

The Village that Refused **TO DIE**



Craig Stennett meets the
inspiring residents of
a village that fought hard
not to fade away

A grey dawn is slowly breathing light over the mountain skyline of Buttertubs and Fleet Moss into the pass between two mountains—the rural community of Hawes. It's a frozen Sunday morning and the UK Met Weather Office has issued a yellow alert for the North of England, predicting severe and hazardous weather conditions which will affect road and rail travel. Temperatures for the day have plummeted to a bone-chilling -4°C and snow is falling heavily, swirling around the roads and lanes of this isolated town. With a population of just 1,137, Hawes finds itself secluded at the head of Wensleydale in the Richmondshire district of North Yorkshire.

Dave Stephenson, 59, wrapped up tightly against the cold, pulls his 16-seat transit bus to a halt opposite The Board Hotel in the centre of town and waits for passengers to arrive. It's the Sunday service for the Little White Bus, linking up Hawes and other villages on his route to a connecting service to the rail link at Garsdale train station eight miles away.

"This run is a rural lifeline", says Dave. "We do this every morning, seven days a week so people can be dropped off at the station and I can pick arrivals up. I also cover the last trains of the day at Garsdale at 7pm. I have two other—what we call demand requests—today on top of my scheduled run. We're classed as a community bus, you see," he explains. "If it's on our regular route we can still be booked outside the normal running times, so people can catch

rail links or connections to other villages if needed."

Walter Head, a retired police officer and resident of Hawes for more than 20 years, is the operation manager. It's his job to keep the community bus service open for business, ensuring the connection between Hawes and surrounding villages as well as the adjacent route from Keld to Catterick.

It's Monday and Walter sits in a cramped but functional control room at the Upper Dales Community Partnership offices just off the Market Place in Hawes and is fielding numerous phone calls. It's proving to be a stressful start to the week. "We've got three buses off the road at present," Walter groans slightly. "Today it feels a bit like I'm trying to keep plates spinning in the air. But I'm proud to say that we've never," he repeats, "never lost a run and that's the way I'd like it to continue."



Previous pages: A sign for the Yorkshire village of Hawes, which is trying to make itself the most self-sufficient place in Britain

Above: The Little White Bus makes its way on its Swaledale shuttle route this time leaving Keld for next stop Muker.

Right: The Little White Bus driver Dave Stephenson waits at Garsdale Train Station for the arrival of the 10.35 Carlisle to Leeds train and the 10.45 Carlisle to Leeds train going in the opposite direction. Passengers from both trains wanting to then travel on to Hawes can do so on his Sunday service.





Back in 2011, Hawes' bus service to the Garsdale railway station was discontinued. Following an outcry from local residents and pressure from Hawes & High Abbotside Parish Council, the North Yorkshire County Council offered a subsidy of £25,000 and free use of one minibus to anyone who could restart the service. The local people of Hawes and its surrounding villages stepped up to the task and formed The Little White Bus Company. At its core that service is a reflection of the spirit of the surrounding community. A team of 60 volunteer bus drivers on call and eight paid part-time drivers have reduced the overheads drastically. It also operates a 4x4 Land Rover as part of a daily school run tackling some of the region's most challenging driving environments to collect and drop off school children on isolated farms. Giving credence to the rustic isolation of the area, Walter outlines the difficulties: "It's real off-road stuff along beds of rivers in parts. We sent Natasha Dinsdale, our Land Rover driver, on an off-road driving course,

Top: A Farmer and his sheepdog travel through Muker in The Yorkshire Dales National Park



Left: Filling up at the Dale Head Petrol Station now run by the local community in Hawes



Middle: At 90 years old, Basil Allen still works in the grocery shop his grandfather and great grandfather opened in 1925



Below right: Post Office manager Ella Dinsdale serves a customer at The Upper Wensleydale Community Office in Hawes

“You know that if you need help here, of any sort, the community will always come to you”

and she handles it all by herself up there now.” All in all, from a projected base of just 3,000 customers at its birth in 2011, the ten vehicles of the Little White Bus service now ferry some 65,000 passengers, locals and tourists alike, throughout the year.

