

THE MINIBUS MAESTRO

Harry Blundred, one of the most colourful and influential busmen of the 1980s and 1990s, died in Barbados on 23 August, aged 75. **DAVID LEEDER**, chief executive of Metropolitan European Transport and a former senior director with National Express and First, spent three memorable years working with him and recalls the experience of running high-frequency minibuses in Devon.

The first Devon General minibus, Carlyle-converted Ford Transit 7 (A927 MDV), has been preserved as a reminder of the years when Harry Blundred's ideas were put into action. TUDOR THOMAS



In late 1988 I spotted a recruitment advertisement in *Bus Business* that caught my eye like a discarded £5 note. 'Blundred Needs Some Brains', it said, 'apply Belgrave Road, Exeter'. Even in the buccaneering days immediately after deregulation, this was unconventional. I had to apply.

Several weeks later I found myself in Devon General's boardroom and my first encounter with Harry Blundred – chairman, managing director and 'proprietor' of Transit Holdings. A second interview followed rapidly, held – typically for Devon General then – in a pub. The job was mine.

To say that Harry Blundred was slightly unconventional is like saying Sir Brian Souter is slightly Scottish. Formal meetings were

rare. Control was exercised by frequent phone calls and walkabouts. He had no office as such, only the boardroom. Harry sat at one end of the long table, next to a huge phone, and I sat 15ft away at the other. The planning manager was regularly summoned by a thump on the office wall. A picture window looked out over the bus station, so we remained aware who paid our wages.

Blundred was the first person I knew well who owned a mobile phone. As early morning was one of his most creative periods, ideas sprang into life over breakfast and a constant stream of phone calls conveyed his latest thoughts on routes, fares, vehicles or strategy, well before his 09.30 arrival in the office. This allowed him to carry out vital

domestic chores like feeding Muscadet, his pet rat, or giving orders to his housekeeper, the unseen 'Mrs Thing'.

The secret of his success was his instinctive grasp of what passengers wanted. A rare talent. At Southdown in the 1970s, he was involved in such unusual practices (for the National Bus Company) as dual-door buses, rear number blinds and route branding. At City of Oxford Motor Services (COMS) he abandoned corporate livery and ran the London service as a 30min shuttle – twin heresies within NBC. All ideas that he reinvented and adapted at Devon General.

He had swept into Exeter from the traffic manager's post at Oxford, tasked by NBC with delivering the break-up of the Western National Omnibus Company. Small, and not sprawl, was once again beautiful. The rambling WNOC was split into four. Blundred was made general manager of the revived Devon General and his years at COMS set the direction for the new company.

COMS had spent the 1970s as a maverick. Instead of the county council micro-management and deficit financing almost universal in the 1970s, Oxford county and city councils took a different approach – the Balanced Transport Policy.

This meant parking controls, bus lanes and park-&-ride, but little bus subsidy. The buses had to rely on passenger revenue – a 1920s concept out of tune with the corporatist 1970s. Rather than collapsing, services in and around Oxford prospered, with a large fleet of mainly two-door double-deckers carrying healthy loads on a dense network of simple, high-frequency routes.

A cheeky request

Exeter was different – typical early 1980s everywhere-to-everywhere low-frequency services and complicated interworked timetables, with 30-odd Bristol VRs plus the odd vintage Leyland Atlantean. To keep things civilised, most buses were safely tucked away in time for the closing credits of *Crossroads*.

Blundred was appalled. Exeter is a compact, dense and thriving city. If Oxford could have buses every 8min on major corridors, why couldn't Exeter? A cheeky request for 30 dual-door Leyland Olympians was sent into NBC headquarters and quickly rejected.

Time has burnished many people's memories of the regulated era, but by 1983 rising subsidies and falling patronage were typical. The strategists at NBC could see that a point would arrive in some companies when a mythical last passenger made an annual, ceremonial journey and the staff could spend the rest of the year tending their allotments. Something Had To Be Done.



Harry Blundred returned to Oxford from 1987 to 1997 with Thames Transit, operating minibuses and Oxford Tube-branded express coaches in competition with City of Oxford. In this May 1997 view, London-bound 9 (M103 XBW), a Berkhof-bodied Volvo B10M, manoeuvres between a Ford Transit and Mercedes-Benz minibus in Gloucester Green bus station.

Harry Blundred took his minibus experience to Australia in 1995, where his Sunbus business won route concessions in parts of Queensland. This Custom Coaches-bodied Mercedes-Benz LO814 was new in 1996 and employed the dual-door layout he had adopted in England to reduce bus stop dwell times. JOHN VENN

Blundred said he received a phone call from NBC regional director John Hargreaves (known in DG as Joe Maplin) and was told: 'You can't have 30 Olympians, but you can have 50 minibuses'.

