

A CENTURY OF COACH TOURS IN AND AROUND THE PENWITH PENINSULAR



[© Morrab Library]

GWR Road Motor No. 78 (AF161), a Straker Squire observation car, outside Penzance Station in July 1904 about to depart on a circular tour. A poster advertising the new services can be seen over the vehicle's bonnet.

One aspect of bus and coach travel history which receives relatively little attention, compared with town and country bus and express coach services, is that of coach tours primarily aimed at holiday makers. From the 1920s to the 1980s a wide range of tours and excursions was offered by both large and small companies throughout the West Country. The largest, Western National Omnibus Company (and its sister company Southern National), provided tours from many towns and villages during the holiday season from April to the end of September. TV&GWOT archives hold many examples of leaflets and booklets advertising whole day, half day and evening tours and we have drawn on these to illustrate this review of tours offered from Penzance as well as to Penwith from other holiday centres as far afield as Newquay, Bude, St Austell and Plymouth. Popular destinations from these were St Ives, Land's End and the Atlantic Coast, and Penzance, Newlyn and Mount's Bay.

In West Cornwall, tours had started twenty years earlier than in many other holiday centres. This was spurred by the early establishment by the Great Western Railway of the first railway operated bus service from Helston to the Lizard on 17 August 1903 and the rapid expansion of bus services around Penzance as feeders to the railway later in the same year. Also, for the summer of 1904, the railway



GWR open charabanc No. 18 (AF86) starting a tour from Falmouth Station, Whitsun 1904 [© Morrab Library]



*GWR Milnes Daimler
28hp open
charabanc No. 66
(AF192) at Redruth
Station. This type of
body was known as
a Lee seater
charabanc with
several points of side
access and stepped
floor and removable
canvas upper sides,
primarily for
touring /
sightseeing. [© Chris
Heaps Collection]*

*A group of GWR Road Motors bus
crews poses with some of their
vehicles while on a summer tour at
Land's End. The Guy FBB on the
left was No. 1264 (YF3918) which
dates the picture as 1927 or 1928.*

*The vehicle on the right is a
Maudslay with a roll-back canvas
roof supported by fixed roof sticks.*



service from Paddington to Penzance was improved by the introduction of 'The Cornish Riviera Express' which cut 1 hour and 10 minutes off the previous fastest journey time. This was seen as an opportunity to attract holiday makers to Cornwall and therefore, as well as improved bus services, a programme of 'Land Tours' by motor 'char-a-banc' (see below) was implemented from 1 July 1904 with two circular tours:

Penzance – Gurnards Head – St Ives – Towednack – Penzance

Penzance – St Just – Lands End – Penzance

These tours proved to be very popular with visitors so all available vehicles were pressed into service. The principal competition in these early days was from horse drawn carriages which had been carrying visitors to Land's End for many years.

A new company, Trelawny Tours Limited, was registered by John and Mary Harding in March 1914. The Hardings had moved to Penzance to take over the Central Hotel and, following the cessation of hostilities in 1918, the new company purchased a reconditioned army surplus Dennis to which a charabanc body was added. During the early '20s the tours business prospered and a second branch was opened at Newquay in competition with established tours operator Hocking.



