

TICKET TO RIDE

VIVIENNE CROW finds a novel way of exploring the nooks and crannies of the unspoilt North Pennine landscape at just the right pace

A Cumbria Classic Coach passes Ravestonedale Endowed School in the village of the same name



I COULD get used to this – motoring through the beautiful Pennine countryside at a sedate pace, attracting admiring glances and waves from other road users, causing heads to turn. Sadly, it's not me attracting all this attention – it's the 1959 Bristol Lodekka bus on which I'm a passenger.

My partner Heleyne and I are travelling with our terrier Jess, from Kirkby Stephen to Hawes on Cumbria Classic Coaches' 569 service. All the buses start from the small Eden Valley

village of Ravenstonedale, where Cumbria Classic Coaches has its depot but you can flag them down almost anywhere along their routes, and the most you'll pay for a return journey is £12. We join the service at Kirkby Stephen railway station, intending to return to the town via the Settle-to-Carlisle line later in the day. There are car parks at the station – more than two kilometres outside of town – and near the local grammar school, on the northern edge of the town centre. >>



Clockwise from top left: Pendragon Castle with Wild Boar Fell in the background; Vivienne Crow with her van at Barnard Castle Club Site; Wensleydale in the Yorkshire Dales National Park; Cumbria Classic Coaches' 1959 Bristol Lodekka bus in Hawes



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about novel ways of
getting out and about
in the Lake District

All aboard

There's a party atmosphere on the busy bus today. Many of our fellow passengers are pensioners who travel for free and are taking advantage of it being market day in Hawes. They all seem to know each other. "Morning Alan", "Morning Mary" they call to each other as they get on. Kneeling buses didn't exist in the 1950s, so a step is provided and conductor Dan offers a helping hand to those unsteady on their feet.

Dan is a member of the Hamer family, a nephew of Will Hamer who set up the business with his wife Claire, son Anthony and daughter Alison after being made redundant in the mid-1990s. He explained: "We have a loyal and diligent family, all with individual skills that are useful for running a classic bus company. My daughter Alison and her husband run a sign-writing and graphic design company, so all our traditional vinyl sign-writing is done by them. Our son Anthony has taught himself the skills of coach body-building, and Claire has a degree in tourism management."

As well as the regulars who, Will says, have turned the buses into a "clubhouse", there are tourists too and young families all enjoying the nostalgic novelty of this unique experience. As the bus weaves its way through Mallerstang it feels like we've been transported back in time. Dry-stone walls carve the valley floor into slender enclosures filled with wildflowers, cotton wool-like balls of white blossom line

both sides of the narrow, winding road, and cottages and farmhouses sit in idyllic locations at the base of the moody hills that tower over the dale. And today, adding to that surreal sense of time travel, we're sharing the road with colourful horse-drawn caravans – visitors to the Appleby Horse Fair, Europe's largest annual gathering of travellers.

Castle country

From the windows of the bus I see the shell of Lammerside Castle, once used by the Wharton family as a stronghold against Scottish raiders, and then the romantic ruins of 12th-century Pendragon Castle, supposedly founded by Uther Pendragon, King Arthur's father.

A few walkers get off nearby. Like Heleyne and I, they see the bus as an opportunity to enjoy a linear walk through countryside that, since August, has been part of the extended Yorkshire Dales National Park. There's an excellent network of paths in the area, passing both castles as well as dramatic waterfalls such as Hell Gill Force, where the young River Eden plummets from the lonely hills to begin its journey to the Irish Sea, and, over the North Yorkshire border, Cotter Force and Hardraw Force.

Hawes has plenty to entertain, including the Wensleydale Creamery where visitors can watch Wallace and Gromit's favourite cheese being made, and the Dales Countryside



Clockwise from above: Ian Howard, left, and Dan Hamer - conductor and driver respectively on Cumbria Classic Coaches' service to Barnard Castle; Kirkby Stephen railway station, one of the stations on the Settle to Carlisle line; ruins of the 12th-century fortress at Barnard Castle

Museum, showing the social and industrial history of the Yorkshire Dales. Eager for our afternoon on the hills though, Heleyne, Jess and I don't hang around when the bus arrives. We quickly head south along a glorious high-level section of the Pennine Way. Ribbleshead is our destination where we catch the train back to Kirkby Stephen, crossing the tremendous 24-arch viaduct and passing through Dent, England's highest mainline railway station, along the way.

The next day we're back on the bus again - this time catching the 572 from Ravenstonedale to Barnard Castle in County Durham. Unlike the 569, which operates on Tuesdays only during the summer, this Wednesday service runs year-round. Today, Dan is behind the wheel of the 1955 AEC Regent III while yesterday's driver Ian Howard, another of Will Hamer's nephews, collects fares. It isn't long before Ian, rushed off his feet, calls in the cavalry and we're joined by a 1954 Leyland Tiger, driven by Will. Looks like we've got us a convoy.