Adjoining Walter's office is the shop front of the Upper Dales Community Office—the nerve centre of Hawes. It's a one stop shop of Post Office-cum-library, resource centre, community office, internet café and police office, plus a general meeting point and hangout destination to catch up on the neighbourhood's news for anyone. Jill McMullon, 57, is out front dealing with customers coming in at bang-on opening time to the community office, and full-time Post Office manager Ella Dinsdale, Hawes born and bred, is swiftly handling posting and parcels from the queue of early-morning arrivals. A local has brought in a lost wallet she found in one of the pubs to return it by registered post to its owner: “I googled his name and address, and



emailed him. He said it was OK to use some of the money inside to pay for postage,” explains the honest finder to Jill. Other parishioners are using the internet or browsing the library books: “They’re changed regularly”, Ella says, “and you can also pay your council tax here or draw cash from your bank account if needed.”

The phoenix-like revival of Hawes and the adjacent Dale communities can be traced back to 1992 when the town’s biggest employer, Wensleydale Creamery parented by Dairy Crest, threatened closure. Local Parish and County Councillor John Blackie, 68, picks up the story: “The creamery had been in operation since the 1950s with the original dairy factory going as far back as 1897. There’s no other major employer in town. It was vital that it stayed open.” A rescue committee was set up, and an eight-month campaign of naming and shaming Dairy Crest’s decision to close culminated in a management team buyout. The creamery re-opened. It has since gone from strength to strength. David Hartley, one of the original members of the management buyout and now managing director of the Wensleydale Creamery, explains the firm’s mission, which is clearly anchored into the

Top; Creamery managing director David Hartley

Bottom; John Blackie with Planning and Development Officer Richard Graham and Parish councillor John Watkin.

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local economy: “We have a genuine community spirit here. Thirty per cent of the parents of the children from the local school work with us. My wife works here. We still have over 40 dairy farmers that have been with us since the 1990s providing milk for the unique Wensleydale flavour.” David is also first to acknowledge that the success of Nick Park’s animated characters also helped to put Wensleydale on the map. “It was Christmas Eve 1996 when *A Grand Day Out* featuring Wallace and Gromit was first shown on BBC2. David Spoxton, owner of the production company, sent us a Christmas card out of the blue, saying, ‘You’ll see and hear something to your advantage by watching *Wallace & Gromit*.’ ”

It was of course a marketing department’s dream and the creamery hasn’t looked back. From a relaunch with 12 employees it now has 224. The name Yorkshire Wensleydale Cheese has protected status and a worldwide reputation. The creamery even boasts a visitor centre.



John Blackie is filling up his petrol tank at the Dale Head Garage in Hawes. The petrol station is the Upper Dales Community Partnership's latest acquisition and John has been the partnership's volunteer executive chairman for 20 years. It's the first community-run filling station in England and allows a vital service to remain in Hawes, the next filling station being a 36-mile round trip away. The rural rebate the area receives for fuel because of its isolation also helps. "We're as cheap as Tesco in Catterick" John is quick to point out.

John is heading over the Buttertubs pass into Swaledale and then on to the small village of Arkengarthdale on the east side of the Pennines. "20 years ago, when I started as a local councillor here, this village had a Post Office, bank, local shop and bus service. They've all gone, one by one," John says while

driving the twisting roads of the Dale. "It's still got a school with 13 pupils. If that goes, it's the death of the village. We're hoping to develop four new houses as part of an Upper Dales Community Land Trust. They'll be held in perpetuity by the village and never sold. Instead they'll be rented out affordably to families with young children to keep at least one of the pillars on which a community is built alive."

John continues, "What we strive for are local services run by and for local people. It helps that the character of the Dales has enhanced people's self-reliance and determination." John himself is a reflection of that fighting spirit. He's had a heart bypass, two bouts of cancer and has been hospitalised twice with pneumonia. "I like to think I've still got four or five years left in me yet," he mentions in passing, with a defiant smile.

A darts and dominoes league is taking place at The Fountain Hotel back in Hawes. Angus McCarthy, the licensee, is reminiscing while serving behind the bar. "You know I only popped in for a cup of tea 30 years ago and I ended up buying the place!"

Karen Winspear from a local farming family is helping out tonight and eloquently explains the spirit of the people of her town: "You know if you need help here, of any sort, the community will always come to you." A heartfelt reflection on this community within the Dales.