In 1982 Anthony Shepherd, the former Hong Kong traffic commissioner, had applied to operate an HK-type jitney service in London. Even with Mrs Thatcher in Downing Street, London Transport and NBC were having none of that and saw Shepherd off in

agreement with the union, for the Tiverton Town service, a 12-seat Mercedes-Benz.

What arrived in 1984 was no.7 (A927 MDV) – quickly dubbed *Little Willie* – a Ford Transit bread van with holes punched in the side by Midland Red's Carlyle Works and 16 seats fitted where the baps would have gone. A wedge-of-cheese livery with a black skirt, bright yellow flash and NBC poppy red bonnet and roof disguised its shape. The second prototype Transit, no.8, was converted by PMT – an even

maintained by semi-skilled labour from the car trade. Spare bus ratios were slashed as the Transits proved amazingly robust and durable. Many ran for 10 years.

Two objectives

The Exeter experiment had two objectives. The first was to find out what would happen if a Hong Kong-style minibus service were unleashed against one of NBC's own operations. For this reason one of the routes (Heavitree Road) was initially 'in competition' with the DG VRs. The second was to find out what would happen if minibuses replaced a standard bus service altogether.

Passenger numbers responded immediately. Minibuses were not a cheap fix. The costs per bus were considerably lower, but they ran far more bus miles. Total costs went up, so the experiment only made financial sense if patronage and revenue were substantially increased. Luckily they were. The VRs and Leyland Nationals were quietly phased out.

By 1989, Exeter had an incredibly intensive service for a city of 100,000 people. Most daytime routes ran every 5 or 7min, but routes overlapped so most stops had a bus every 3 or 4min. Evening services ran at 15 or 20min intervals until well after 23.00.

Good use was made of the minibuses to reach the heart of housing areas and everything operated as hail-&-ride. The original marketing name planned for the network had been Maxi Taxi and not MiniBus. New housing areas were served by frequent services well before most homes were occupied. The park-&-ride sites at Matford and Sowton were next to industrial estates, balancing the morning peak loadings into the city with decent loads of estate workers travelling outbound.

It is fair to say that the public hated the vehicles but loved the service. The Transits were cramped, with narrow seats (three-cheekers we called them), but they allowed the operation of a hugely improved timetable.

What arrived in Exeter was a Ford Transit bread van with holes punched in the side and 16 seats fitted where the baps would have gone

the traffic courts. But 'Maplin' and other NBC panjandrum wanted to give the idea a try before somebody else did. Blundred's request arrived at the right time. Surely here was the man to put the idea into practice. NBC would underwrite any losses.

Exeter was ideal for the trial. Conventional thinking was that the best bus territory was in the big cities, but Exeter was typical of many NBC towns. Furthermore, the city services received no direct subsidy.

It was not necessary to spend years persuading the mandarins at Devon County Hall to give permission for such a radical experiment. DG had been an early adopter of the Timtronic computerised ticket machine, which would allow the passenger reaction to be easily and scientifically monitored.

Finally, the trade union — the National Union of Railwaymen, not the Transport & General Workers — was open to an approach. Its people were pragmatists. The minibus drivers would be paid less, but there would be many more of them and they would pay the (full) union subscription and help recoup the members lost as British Rail pruned staff levels. To make matters easier, DG already had a minibus

more curious vehicle with windows like the portholes of a midget submarine.

The traditionalists within Devon General were horrified. These were not proper buses. 'Give 'em six months before they fall to pieces' was the expert consensus. But to an older generation, the few surviving old soldiers who remembered the pre-regulation era, *Little Willie* did not look so strange.

It was what Harry called 'an agricultural vehicle' – his ideal bus. It had a simple chassis with a manual gearbox and the engine in the right place (at the front). It could be maintained with a spanner and decent sized hammer. The later Mercedes-Benz 709Ds and 811Ds were similar in size and mechanical layout to the Leyland Lions that were a national standard when the UK bus industry was a Google-like powerhouse of innovation.

Transits had been used on such services as LT's Hampstead dial-a-ride for about 10 years and were invariably criticised for their short component life. Harry realised that this did not matter. The parts were mass produced and cheap, and could be changed quickly – in many cases overnight, and in some cases during driver breaks. And they could be

The colour coding was an immediate hit, further enhanced by colourful destination blinds and a high standard of roadside information.

The minibuses required different operational disciplines. A 16-seater is a wonderful thing provided you are not the 17th passenger. Even small delays on a 2min frequency opened up gaps, which led to passengers swamping the next bus and passengers being left behind.

The answer was active radio control. Our drivers were good at reporting passengers being left behind and extra buses were inserted into the service when things started to go wrong. Passengers could also be kept informed that there really was another one on its way.