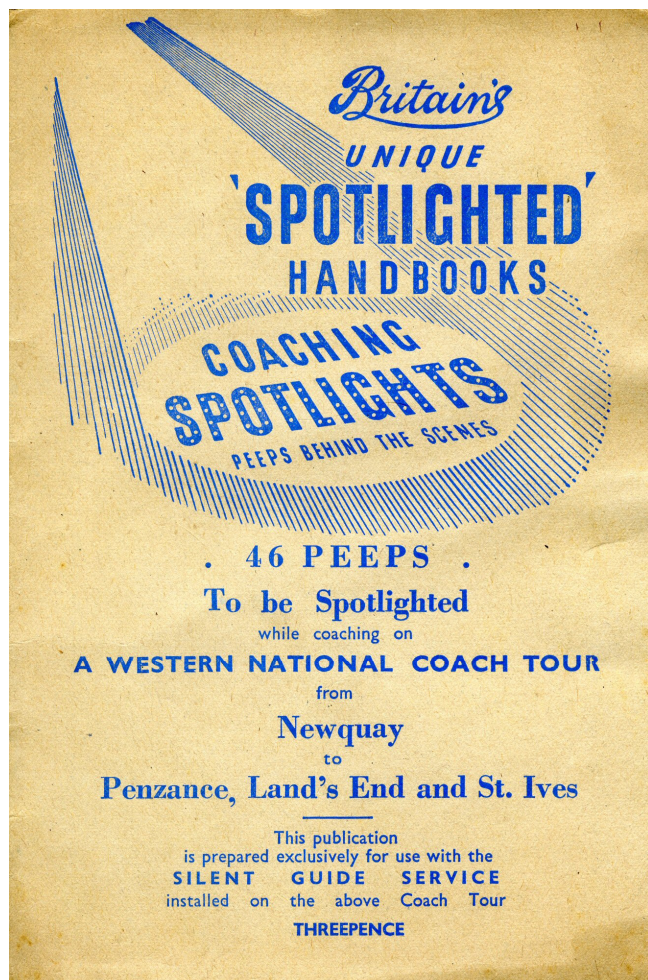
*Former Trelawny Tours Albion PFV26 with London Lorries
20 seat all weather coach bodywork seen with National
fleet no. 2749 but still in Trelawny livery in 1928.*

This tours booking office was at 4 Queens Buildings on Penzance Promenade and had originally been leased by Trelawny Tours from Saunders Hotels in 1919. It was taken over by National with the Trelawny business in 1928 and remained in use by National and successor companies into the 1980s.



Harding hit on the idea of a 'Silent Guide' which consisted of a counter at the front of the coach visible to all the passengers and operated by the coach driver. The numbers on the counter referred to notes on the principal points of interest along the tour contained in a booklet of 'Peeps' or coaching spotlights which could be purchased from the driver for 3d (1.25p). When the counter was changed a gong rang to alert the passengers – so much for 'Silent'. Harding sold or hired this equipment which he called a 'Sceneaidicator' (!) to a number of coach tour operators across the South and West of England including the National Omnibus & Transport Company.

The 'Knowtoring Travelogue' has adverts for hotels, hostelries, eating places and other businesses along the way such as the "First and Last House" in England, "Mrs LA Lichfold – Specialist in Handiwork, Arts and Crafts done on the premises", "EA Radbournes, Market Jew St – choose your pipe as you would your friend" and "Heart's Content Café, Praa Sands, Proprietor WH Endean, Phone: Germoe 4 – Luncheons, teas, ices cakes, home made – charges moderate".



Two booklets were available to coach tourists. On the **left** is a 'spotlighted' handbook which described 46 'peeps' to be seen on a tour from Newquay to Penzance, Land's End and St Ives available from the driver for 3d (1.25p). On the **right** is the 'Travlogue of Knowtoring' covering all tours from Penzance and St Ives, price 1/- (5p).




RELIABILITY LUXURY SAFETY

The "Silent Guide" service
is included in these fares.

**YOUR CHOICE OF THESE
12 Beautiful Tours
IN ANY ONE DAY!**

| Tour | ROUTE | Time | Return Fare |
|------|---|------------------------|-------------|
| 1 | LAND'S END, PENZANCE & ST. IVES including our Grand Atlantic Coast Tour with over 40 miles of Coast Road— CIRCULAR TOUR. Going via Perranporth, St. Agnes, Portreath, Porthtowan, The North Cliffs, Deadman's Cove, Hell's Mouth, Godrevy Lighthouse, Hayle and Penzance and Land's End. Returning via the Coast Road—Gurnard's Head, Eagle's Nest, Zennor and St. Ives. | Daily 9.45 a.m. | 10/6 |
| 2 | ROMANTIC TINTAGEL & BOSCASTLE | Daily | |

