

FIFTY YEARS OF COACH TOURS IN AND AROUND THE SOUTH HAMS

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. In the Kingsbridge area these tours started from Dartmouth, Kingsbridge, Salcombe and Hope Cove as well as from the company's main base for its South Devon and East Cornwall Area in Plymouth.



Fascinating detail from a late 1920s postcard at Hope Cove. Two all weather coaches and a small charabanc are parked outside the Hope & Anchor while their passengers enjoy a brisk walk or a paddle. [All images from the TV&GWOT / Colin Billington Collection]

Our 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 Kingsbridge as well as tours from other holiday centres to the South Hams where popular destinations were Dartmouth, Blackpool Sands, Slapton Sands, Salcombe, Hope Cove and Bigbury-on-Sea.

An early tours booklet in the TV&GWOT archive produced by the National Omnibus & Transport Company in 1928 describes 54 different tours from Plymouth. This is particularly interesting as it was soon after the acquisition of Devon Motor Transport (DMT) by National but before the formation of the Western National Omnibus Company in 1929. DMT had an extensive network of bus routes radiating from the city to Tavistock, Ivybridge, Totnes, Yealmpton, Ermington and Wembury, together with frequent local



A visiting tour from the Grey Torpedo Cars of Torquay by a solid-tired charabanc complete with driver, conductor and 16 passengers dressed for any eventuality.



Cover design from 1928 for National tours from Plymouth.



Early 1930 Western National guide to bus routes and tours in South Devon. Similar books were produced for all areas across the West Country.

services to Crownhill, Plympton and Tamerton Foliot. DMT also had a significant share of the tours and excursions in the Plymouth area dating from their acquisition, in 1927, of RH Baker's REX charabanc tours. National tours from Plymouth to the South Hams included Day Tour No.20 to Slapton Sands and Half Day Tours No.5 to Salcombe, No.6 to Dartmouth and No.15 to Bigbury-on-Sea. The Crowing Cock Restaurant at Torcross had an advert in the booklet and could cater for charabanc parties as it had a seating capacity of 275.



The Crowing Cock restaurant was a favourite stopping point at Torcross seen with a variety of touring cars and coaches awaiting their passengers in the late 1920s.

The Thames Valley & Great Western Omnibus Trust

Island House in Kingsbridge, with bunting for Kingsbridge Fair, was the headquarters of E & BR Noyce with boards displaying tours to Bude, Bridport Bay, Teignmouth, Lyme Regis, Weston-super-Mare and many other destinations. When Western National acquired Noyce's coach business in March 1933, it continued to use Island House until February 1936 when it moved to 15 Duke Street.



A similar Western National routes and tours booklet for the South Devon and East Cornwall Area published in the early 1930s lists 67 different tours from Kingsbridge licenced to the company. Dartmoor destinations were clearly popular with separate tours to Becky Falls, Lydford Gorge, Princetown, Haytor Rocks and Widecombe-in-the-Moor. 42 tours were authorised from Salcombe and Hope Cove and 11 from Dartmouth. Kingsbridge is described as *"a good centre and many interesting places are accessible from it. It is the starting point for several omnibus services to Hope Cove, Thurlestone, East Portlemouth, Salcombe, Slapton Sands, Torcross etc. There are interesting churches in both Kingsbridge and Dodbrooke, the older part of the town. In the former some very necessary improvements have been made in recent years, and there has also been brought to light a church warden's staff 150 years old. This bears the arms of Kingsbridge in oxidised silver, and experts acclaim it to be the earliest specimen of this treatment of metal. The local Museum is worth a visit."*

"Kingsbridge is a bright and busy market town. The charter for the market was granted in 1257, and it has been held without a break ever since".

Page 37 has advertisements for the *"Anchor Hotel, Proprietor: R Strong"* and *"A Pierce, Baker and Confectioner – Tea Rooms, cold luncheon. All cakes etc. made in our own bakery"*.