Blundred favoured the talk-through system, where all drivers heard all radio traffic (as could passengers), to promote team spirit and communication. The drawback was that talk-through could be abused. Several months were spent searching without success for the mysterious 'chicken driver' whose repertoire of avian noises became legendary and disruptive.

Equally bizarre was the Exeter man who woke up one morning believing he was a bus inspector. Dressed in an official-looking overcoat and carrying a mocked-up radio handset, he convinced numerous passengers and some staff that he was in charge, before a restraining order was granted to keep him away from the buses.

Blundred's approach to planning was distinctive. In the old days, estates were linked across the city to maximise rostering efficiency on infrequent routes.

The high frequency operation simplified

scheduling. The minibuses linked housing areas of similar socio-economic character – never again would Exeter passengers have to sit on a bus next to their social superiors.

Buses were kept on one route, and drivers with one bus, all day. This aided reliability and contained traffic problems to the routes directly affected. Changeovers only took place at the terminals or city centre. This made it easier to accommodate last minute changes to driver breaks, and passengers never had to wait for a replacement driver. Drivers also were allowed to take their buses home for lunch.

Another crucial Harry-ism

Another crucial Harry-ism was that Devon General was a High Street retailer. He understood that no one wants to go to a bus station. The strength of the city service was our direct access to shops, employment and leisure facilities centred on the High Street, which buses and pedestrians shared. It also provided a convenient interchange hub.

Huge effort went into maintaining operational discipline in the city centre – which had over 200 minibuses per hour at peak times – and reminding the city fathers of the benefits that high quality public transport was bringing.

Once the red minibus unit reached 30 buses, a second operation coded blue was started, then a third, the greens. Each had its own buses, drivers, inspectors and manager, and Blundred fostered a healthy rivalry between them. By 1989 well over 100 minibuses were on the road, and passenger numbers had doubled.

A similar operation was started in Torbay in 1986 but this showed the limitations of the concept. The 16-seaters struggled to cope

with huge seasonal fluctuations in demand and the more complicated geography of Torbay made the network harder to market. Even here the patronage growth was impressive.

By the time I arrived, Blundred had led the first management buyout from NBC on 19 August 1986 and Transit Holdings had been created as an umbrella company, starting Thames Transit in Oxford in 1987.

His next move was to rethink DG's country network. In 1988 these were still being run by a hodgepodge of VRs, Leyland Nationals, Leopards and Bristol LHs that were expensive to maintain and would be costly to replace. The core market was subordinated to school journeys and diversions to serve remote villages.

He applied the city principles to country routes, this time using 23-seat Mercedes-Benz 709Ds. The school journeys were separated out, while the core network was ruthlessly pruned and simplified.

Back then, congestion was much more isolated and full advantage was taken of the superior acceleration of the Mercedes to reduce running times. So a relatively small fleet delivered an intensive timetable (on the main flows at least) and frequencies were radically improved from Exeter to places like Teignmouth, Tiverton and Exmouth.

Another ancient tradition was revived, and DG closed country depots and outstationed the Mercedes overnight in pub car parks. The results were impressive – lower costs, higher frequencies, faster journeys, more passengers.

The Transits are long gone and so now has Harry Blundred, but many of his fresh ideas – simple networks, high frequencies, day tickets, route branding – have become today's bus industry common sense. ■

Harry Blundred: a unique busman's lifetime

Harold Davies Blundred was born Stoke on Trent 19 September 1941.

Joined Potteries Motor Traction 1962 as conductor. Assistant to traffic manager East Midland 1969; joined Southdown 1970 as traffic development officer; left 1979 as deputy traffic manager; City of Oxford traffic manager 1979-82; general manager Devon General 1983-86. With four colleagues, set up Transit Holdings to buy Devon General for £3.4million August 1986.

Launched Thames Transit, Oxford March 1987, later acquiring ex-NBC company South Midland. Abandoned August 1988 launch of Basingstoke Transit, turning business rivalry with Stagecoach into friendship with Brian Souter.

Docklands Transit operated commercial minibus routes in east London March 1989 to November 1990; later won London Transport tendered routes. Portsmouth Transit started January 1991, acquiring business Stagecoach ordered to sell and converts to minibuses.

Appointed OBE June 1994 for services to bus industry. Focused attention on Australia from 1995, when his Sunbus business



won operating rights in Queensland, using minibuses.

Sold Devon General to Stagecoach January 1996, Portsmouth Transit to FirstBus March 1996, Thames Transit, Docklands Transit



and Australian schoolbuses to Stagecoach July 1997. Remaining Sunbus operations sold between 2000 and 2008. In retirement, lived latterly in Barbados and French Riviera. His wife Sarah survives him.