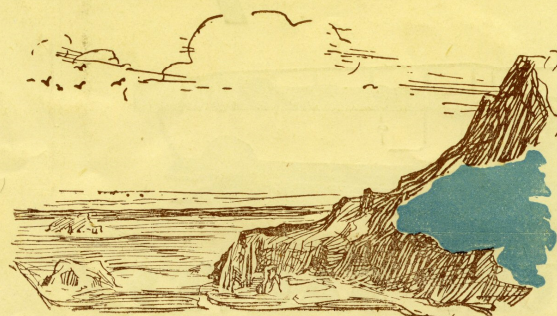
In the mid '20s many coaches still ran on solid tyred wheels and had rows of bench seats accessed by individual doors on the nearside of the body. These were known as charabancs (often pronounced 'sharra-bang') from the French word char-a-banc meaning a 'carriage with benches', the plural being chars-a-banc. They had canvas roofs which could be rolled back in good weather but often without side windows. During the late 1920s the 'all weather coach' was developed which had side windows which could be dropped down into the body side with the canvas roof being attached to the windows tops so that the interior could quickly be made weather-tight. With their pneumatic tyres and quiet petrol engines they were regarded as the height of luxury.

**WESTERN NATIONAL
MOTOR COACH TOURS**

Associated with GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY.

**ARE THE MOST POPULAR
BECAUSE . . .**

1. Each of the 23 modern touring coaches (fitted with brakes on all four wheels) offer the last word in luxurious, comfortable travelling and comprise the finest fleet in Cornwall.
2. Western National drivers are picked men, who have intimate knowledge of every inch of the road. "Safety first" and courtesy are their mottoes.
3. The routes covered are famous for the grandeur and variety of scenery, and adequately cover every world-renowned beauty spot in the Duchy.
4. Last, but not least: The Coaches are fitted with the **Silent Guide** service—a simple method which enables passengers to 'know as they go' all the places of interest passed en route.



National eventually acquired the coach tours businesses of both Harding and Hocking in 1928. The purchase of Trelawny Tours did not include the Silent Guide business which Harding continued to run and National continued to use into the 1950s. On 1 January 1928, National had also acquired Devon Motor Transport which operated in Cornwall as Cornwall Motor Transport with its main base in Truro. When the Western National Omnibus Company Ltd was formed on 1 January 1929 as a joint venture between the Great Western Railway and National combining their respective road motor bus and coach interests, the resulting company became the dominant operator in Cornwall and continued to swallow up other competitors.

Former 1930 Royal Blue AEC Regal coach No. 3630 (LJ1915), rebodied by Duple as a 32 seat touring coach in 1938, is seen in this early 1950's view together with a 1949 Bedford OB about to depart on tour. Both drivers appear to be giving an introduction to their passengers before they set off. The coaches are outside Penzance's Pavilion Theatre on the Promenade, just west of the tours booking office.



An early tours booklet in the TV&GWOT archive produced by the National Omnibus & Transport Company in 1928 describes 54 different tours from Plymouth one of which (Day Tour No 9) was to Penzance where St Michael's Mount, the Morrab Gardens, Penzance harbour and the Newlyn Art Gallery were the principal attractions.

A similar Western National routes and tours booklet for the Cornwall Area published in the early 1930s lists 37 different tours from Penzance and 35 from St Ives licenced to the company. West Penwith destinations were clearly popular with separate afternoon and evening tours from Penzance to Land's End, Gurnards Head & St Ives, Lamorna & Porthcurnow, Pendeen Lighthouse, Praa Sands, Hell's Mouth and Eagle's Nest. The 'Five Lions' Day Tour took the traveller to see Trerryn Dinas (Logan's Rock), Land's End, Cape Cornwall, Gurnards Head and St Ives. An appreciative traveller is quoted as saying "We have been face to face with five Cornish lions and realise that they are indeed of a royal race".



Tours leaflets from the 1930s. **Left** is an example from 1935 with a Leyland Tiger bus on the front advertising tours from Penzance and Marzion. On the **right** is a 1939 example with an up-to-the-minute depiction of the most modern touring coach as also illustrated above.

It is interesting to discover from the archives how the programme of day, half day and evening tours evolved over the years in response to demand, competition from car ownership, price inflation, the opening of new and upgraded visitor attractions, vehicle comfort, speed and reliability and the many other wider societal changes which influence every aspect of our lives. In carrying out this review we have been able to identify more than 100 printed documents – leaflets, brochures, booklets, travel guides – specifically relating to coach tours from Penzance and St Ives or to the area from other tourist and holiday centres in Cornwall & Devon, principally Plymouth, Newquay, St Austell and Truro.