It also has an entry for Salcombe which includes *"Its many old attractions make a lasting impression on those who live here either permanently or for a holiday and are so different from the noisy garishness of the better known holiday resorts."*

Following the acquisition of the excursions, tours and private hire business of E & BR Noyce on 8 March 1933 together with their depot at Rack Park and use of the booking and enquiry office at Island House, Western National offered an extensive tours programme from Kingsbridge, Salcombe, Hope Cove and Thurlestone. A leaflet from 1935 announced that booking could be made (without extra charge!) at Island House, the Kingsbridge GWR Station or Marsh & Co, 5 Fore Street, Salcombe (Tel No.18). This was for the period from Monday 5th August to Sunday 18th August and scheduled one full day tour and one half day tour daily from Sunday to Friday with just a single day tour on Saturdays. Destinations included *"Torquay and up the River Dart"*, Dartmouth, Buckfast Abbey, Okehampton and Lydford Gorge, Looe and Polperro, and Bigbury-on-Sea. Day tours were generally around 9/- (45p) per person and afternoon tours between 3/- (15p) and 5/- (25p) with 1/- more charged for tours from Salcombe, Hope or Thurlestone.

Through the late 1920s and '30s, a wide variety of new and second hand vehicles from the many smaller operators acquired by Western National were operated. In the mid '20s



MOTOR COACH TOURS

— FROM —

**KINGSBRIDGE, THURLESTONE
HOPE, SALCOMBE**

SEATS MAY BE BOOKED IN ADVANCE

(WITHOUT EXTRA CHARGE)

AT THE

COMPANY'S LOCAL OFFICE

— **ISLAND HOUSE** —

OR

G.W.R. STATION, KINGSBRIDGE

Telephone: 22

**MARCH & Co., 5, FORE STREET
SALCOMBE**

Telephone: 18

— BE SURE IT'S A —

**WESTERN NATIONAL
GREEN LUXURY COACH**

THE

WESTERN NATIONAL

OMNIBUS • COMPANY • LIMITED

Associated with the Great Western Railway.

Head Office: 48/50, QUEEN STREET, EXETER.

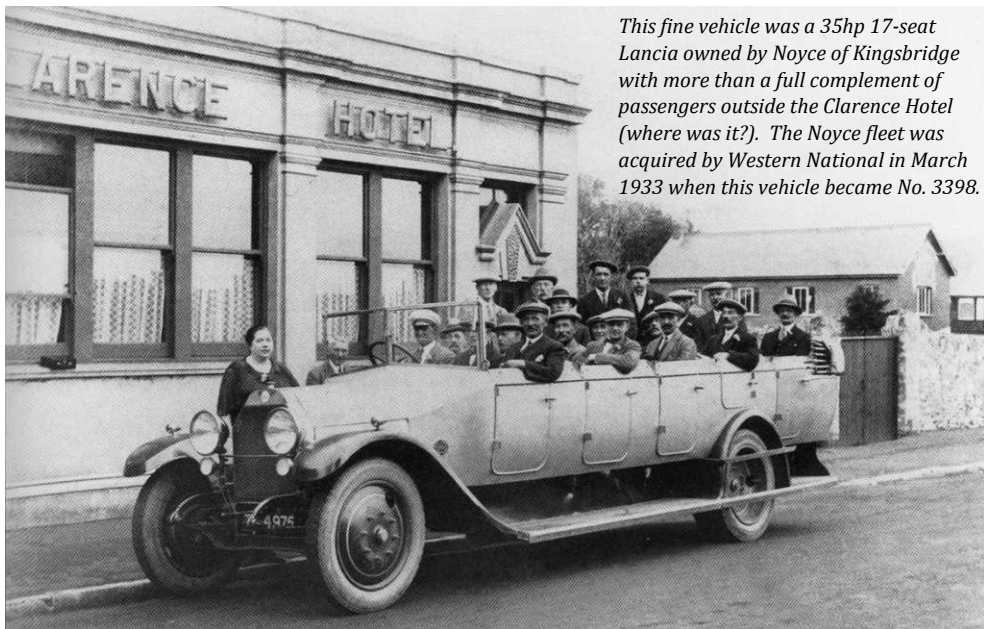
Telephone: EXETER 4191.

Telegrams: "NATCARCOM, EXETER."

A 1935 leaflet advertising tours from the Kingsbridge area. The reverse lists 25 different tours for the period 5-18 August covering Torbay, the South Hams, Dartmoor and SE Cornwall.

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 'sharrabang') 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 window 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.


One of the vehicles that Western National inherited from the Noyce fleet was TT4975, a Lancia 35hp 17 seat charabanc which was allocated fleet number 3398. A contemporary photograph of this is reproduced in this souvenir programme taken outside the Clarence Hotel with at least 20 people in addition to the driver all either already aboard or looking rather hopeful! If you happen to know the location please make contact with TV&GWOT and let us know.



