

Isle of Wight County Press online

All Aboard for Festive Spirit – by Charlotte Hofton



The Community FYT Bus at the Moa Place car park, with volunteer John Daniels.

As you may have gathered from my Christmas grouch a couple of weeks ago, I am not always the Sugar Plum Fairy when it comes to the excesses of Christmas.

Indeed, I'm afraid the Acid Lemon Cynic comes to the fore quite often at this time of year.

But enough of that. Today I am skipping about with cheeriness as I bring you exactly the kind of heartwarming story that makes Christmas worthwhile. Better than that, it's a story that is not just for Christmas but a year-round tale of kindness, community spirit and simple gifts which put human needs before material wealth.

It's the story of a bus. Quite an ordinary bus which trundles from Monday to Friday around West Wight, driven by ordinary people and used by ordinary people doing ordinary things. Shopping, doctors' appointments, visiting their relatives in care homes, a trip out to lunch. Nothing spectacular, no celebrities, no exotic foreign travel.

And yet the FYT (Freshwater, Yarmouth, Totland) community minibus service, which has just celebrated its third anniversary, is a shining example of what can be achieved by consideration for people's needs in the community and the willingness to give time and kindness to others.

The service was the brainchild of Adrian Harris and Michael Craig, who realised that with public bus services diminishing and, in any case, not necessarily covering areas where residents needed it most, there was a need for a route and a service that would be of real benefit to the larger communities in West Wight.

Since 2011, and with funding from donations from public bodies and individuals, that idea has blossomed into a regular bus service operated and maintained entirely by volunteers, providing not only a highly efficient method of serving the community but generous friendship and, arguably, an absolute lifeline for some of its passengers.

While those volunteers who run the service do so with a professionalism that would put many public services to shame, it is the atmosphere of consideration for human needs that is most evident as the three FYT buses travel for five days a week through its three routes.

Its timetables have been carefully worked out to cover as wide a remit as possible through the areas in and around Freshwater, Yarmouth and Totland.

While the bus is available to all, a substantial proportion of its customers are elderly and so the bus goes to roads where residents would otherwise find it hard or impossible to walk to a bus stop, covers care homes and doctors' surgeries and stops at supermarkets with convenient timings for return trips. When I take a trip with the FYT bus, there's a perceptible atmosphere of friendliness among its passengers and the volunteers on board. The regulars are greeted by name and helped where necessary as they board and alight. Many of them say the bus has made a vital difference to their lives.

"We can't do without it," says Daphne Tondeur, who is able to board the bus right by her home and make regular visits to her husband, who is in a nursing home. No stress, an easy journey and a lifeline for Daphne and her husband, who would otherwise see each other far less often.

Others are shopping, going for doctors' appointments, or just enjoying the ride.

The volunteers tell me it's been known for some passengers to go twice round the route, because they enjoy the comradeship so much.

Adrian Harris recalls one IW lady was on the bus every day for a week, getting off at cafes and restaurants, visiting Fort Victoria.

"She'd made it her holiday, coming on the bus and treating herself to a daily outing," he said.

The timetable is run with strict punctuality but there is leeway, where time permits, to help a customer take their shopping inside their door, or make an unscheduled stop on the route where somebody is waiting outside their house.

In addition to the scheduled routes, there are regular excursions, into Newport or to see seasonal attractions, such as the Brighstone Christmas Tree Festival.

The weekday services are free to bus-pass holders, with residents' discounts available on the standard fare of £2.50. Almost everybody who travels free puts something in the bus's collecting jar. And that's because they know how vital this service is.

It performs a practical service with humanity but it cannot survive on goodwill alone.

The FYT bus is always looking for more volunteers, either as drivers (special training is provided) or helpers on the bus and in their office.

And it always needs money to keep on the road. Fuel alone costs £1,000 a month and they would love to replace their fleet of Peugeot minibuses with vehicles more suited to journeys with frequent stops.

If you would like to help this heartwarming story to continue on the Island, either as a volunteer or through a donation, it would be a really worthwhile Christmas gesture. Better than all that glitzy tat everyone's frantically buying for no apparent reason, apart from the fact they've gone off their heads.

For details of the FYT bus scheme, ring 752917 or visit their website on www.fytbus.org.uk

And if you're in West Wight and feeling in need of some cheer, take a trip on the FYT bus. You don't need anywhere to go in particular.

It's simply a journey to contentment and it restores one's faith in human nature.