens due to its flexing bodywork.



The troublesome 1988 Volkswagen which broke three windscreens due to poor body alignment

There was even an instance of vandalism when someone cut through Robin's brake pipes while the bus was parked by the village hall overnight (see *press cutting below*). Fortunately, the driver realised before disaster befell bus, driver and passengers. The local newspaper report stated that 'a massive effort has been launched to find the culprits' but PC Ray Hawkins was unable to solve the case.

Brake pipe cut on minibus used by elderly

Herald
15th June
2001

Police probe 'sickening' act of sabotage

A SHOCKING act of sabotage could have ended in tragedy for passengers on Harting's community bus, police of vandalism could have resulted in a very serious accident. Pc Ray Hawkins said: "If the driver did not see the warning light and got up to some speed, he could have been killed. The bus was damaged is the fourth vehicle it has run. The bus is owned by Harting Parish Council and the Mercedes-Benz bought in who have broken the mirrors. sits in the open in the car park. "It is a popular service and the bus can hold up to 16 people



The sabotage suffered by the Harting minibus is discussed by, from the left, Doug Outram, who was driving the bus when the damage was discovered, Roger Holmes, chairman of the Harting minibus management board, and John Sladden, drivers' organiser.

The Harting Vandal Scandal, June 2001

Harting Minibus has always been mindful of its wider social and environmental responsibilities. Both current minibuses are Euro 5 compliant in having the cleanest, most efficient diesel engines on the market. It is hoped, finances and future technology permitting, to utilise even more climate-friendly technology in the next half century of operation. Over the 50 years that the

service has been running, the all-volunteer driver cadre, management and maintenance personnel have done a sterling job ensuring a continuing and safe service.

For many years the minibuses have been used to carry local children to and from school in Petersfield, which saves several thousand individual family car journeys each year. This service is organised by a dedicated schools coordinator who also doubles as the passengers' safeguarding lead (and editor of Parish News!). In addition, private hires have provided useful income for the company, whilst excursions to, for example, Goodwood races and Winchester Christmas market have proved popular.

One notable change was the setting up of a separate Community Interest Company to run the service. In 2016, the Parish Council found that it could no longer run the service under recently introduced regulations. Despite this change, it is still run by an all-volunteer team of drivers, administrators, and engineers, with the 50-year-old Tote still contributing to running costs. Harting Minibus is also indebted to many others whose support helps keep the service going - among them are our sponsors, whose logos adorn our buses, and the Nugents, who provide us with hard-standing free parking on their farm.

Other than the regular (every ten weeks) vehicle safety inspections and any necessary repairs at the local commercial motor engineers, day to day running costs (fuel, insurance and vehicle depreciation) are the only financial outgoings.

Earlier this year the children of Harting C of E Primary School were challenged to come up with their idea of what minibuses would look like in 50 years' time, and some examples of their vivid imagination are shown at the end of this article.

Finally, I know I speak for many in the village when I offer my heart-felt thanks to all those who went before for their hard work, commitment, foresight and, at times, stubbornness in founding and keeping such an enterprise going for half a century. I would also like to thank those, too many to mention individually, who diligently kept records and photographs that I have plundered for this article. And, of course, a big thank-you to our passengers - without you, we wouldn't have any minibuses!

Well done, Harting, give yourself a pat on the back!



The Mercedes with passengers



The Mercedes and Ford Transit workhorses of the 2010s



Taking delivery of Poppy, 2018



The current fleet: Gus the Bus (Peugeot) and Poppy (Fiat) were named by the children of Harting C of E Primary School; the smart new livery was designed by Harting's Jo Swanston

If this article has inspired you, and if you are able, would you please think about becoming a volunteer driver?

We give full MIDAS accredited minibus training, and your commitment to driving could be as little as two hours once a quarter, or more if you prefer. This is a great opportunity to get to know people in our villages, do something really worthwhile for the community and be part of maintaining the respected Harting Bus service for another fifty years.



The poster features a red banner at the top with the text 'the HARTING BUS' in white. Below this, the word 'NEEDS' is written in black, followed by 'YOU!' in large, bold, red letters. In the center is a side-view illustration of a silver Harting Bus van with a red banner on its side that reads 'the HARTING BUS'. Below the van, the text 'DRIVERS REQUIRED' is written in large, bold, black letters. At the bottom, a red banner contains the contact information: 'Please call Mike Bracey · 07899 917866' and 'www.hartingminibus.org.uk' in white text.

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