These are classic buses with few of the mod-cons expected of modern public transport - no air-conditioning, for instance, although that's rarely a problem in the North Pennines. And, although there's room for pushchairs, there's no provision for wheelchairs or bicycles unless they can be folded. The drivers too have to be prepared for a 'different' experience. With no power steering and crash gearboxes, operating these beasts can be hard work.

ALAMY

Classic coaches



The 'convoy' heads north to Brough where a 900-year-old castle stands guard over the Stainmore Gap, one of the most important crossing points in the Pennines. The Romans also recognised the strategic significance of this pass, building a fort here to protect the York-to-Carlisle road. Today, the military presence continues - the warning flags of the MoD's 9,700-hectare Warcop Training Area line the B6276 as we climb higher into the bleak, fog-shrouded North Pennines. It's hardly surprising that no walkers disembark today.

George, an old farmer, explains to me how wool was used to construct this road, which climbs to a high point of almost 500 metres above sea level. On two particularly boggy stretches, a tonne of fleece was laid over the peat before the road was built on top. Similar techniques are used today to repair footpaths in the Lake District.



Barnard Castle Club Site (below) is a half-hour drive from Kirkby Stephen, while Kendal Club Site lies 40 minutes away. To book a stay at either head to www.myccc.co.uk/ukcampsites or call 024 7647 5426.





Left: The Bowes Museum and Gardens in Barnard Castle, Teesdale, County Durham. Below: Cumbria Classic Coaches' service 572 to Barnard Castle stops for a comfort break in Middleton-in-Teesdale



Into town

There's a brief comfort stop in the lovely village of Middleton-in-Teesdale, just a few kilometres downstream of High Force, probably the most dramatic waterfall in England. Then it's on to 'Barney' where the streets, like those in Hawes, are lined with market stalls selling clothes, books, home-made jam, rugs... There's been a market here for centuries and the town centre's most iconic building – the octagonal Market Cross – was built in the 18th century as a shelter for women selling butter and cheese. No dairymaids today though. The Market Cross's sole function now seems to be as a roundabout.

The many attractions of Barnard Castle include Eggleston Hall Gardens, passed on the way into town, and the art collections of the Bowes Museum, housed in an elegant French-style chateau. After a quick bite to eat in the dog-friendly Penny's tearoom, we opt for the riverside remains of the 12th-century castle, once owned by Richard III – he of Leicester car park fame.

As we set off back to Cumbria at the end of day, I notice people nudging each other excitedly on the streets as we pass. Faces light up with big smiles of nostalgia. Folk seem genuinely pleased to see these reminders of past times chugging along modern roads. In a few hours, I'll be back behind the wheel of my 2002 campervan and I'll have to make do with the occasional wistful glance that says 'one day I'm gonna get me one of those'... 🚍

Armchair travellers particularly interested in the Lake District and its history may like to dip into a new book that explores the landscape, traditions, people and transport of the area. Lakeland - A Personal Journey by Hunter Davies is published by Head of Zeus, priced £16.99.



DAYTRIPPER

Fancy retracing Vivienne's footsteps? Hop off the bus at Hawes to explore the rugged beauty of the Pennine landscape on foot, walking to Ribbleshead where you can catch the Settle-Carlisle train back to Kirkby Stephen.

Viv said: "The walk from Hawes to Ribbleshead is almost ten miles (a little more than three hours), involving 450 metres of ascent – a straightforward undertaking for regular hill-walkers. It follows the Pennine Way south, slowly climbing above Wensleydale's traditional barns and patchwork of drystone walled-enclosures. Our companions

were mostly sheep and waders, the curlews and lapwings calling out their warnings as we passed their ground-nesting sites.

"The grassy path is reasonably obvious at first, although we walked it on a sunny day – it might not be so straightforward when the mist descends. On reaching the high ground of Ten End though, we were able to stride out along clearer paths with grand views of distant hills. Joining up with the Cam High Road, a Roman route, a steady descent begins in the company of Yorkshire's 'Three Peaks' – Wharfedale, Ingleborough and Pen-y-ghent. Leaving the Pennine Way at Cam End, the Dales Way leads down to the B6255 for a final

two kilometres beside the road.

"From arriving in Ribbleshead we had more than seven hours until the last train back to Kirkby Stephen – plenty of time to enjoy a leisurely pace and reward ourselves with a drink and a bite to eat at the Station Inn at the end of the walk." Check www.settle-carlisle.co.uk for up-to-date timetables before setting out.

