

BROTHER ON AN EPIC JOURNEY

Using only local buses, **John Green** travelled the length of Britain in aid of one of England's oldest almshouses

Why did you start this journey around Britain – and why use only local buses?

The ancient Hospital of St. Cross in Winchester has vacancies because people don't know what a wonderful place it is for a single male retiree, over 65, to live. Not only is it a strikingly beautiful place, with its 12-century chapel, with most of the other buildings dating from the 1450s, we have a community that enjoys each other's company, so you are alone only when you want to be. The principal reason for the trip was to raise awareness of the hospital – to let people know it was founded in 1132 and has provided accommodation to men for nearly 900 years – and the second was to try to raise some money for maintaining our chapel. Why by local bus? I have a bus pass!

What do you like about the almshouse?

I have lived here for about 10 years and I enjoy independent living, amidst a warm and entertaining community, with patient staff and trustees who endure our eccentricities with cheerfulness and a considerable degree of patience. I teach bookbinding three days a week and work in the Deanery Bookstall at the Cathedral on another day, so, as my children say, "it keeps him off the street".

Which bus route did you find the most beautiful?

Without question, the journey from Arisaig, on the west coast of Scotland, overlooking Skye, Eigg and Rhum, to Fort William – stunningly unspoiled – and then through Glencoe, along Loch Lomond to Glasgow. The buses I took all served local communities, leaving main roads to sweep off to the normally unvisited towns and villages along the road between two points. You can see more of the country from the upper deck of a bus than I'd imagined possible.



Which other almshouses did you visit on your seven-week journey?

In Chelmsford, Lowestoft and Durham, staying in each and, in Tiverton, for a weekend. I think Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association was the largest – 1,700 homes across 130 sites – and the smallest, Tiverton, with some 80 homes. All were beautifully maintained, with both new and old buildings, with communities that worked, with kind, interested staff, deeply involved in looking after the residents. Wonderful work.

You've met a wide range of people in 30 counties; which encounter made the biggest impression on you?

Without exception, the kindness and patience of the bus station staff and the drivers has been both extraordinary and eye-opening. One encounter was when I foolishly left my phone on the bus from Plymouth when it reached Paignton. I told the Stagecoach station manager, Jay Clark, who said he would try to recover it and get it back to me. Not only did he do that, he delivered it to me himself, on his Saturday off, having driven his family into the wilds of Exmoor where I was staying to make sure I got it back. That, really, was astonishingly kind and generous.

ABOVE In his Hospital of St Cross robes, Brother John Green cut a striking figure on local buses from Durness to Land's End; John gets a send-off at Winchester Bus Station

For more information, see hospitalofstcross.co.uk