This fine vehicle was a 35hp 17-seat Lancia owned by Noyce of Kingsbridge with more than a full complement of passengers outside the Clarence Hotel (where was it?). The Noyce fleet was acquired by Western National in March 1933 when this vehicle became No. 3398.

A brochure for Plymouth tours from 1937, the Coronation year of George VI, with a picture of a Leyland Tiger.

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 South Hams and Dartmoor. 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 between 1937 and 1950. 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. Between 1950 and 1962 when the last were withdrawn there was always at least one OB allocated to Kingsbridge depot. Records show that vehicle Nos. 536, 537, 539, 551, 558, 599, 1400, 1404, 1410, 1419 and 1420 were all allocated to Kingsbridge at various times in this period with 551 there from 1955-8, 558 in 1954/5 and 1958, 1410 from 1957 to 1962 and 1420 from 1954-6. Bedford OBs with bus bodies of which there were 35 in addition to the coaches were also used at Kingsbridge on the narrower routes to East Portlemouth, South Pool, Bantham etc.



Coronation Year 1937

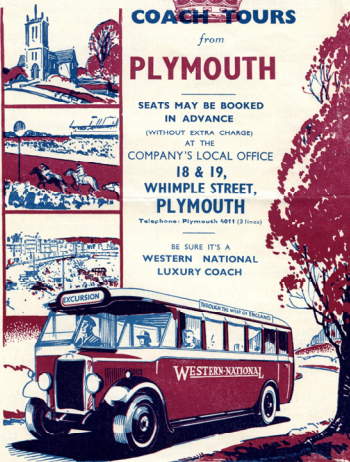
COACH TOURS

from

PLYMOUTH

SEATS MAY BE BOOKED
IN ADVANCE
(WITHOUT EXTRA CHARGE)
AT THE
COMPANY'S LOCAL OFFICE
**18 & 19,
WHIMPLE STREET,
PLYMOUTH**
Telephone: Plymouth 4811 (2 lines)

BE SURE IT'S A
WESTERN NATIONAL
LUXURY COACH



THE WESTERN NATIONAL OMNIBUS COMPANY, LIMITED.
Head Office—QUEEN STREET, EXETER.
Telephones: EXETER 4491/2, 3.
Telegrams: "NATCARCON, EXETER." B's. 22-4/37. 12000.



WESTERN NATIONAL

LUXURY COACH TOURS



TELEPHONE PLYMOUTH

4011

EXTENSION 10

TOURS FOR WEEK COMMENCING:
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12th.

Sunday, September 12th.	
9-0 a.m.	Grand Mystery Tour ... 12/6
10-30 a.m.	Long Day at Bigbury-on-Sea ... 4/6
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Sidmouth via Moors return via Coast ... 10/-
2-0 p.m.	Afternoon Tour to Westward Ho ... 7/6
2-30 p.m.	Afternoon Tour to Exmouth ... 7/6
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Brixham, Berry Head and Paignton ... 6/-
2-30 p.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey ... 8/6
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Manaton & Becky Falls return via Coast ... 6/-
3-0 p.m.	Afternoon Mystery Tour Home 6-0 ... 3/-
7-0 p.m.	Evening Mystery Tour Home 9-30 ... 3/-

Monday, September 13th.

10-30 a.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey Home 9-30 p.m. ... 6/-
10-30 a.m.	Pictureque Tour to Looe & Polperro Home 9-30 p.m. ... 6/-
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Bude and Clovelly ... 10/-
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Teignmouth via Moors return via Coast ... 7/6
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Dartmouth and Slapton Sands ... 6/-
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Widecombe-in-the-Moor and Haytor Rocks ... 6/-
3-0 p.m.	Afternoon Mystery Tour Home 6-0 ... 3/-

Tuesday, September 14th.

9-0 a.m.	Grand Tour to Cheddar Caves via Glastonbury and Wells ... 12/6
10-30 a.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey Home 9-30 ... 6/-
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Tintagel & Boscawen ... 8/6
2-30 p.m.	Pictureque Tour to Downdery & Looe ... 5/6
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Brixham, Berry Head and Paignton ... 6/-
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Brixham, Berry Head and Paignton via The Black Forest ... 7/-
3-0 p.m.	Afternoon Mystery Tour Home 6-0 p.m. ... 3/-

Wednesday, September 15th.