The natural attractions of the Cornish Coast provided consistent tour destinations from the advent of motor coach tours in the early 1900s for over a century until the successors of GWR Road Motors and the 'National', First Devon & Cornwall, withdrew from day and part day touring in about 2005. In 1930 the adult fare for a day tour from Newquay to Land's End was 10/6 (52.5p) and to The Lizard including Mullion and Kynance Coves 9/- (45p). From Penzance a half day tour to Land's End could be enjoyed for 4/- (20p), the Five Lions Day Tour was 6/6 (17.5p) and evening tours to Pendeen Lighthouse, Hell's Mouth, Land's End or Gurnards Head and Zennor were half a crown (12.5p).



1948 Bedford OB No. 575 (HOD115) is seen in St Ives coach park, probably having brought a tour party from Newquay. It stands next to a similar vehicle from the fleet of Kingsbridge Belle run by the Wellington family who later acquired Tally Ho Coaches. This was JFJ180 which had a Tiverton Coachworks body and had been acquired from Greenslades Tours of Exeter in 1953.

By the late 1930s new vehicles were arriving and more sophisticated publicity leaflets were being produced. The 1937 tours leaflet cover incorporated a crown and the words 'Coronation Year 1937' with a picture of a Mumford bodied Leyland Tiger. Another 1937 leaflet shows a new 25 seat Bedford WTB type touring coach, a type highly suited to the narrow winding lanes of the West Country. The driver was seated behind the front mounted engine in the main body compartment with his passengers (so-called 'normal control'). These small Bedfords were the first standard touring coaches for the National fleets with no less than 56 of the WTB type and 134 of its successor the Bedford OB being purchased new from 1937 to 1950.



This 1953 coach was a Bristol LS (Light Saloon) No. 1348 (LTA876) seen parked in the summer sunshine on the apron outside the Western National depot at Wherrytown (now Lidl) awaiting tour duty.
[© RHG Simpson]

The next Bristol coach chassis after the LS was the MW (Medium Weight) which was built from 1958 to 1967. Photographed at Newquay, 1395 (264KTA) was a 1962 model which introduced a new body style with glass quarter lights and stepped waist line in this attractive cream and green touring coach livery.



Although their main duties were tours and excursions for private parties, they were also pressed into service for Royal Blue express coach services on busy summer weekends to destinations such as Exeter, Cheltenham, Bournemouth and London.

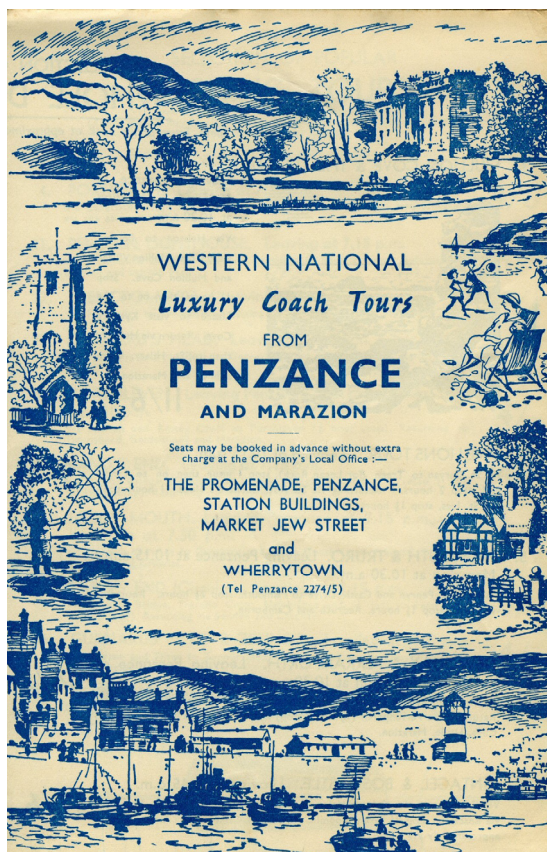


A 1954 leaflet advertising tours from St Ives depicts a Western National Bristol LWL coach which was wider and longer than earlier models providing additional capacity and comfort.

