

## Basil S Williams aka 'Basil the Bus'

by Christine Bury

'Bone shaker', 'comfortable ride', these are just two of the remarks made by locals who recall the bus services and excursions run by the Hants & Sussex company in the nearly 60 years of its operation under the leadership of Emsworth businessman, Basil Williams.

Born in 1914, Basil's interest in buses began at an early age when as a schoolboy he rigged his bicycle out as a bus. He lived in Southleigh Road and while travelling from Emsworth to Farlington each day Basil nurtured the idea of running bus services himself. He was an avid bus watcher and timetable enthusiast – a bus spotter rather than a train spotter!

The would-be entrepreneur became interested in the RAF's development of Thorney Island and realised its potential for a bus service running between Emsworth and Thorney Island. A Hawker Fury fighter had crashed on the island in 1933 and a subsequent investigation revealed that the green fields of the flat island would make an ideal site for an RAF base. Within two years work on the base began and the first 400 airmen moved into RAF Thorney Island in March 1938.

In the meantime Basil, aged just 22, set up Hants & Sussex Motor Services Ltd in April 1937. He had already applied to the South Eastern Traffic Commissioner without success for the right to run buses on certain routes and had thus begun his life-time business rivalry with Southdown Motor Services Ltd.

The first coach ordered by the Hants & Sussex was a Dennis Lancet capable of carrying 32 passengers. The livery was black and cream and its first job was a religious sisterhood outing. The new bus was destined for the Emsworth-Thorney Island route but administrative delays meant it was not used for that purpose until early 1939. In the



meantime, Basil provided a vehicle for all the RAF's requirements such as transport to away football matches.

Between 1937 and 1939 as the new company became more established, contract and private work increased. Basil negotiated the purchase of the first of several companies and so acquired licences to operate in various local areas. He also bought more coaches, often second hand. Once war started and the pressure increased on buses and the transportation of servicemen, Basil acquired his first double decker bus and expanded his bus fleet. He was still doing mainly contract work, particularly for the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, taking servicemen on a daily basis between training camps. One of the difficulties at this time was the supply of professional drivers, many of whom were called up, and often itinerant drivers had to be used. Conductors, however, were easier to find. Hants & Sussex were one of the first bus companies in the area to employ young women in this role.

The increasing number of buses and coaches meant a greater amount of maintenance was needed and this took place at Emsworth's Sultan Road depot located on Eades coal yard. By 1942 the fleet stood at 15 vehicles. An advertisement in *Commercial Motor* in 1942 offered bus drivers 1/8d and coach drivers 1/7d an hour.

A year later Basil Williams, after much discussion with fellow directors and staff, decided to change the fleet livery to maroon and Julian red with cream relief, partly

because no other operator in the area used these colours. The staff uniforms changed from green to navy blue with red piping.

Working conditions were frequently difficult and hazardous, often involving journeys without headlights in the blackout under direct instructions from the Admiralty and the War Office.

The company continued to extend its services during the war but the build-up to D-Day gave rise to the biggest contract yet. The workforce building the Mulberry Harbours operated 24 hours a day in three shifts. Hants & Sussex took one shift in and brought the other back three times a day.

1944 was memorable for another reason for in that year Basil married Irene Savage.

Following the end of the war Basil Williams built up his organisation quickly. He purchased a shop at 66 North Street, Emsworth in September 1945 to house the Secretary's office and accounts staff. In the front was a public booking office that served the whole group because Basil continued to acquire other companies thus enabling expansion into more areas in Hampshire and West Sussex.

Management, financial and health problems beset him in the early 1950s and the fleet had reduced from 40 in 1952 to 23 in 1953. In September 1954 Basil and his wife resigned from the boards of all the companies, with one exception, within the group. The couple were still shareholders but could no longer control events. Companies and buses were sold and the Hants & Sussex company was legally wound up in 1961.

But this was not the end of Basil's involvement with buses. Southern Motorways was formed, new and second hand buses and coaches were gradually purchased and operations began afresh. The Hants and Sussex logo could still be seen on the fleet. 1966 was a great year. A new 52 seater coach was bought and Basil purchased Hollybank House.



*Among those present at the opening of the Emsworth town service in 1949 were Basil Williams; Mr Lewis, chairman of Havant UDC; Mrs Williams and baby Vivian; and Alan Lowe (the company's accountant)*

Deregulation of bus services in 1986 meant that bus operators no longer had to register all the bus services which they proposed to operate without any financial support with the Traffic Commissioner. Instead County Councils were charged with putting all services that they wished to operate out to competitive tender. Basil decided to continue running all services currently offered. He was still buying and selling buses, acquiring new routes, dropping others. A long term residency came to an end though in December 1990 when he moved vehicles and maintenance from the Sultan Road depot after 52 years. A temporary home was found at Southleigh Farm before a more permanent home was established in Leigh Park.

In 1992 after 55 years Basil decided to retire from day to day management of the regular bus and coach services. Financial and operational troubles still persisted and trading ceased in 1996. Basil died in June 1999 aged 85. The memory of riding his buses and coaches is still alive today, though, as local residents recall trips they made on Basil's 'bone shakers or comfy seats' on either a regular bus service or an excursion day trip.

*Source:*  
*Hants and Sussex The Basil Williams Story* by Alan Lambert. ISBN 9780957268555, Bowden Publishing.