9-0 a.m.	Grand Tour to Lands End via Penzance ... 12/6
10-30 a.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey Home 9-30 p.m. ... 6/-
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Sidmouth via Moors return via Coast ... 10/-
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Bude & Clovelly ... 10/-
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Teignmouth via Dartmoor return via Torquay ... 7/6
2-30 p.m.	Pictureque Tour to Looe & Polperro Circular Tour to Brixham, Berry Head and Paignton ... 6/-
3-0 p.m.	Afternoon Mystery Tour Home 6-0 ... 3/-

Thursday, September 16th.

9-0 a.m.	Grand Tour to Minehead via the Exe Valley ... 12/6
10-30 a.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey Home 5-30 p.m. ... 6/-
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Exmouth via Moors return via Coast ... 8/-
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Tintagel & Boscawen ... 8/6
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Dartmouth and Slapton Sands ... 6/6
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Manaton & Becky Falls ... 6/-
2-30 p.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey ... 6/-
3-0 p.m.	Afternoon Mystery Tour Home 6-0 ... 3/-

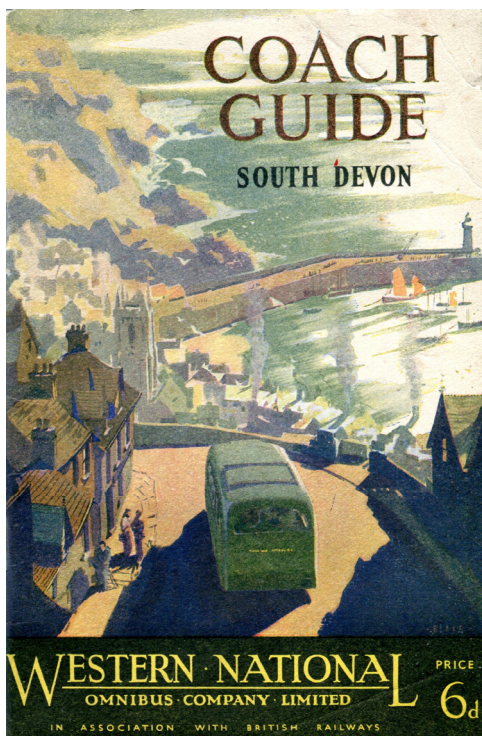
Friday, September 17th.

9-45 a.m.	Circular Tour to Torquay via Dartmoor ... 7/-
10-30 a.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey Home 9-30 p.m. ... 6/-
10-30 a.m.	Circular Tour to Bude and Clovelly ... 10/-
2-30 p.m.	Circular Tour to Brixham, Berry Head and Paignton ... 6/-
2-30 p.m.	Princetown, Dartmoor & Buckfast Abbey ... 6/-
3-0 p.m.	Afternoon Mystery Tour Home 6-0 p.m. ... 3/-

Saturday, September 18th.
For particulars inquire at Office.

Seats may be booked by Telephone, PLYMOUTH 4011, Extension 10, but must be claimed at least 30 minutes prior to time of departure. Tourists are requested to be in readiness for departure at the time of departure. Yelverton residents are respectfully requested to book their Seats at Messrs. Andrews, Leg of Mutton Corner, Yelverton.

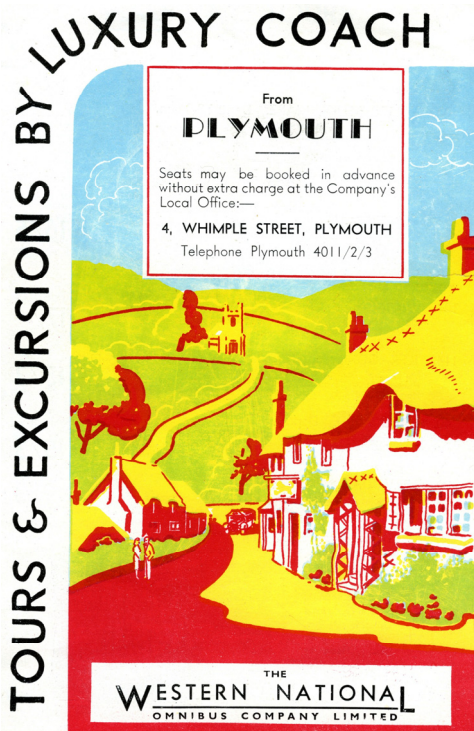
This tours leaflet shows one of the new Bedford WTBs, deliveries of which commenced in 1937. Tours included "Grand Tours" to Cheddar Caves, Minehead and Land's End which included lunch and tea, and a wide range of Dartmoor circular tours.