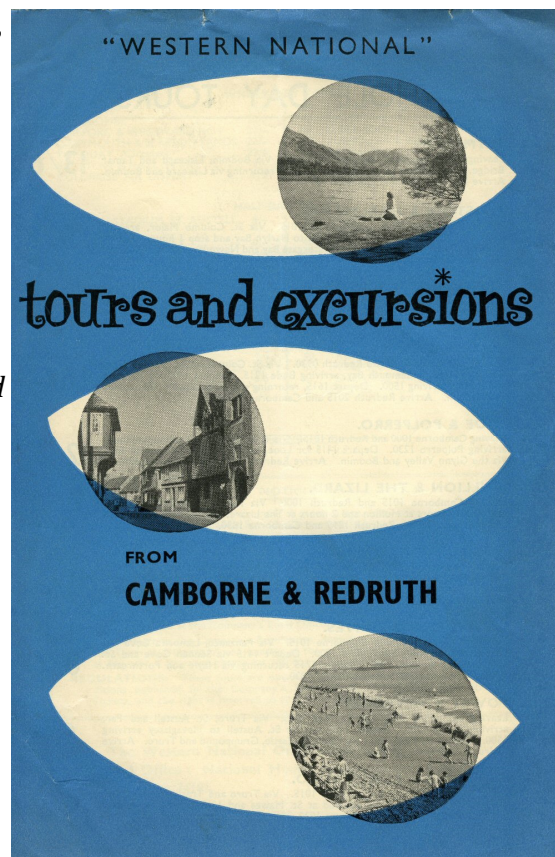
Prices, destinations, departure times and itineraries remained virtually unchanged until leisure tours were suspended shortly after the outbreak of World War II. On resumption of the touring programme after the war prices were increased by between 10-20% but inflation in prices remained low through the 1950s so that by 1961 the cost of the Five Lions Day Tour at 9/6 was still under 50p and evening tours were 4/- or 4/6 (20p or 22.5p).

Up until 1968 prices for all Day Tours remained under £1 and Half Day tours under 10/- (50p), the inflation rate in fares averaging out at between 2% and 4% with the higher rate applying to the shorter runs. The destinations served and routes travelled remained little changed over this period.

Although the West Country remained a favourite holiday destination, the Golden Age of coaching was drawing to a close primarily due to competition from the private car. In addition, during the latter part of the '60s and the 1970s price inflation rapidly increased. By 1980 the price of a half day tour from Penzance to Land's End reached £1 and evening tours averaged 80p (16/- in old money!)



Left: In the 1960s the graphic design of leaflets concentrated more on a stylised version of what might be seen on the tours than on the vehicles being used as illustrated by this 1961 Penzance & Marazion tours brochure printed in a single colour. Designs changed each year and were used across the 'National' region from Penzance to Trowbridge in the North and Swanage in the East. **Right:** The 1965 design used eye shapes to illustrate attractive destination as in this Camborne & Redruth example.



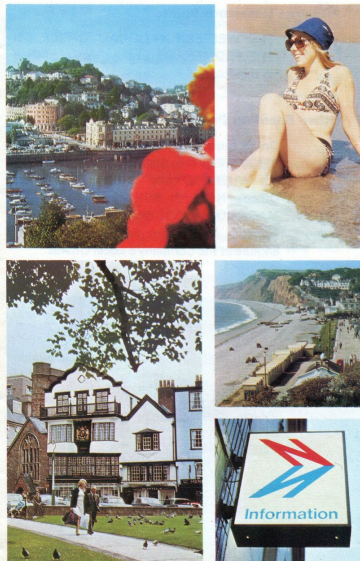
In the mid-1970s 41 seat Plaxton bodied Bristol LH dual purpose coaches were introduced, specially built to the narrow width of 7'6" required for the Devon and Cornwall routes. These were used on tours for limited periods in the summer months and then on stage carriage bus services for the remainder of the year so they could be used all year round rather than being laid up through the winter as many coaches had been in earlier times.

The author of this review experienced the delights of a coach tour, first hand in August 1974 as a passenger on Plaxton bodied Bristol RELH6G 2409 (PDV409M). It is seen **above** at Porthcurno and then again, **right**, at the most westerly point in mainland Britain rounding the snack bar at Land's End.



