

Tributes paid to father of minibus revolution

Harry Blundred OBE was the owner of Transit Holdings and he was credited with spearheading the minibus revolution of the 1980s

OBITUARY

► The family of bus industry entrepreneur Harry Blundred OBE has announced that he passed away in hospital in Barbados on August 23 following complications from surgery. He was 75.

Blundred is credited with leading the minibus revolution that saw the widespread introduction of small 16-seat buses across Britain in the mid-1980s. With an acutely commercial and entrepreneurial mind, he advocated simplified, high frequency bus networks that responded to customer demand.

Blundred began his career in the bus industry with Potteries Motor Traction in Stoke-on-Trent in 1962. Initially employed as a bus conductor, after a year on the buses he went into the administration side of the business. Following spells in planning and operations management with National



Harry Blundred with one of the original Devon General minibuses at a bus rally in 2013

Bus Company subsidiaries East Midland and Southdown, he joined the NBC's Oxford operation as traffic manager in 1979. However, in early 1983 he moved to Devon General after a reorganisation of the NBC's Western National business.

It was here that Blundred made his mark. He was allegedly

sceptical about an NBC plan to introduce small minibuses in early 1984 on a pilot high frequency low fare network in Exeter, but as patronage on this embryonic network grew and grew, Blundred became a convert. By 1990 the entire network of what was Devon General was entirely operated by minibuses.

After acquiring that business with four colleagues in a management buyout from NBC in the summer of 1986, the success of the Exeter experiment led Blundred to launch Thames Transit a year later in Oxford. The new operation was in direct competition with City of Oxford Motor Services, his old employer.

It was during this period that Blundred introduced the Oxford Tube coach service between Oxford and London, initially at a 20-minute frequency before ramping up the service to every 10 minutes throughout the day. Meanwhile, in 1991 the former Portsmouth municipal operation was acquired from Stagecoach.

While a small minibus network launched in the late 1980s in London's Docklands failed to prosper, Blundred eventually sold his businesses to the emerging transport groups. FirstGroup acquired the Portsmouth business in 1996 with Stagecoach snapping up the remainder of Transit Holdings in 1997.

Awarded an OBE in June 1994 for services to the bus industry, Blundred retained a number of business interests, including Transit Australia, a small bus operation in Queensland, Australia. He retained ownership until April 2008. ■

'THE ORIGINAL DISRUPTER'

Leeder pays tribute to Harry Blundred OBE

► Industry figures have paid tribute to Harry Blundred OBE who has passed away aged 75.

David Leeder, founder and chief executive of Metropolitan European Transport, spent four years as Blundred's assistant at Transit Holdings in the early 1990s.

He describes Blundred as "the

ultimate traffic person". "He was not an analytical person," Leeder told *Passenger Transport* this week. "He was an instinctive person. He knew what the customer wanted and at the time, in the 1970s and 80s, that was revolutionary.

"He was a Thatcherite, but he was also a Ridleyite. He believed in Nicholas Ridley's vision of a highly competitive and market responsive bus industry. Harry was the original disrupter; he utterly believed in shaking up the market."

Leeder recalls Blundred experimenting with route branding while traffic manager of Brighton-based Southdown in the late 1970s. "That was unheard of at the time," he said. "Harry subsequently did a lot of stuff that is commonplace today."

He adds that while the National Bus Company played a key role in introducing minibuses in Exeter in 1984, once Blundred was convinced that the high frequency, low fare concept of the service would work, "he ran with it".

"He was tapping into something completely different that hadn't been tried before," Leeder adds. "While things like high frequency services and simplified, branded networks are commonplace today, the industry has lost sight of the advantages of the minibus. 16-seat minibuses became 24-seat minibuses which became 33-seat midibuses and now they are back to full size buses once again. Stagecoach has brought the minibus back in Ashford, maybe their time has come again?" ■