This South Devon Coach Guide (above) was published in 1948 by Western National in association with British Railways reflecting the nationalisation of the company along with the railways in 1947.



The Thames Valley & Great Western Omnibus Trust



A timeless design for the cover of this 1950 leaflet of tours from Plymouth which included new destinations such as Newquay with a 4 hour stay there, the round trip being 11½ hours at a cost of 12/3 (56p).



Above, an extract from a 1955 flyer for tours from Dartmouth with an illustration of a Bristol LS, which had a powerful Gardner 6HLW underfloor engine and shorter wheelbase improving the turning circle. One of these vehicles, No. 1376, will be in service today on a route to Blackpool Sands.

Left, a well used leaflet of tours from Salcombe illustrates the stylish full fronted Bristol LWL coaches delivered in 1951/2 to the new maximum dimensions of 8ft wide by 30ft long. The large size compared with earlier models resulted in the nickname 'Queen Marys' for the 26 vehicles of this type.

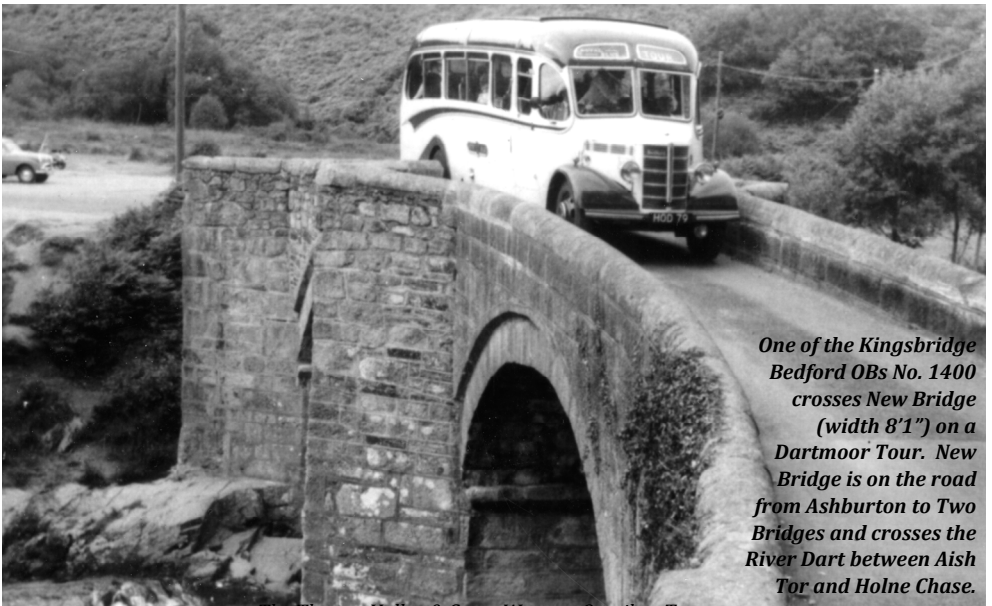


This postcard of Hope Cove is a very effective reproduction of a hand coloured black and white photo. Look carefully in the left centre where a Bedford OB is parked. Many of the later OB coaches received a mid-life refurbishment which included a repaint from the traditional tour coach livery of cream and green to Royal Blue cream and blue. Most were done in 1957 so this can be dated as late '50s/early '60s.

A blow up (right) of the previous picture shows the Royal Blue fleetname plates on the nearside and rear. This is probably a visiting coach from Plymouth, Dartmouth or further afield parked in the square while its passengers enjoy the seaside or stroll round to the Hope & Anchor.



During the 1950s, with the improved comfort, speed and reliability of the Bedfords, Day and Half Day Tours travelled further afield for example to Bude, a coastal tour as far as Lyme Regis, Sidmouth and Newquay. 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.



One of the Kingsbridge Bedford OBs No. 1400 crosses New Bridge (width 8'1") on a Dartmoor Tour. New Bridge is on the road from Ashburton to Two Bridges and crosses the River Dart between Aish Tor and Holne Chase.