COACH TOURS from PENZANCE and MARAZION

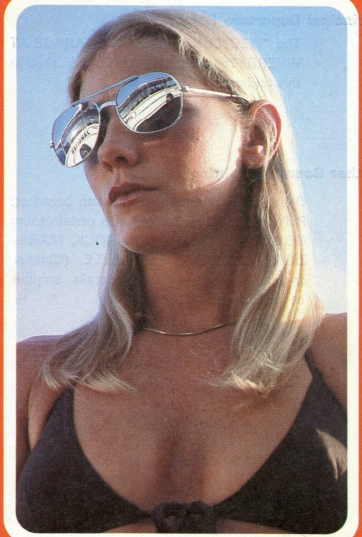
Below: Two Western National Leyland Leopards on tour, parked in St Ives bus station in the summer sun in 1992. On the left 3519 (YDV189S) is still in the second post-privatisation livery of blue, cream and red whereas 3544 is newly painted in Grenville of Cornwall livery. Grenville was taken over by Western National in 1988 and the name was continued for tours and private hire from Camborne for several years afterwards.



Left: Within the formation of the National Bus Company in 1969, publicity for coaching activities was centralised and, consistent with the times, a touch of glamour was added to scenes of attractive locations, but it has to be said that the illustrations had little relationship to the spectacular Cornish coastline!

Right: Glamour took over completely in 1980! Hopefully the somewhat surly demeanour is hiding her inner delight with being back on the Cornish Riviera and being dazzled by the coach reflected in her shades.

Coach Tours from PENZANCE and MARAZION 1980



Below: Royal Blue was the premier coach company, latterly under Western National ownership, providing luxury travel to the South West. Each year TV&GWOT invites preserved coaches to travel on original long distance routes. In 2015, 15 coaches descended on St Ives in quick succession, a challenge admirably managed by First Kernow supervisors.



Here Colin Billington's Bristol LL 1250 (LTA729) is flanked by RE 1460 (OTA632G), which is in service at Penzance today, and LS 2267 (56GUO).


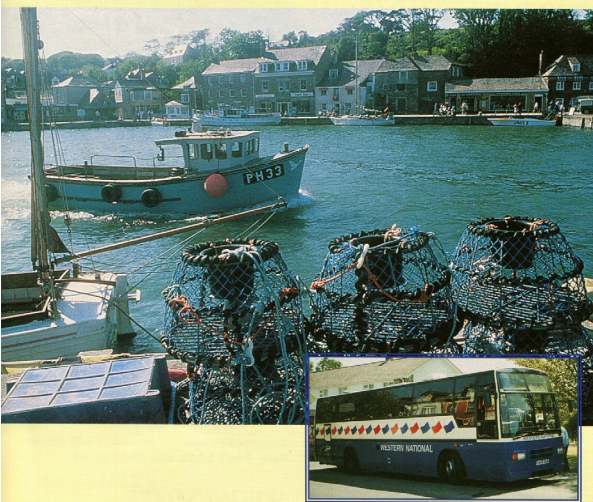


First Western National 2511 (UHW551) was a Van Hool bodied Volvo B10M acquired from Badgerline with several others in 1991. 2511 is seen here entering Penzance bus station with a tour party on 2 August 2000.

New attractions were included in tour programmes, the Helston Aero Park and Poldark Mine appearing in the 1986 Penzance tours programme and, in 1988, the new Land's End complex developed by Peter de Savary featured in Western National's Plymouth day tours programme at an inclusive price of £5 rising to £7.95 in 1992. The Helston Aero Park developed into Flambards Triple Theme Park featured in the coach tours programmes from 1995 onwards. Reduced fares for senior citizens and families were introduced from the late 1990s.

The photographic records and tours brochures in this review illustrate the wealth of fascinating information held in the growing TV&GWOT archive providing the basis for research and future articles.


Colin Billington

Coach Tours and Excursions from Penzance & St Ives

Easter to October 1995

The final examples from 1995 (left) and 2002 (right) reflect a more local focus and are consistent with the vehicle liveries and house styles of the time. It is a pity that a Plymouth fishing boat appears on a Penzance leaflet but the concept is more relevant to the tours on offer. When the Eden Project opened in 2001 hailed as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World', it immediately featured in local tours brochures as well as attracting coach parties from across the UK and Europe.



COACH excursions

from PENZANCE & ST IVES