Another South Devon based coach 1404 disembarks from the Torpoint Ferry on a tour to South East Cornwall, probably Looe and Polperro. This is also post mid-life refurbishment into Royal Blue livery.



This superb photo (left) is a detail of the panorama of Kingsbridge Bus Station which was used on the centrefold of our 2014 programme. Concentrating on the enquiry office and waiting room, a couple study the selection of tours on offer for the week. In the window under the TOURS sign are publicity posters and other tours marketing material.

The blow up (below) gives more detail of the window display with, on either side, a card sign post.



Above is a similar ('Southern' rather than 'Western' National) tour signpost which is part of the TV&GWOT archive collection.

In the later 1950s coach body styles took on a more continental appearance as exemplified by this 1959 Grey Cars Willowbrook bodied AEC Reliance delivered in this rather plain grey livery which was later embellished with more maroon and cream relief. TCR890 is seen parked at Torcross by the freshwater lake of Slapton Ley separated from the sea by a narrow shingle bank.



Between 1960 and 1962 a new type of coach was introduced by the National companies for West Country Tours. This was the 33 seat Bristol SUL4A which had a mid-mounted horizontal underfloor 4 cylinder Albion diesel engine giving high fuel economy, with up to 20m.p.g. achievable. One of these was allocated to Kingsbridge depot from 1962 onwards, the first being No. 420 which stayed until early 1968, then 426 until July 1969 and finally 424 which, after leaving Kingsbridge, remained at Totnes until being sold for preservation in December 1979. Remarkably all three Kingsbridge SUL coaches survive. 420 is preserved by TV&GWOT Trustee David Sheppard and 426 is a traveller's home somewhere near Andover. 420 can be enjoyed in service at today's Kingsbridge

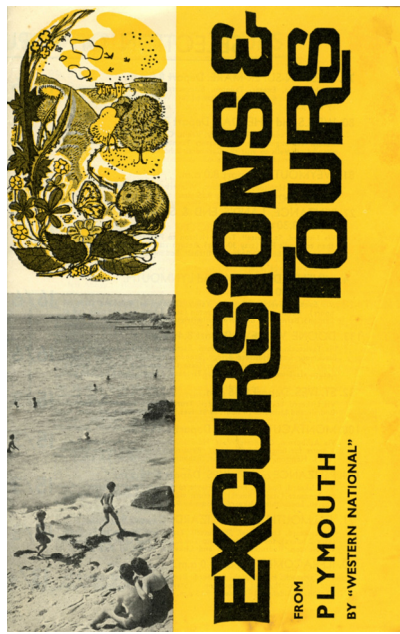
Running Day along with 425 and 434.



In the early 1960s the Bedford OBs were finally replaced after many years of reliable service by these Bristol SUL coaches also built to a width of 7'6" for use in the narrow Devon lanes. This is No. 420, the Kingsbridge coach from new in 1962 until February 1968. Here seen on a tour from Kingsbridge to Torbay at rest in Torquay Coach Station with passengers returning to continue their outing.



Here 420 lurks in Kingsbridge Bus Station ready to tour, partly obscured by Royal Blue Bristol MW No. 1408 bound for Bournemouth. A coach of this type was later owned by Tally Ho! (No. 1410) and used for tours. [© B Gibson]



These two illustrations are from Plymouth tours and excursions leaflets of 1963 and 1965 and typify the cartoon-like graphic design of the time.

Towards the end of the 1960s, the market for tours of the type described in this article diminished as car ownership was enjoyed by the majority of families coming on holiday to the area. The SUL coaches were modified for dual purpose use for both bus and coach work and renumbered in the 1200 series. Day and half day tours were now offered only in the larger seaside resorts. In the mid-1970s the remaining SUL coaches were replaced by 41 seat Plaxton bodied Bristol LH dual purpose coaches 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. In South Devon, West Country day and half day tours continued to be offered from Dartmouth well into the 1980s and from Plymouth just into the early years of this century.

Colin Billington



However, the pleasure of coach tours endures. Here Colin Billington's former Western National Bristol SUL No. 434 and preserved in its later Guernsey guise is seen crossing Shipley Bridge on the edge of Dartmoor during a Kingsbridge History Society outing in 2014. 434 along with 420 and 425 will be in service at today's event.