



Chapter One - Priming the Pump, and various digressions

A chapter sample extracted from *Humanshields*, written by Joe Letts

It had been a wintry, bleak and unproductive November Sunday, low wet cloud limiting visibility to the width of the road outside our home and taking the pleasure out the obligatory stroll about our Saxon hilltop town with Sophie the black lab and her recalcitrant son. As the daylight dimmed, with doggy duty done, I was lazily whiling away time with the Sunday supplements, cosily enjoying the sounds of our young family robustly entertaining itself and savouring the smells as Thea prepared our supper, including love as an essential ingredient. The 'phone jangled and I responded reluctantly, just about managing civility to my caller while suppressing irritation at the disturbance of a bus hire enquiry latish on a Sunday when all I really wanted to do was relax and vegetate. I listened languidly as the caller outlined his proposition.

Rambling, often inconclusive conversations about buses are grist to the mill if you have somehow acquired a pair of vintage airport buses and you

make a living from them. It doesn't surprise me any more that folk call me up assuming I know a lot more than I do, wondering what the ownership implications of buying a bus are and whether they could or should get such and such one for whatever nefarious purpose. They're generally simply in need of someone other than their spouse to bounce ideas off, who'll talk through some wild thought they have just had without scoffing, and I'm inclined to be indulgent, usually. I can't claim never to have pestered others more knowledgeable than myself on many subjects over the years, so why wouldn't I help someone follow their heart rather than their head, well in the absence of any other pressing engagement anyway?

Not infrequently, of course, my advice is that they shouldn't really be proposing to buy a bus at all. Where would you keep it? Have you considered basic maintenance, and how much fuel it will use? Old buses need exercise just as old people do if they're to remain fit and healthy, so keeping them running well takes time and commitment. In the first instance it's generally the case that anyone with a great plan for use of a bus should be enlisting the support of someone like me, who already has and is operating suitable buses, so they can fire up and road test their idea without getting their fingers burned.



And on this occasion so it turned out to be. We had met before apparently, this guy Richard Scrase and me. I could remember the event right enough, though not the person sufficiently well that I could give him a face. Softly spoken and friendly, easy in conversation, a schoolteacher and sometime editor of the Green Party magazine by trade, he had come along to a 'Big Green Gathering' hilltop camp in Wiltshire several years previously, where we had been operating a bus service from the local train station. He reminded me that we and fifty odd others had taken one of the buses and blatted off on a brilliant guided day trip to Avebury Rings in Wiltshire. I remembered that trip well.

Red London buses would, they thought, generate lots of press interest in the action - they were right.

An amazingly well informed chap called Robin Heath had guided us around this astonishing and very ancient venue, recounting unforgettable tales of how, many thousands of years ago vast fortifications had been dug out by hand, and how the famous stone circles were laid out as a calendar so accurately that cult leaders of the day were able to understand and predict from them astronomical events including solar and lunar eclipses! A smart trick that must have surely been for the priests that understood the ways, the mathematics, the astronomy and the astrology that wove it all together; what power

those guys must have had! Richard was contacting me now, he said, because he wanted to pick my brains about buses and the rules of operating them. He was helping organise a mass protest that was going to take thousands of 'human shields' to Iraq to stop the war there, he said. They were hoping to take a red London bus led convoy all the way down to Iraq by road, and the idea was to lead an ever increasing international procession full of anti-war protesters whom, when settled and established in Iraq, would embarrass Bush and Blair into abandoning their invasion.

Red London buses would, they thought, generate lots of press interest in the action - they were right. Did I know the best place to buy the buses they'd need, and where would they find drivers? What insurances would they need, all that stuff, and would they need any special licenses?

Well after a few minutes he certainly had my attention. We weren't discussing making a bus into a chip shop or some kind of hippie camper then! Of course he was on safe ground assuming that almost anyone at a Big Green Gathering would be generally sympathetic to an anti-war action, it would have been hard to find anyone who wasn't anti-war unless they were there by accident, hopelessly lost.

Richard had made just one call to try to find out about red buses, it transpired; his decision to pick on me was inspired. He did not, indeed could



not possibly have had even the slightest notion that I had history with Iraq, had previously travelled to Baghdad in 1991 to gather evidence to protest the UN embargo set up to get the Iraqis out of Kuwait,

that trip itself a consequence of having spent a large part of the previous twenty years preparing and equipping myself as a disaster relief volunteer. Also that I would be perfectly prepared to take part in just such a task as that he was proposing?

Richard described the proposed human shields action in passionate terms, explaining that Kenneth O'Keefe is a disaffected American ex marine who fought in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 but has since repented. He was trying to mobilise large numbers of volunteers to ride red London buses and whatever other vehicles they could commandeer all the way to Iraq, specifically Baghdad. Recruiting through Western Europe and the Balkan States, they would gather about themselves hordes of enthusiastic supporters wherever they went. A convoy would then travel down through Turkey and Syria, states where anti-war sentiment was much firmer than in Europe, and on to Iraq where the, by then thousands of convoy members, would stop President Bush's war by acting as, literally, human shields, standing firm with Iraqi people to protect them and their homes from American bombs and armies.

Until that moment I had never heard the expression human shield in any other than the sense of hostages captured by Saddam Hussain's army as it took Kuwait.

A tiny organising committee, just five or six souls I think, had decided on the red buses idea because they figured these distinctive, iconic vehicles would get maximum press attention; and I agreed they were probably right there, as my experience with the buses is that they do seem to act as magnets to TV crews. There is a side benefit with Routemasters, too, in that people can't help grinning when they see their big red smiley faces, likely to be a huge benefit when driving half way across two continents with volunteers of all faiths through territories with all kinds of varying ethnic make-up and politics to take on the world's numbers one and number two most vicious armies!

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Richard had called because he knew nothing of the legalities of taking paying passengers on such an arduous and potentially catastrophic journey, and wondered whether I could give



advice on where they would be able to find buses and drivers. What licenses and insurances would they need to be legal, an essential element if they were to avoid being torn apart by the press as irresponsible cheapskates and charlatans, and what other practicalities would there be. He wanted to know what paraphernalia did I think they would need to take if they were going to survive the trip? Did I think the whole idea was barmy?

Well, no, actually, I didn't think it was a barmy idea at all; and call me naive but I really did think right from the gitgo that the Humanshields might pull it off and stop the war. Crazy you might say, now, with hindsight, but I make no apology for ignorance or naivety, these are essential attributes when embarking on wild schemes. All the way along there was an outside chance we, by which I mean the whole anti-war movement, might succeed.

There was, after all, a huge popular clamouring against the war at the time, including vocal opposition from the world's diplomatic corps, and from the military too; the prospect of murdering thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians was proving abhorrent to almost every national government throughout the world. Even in the UN where US bullyboys generally have such sway this war in particular had been roundly rejected. That large numbers of predominantly white European and North American activists might be gratuitously slaughtered as they stood

bravely protecting the Iraqi people before the advancing American troops, who were proposing to loose off their gruesome weapons of mass destruction willy nilly with the usual huge enthusiasm and without any regard for who was in the way would certainly get attention, and indeed it might prove politically unacceptable for the war to happen at all. Especially as it was regarded by so many as illegal and likely to severely damage all the core values the United Nations stood for. Yes, I have to admit I thought at that time that the Humanshields to Iraq idea just might work!

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I was more than willing to chew the fat with Richard for a while that afternoon, and became more and more excited as we continued to talk together. After he'd gone through various aspects of the planned action enough times that it had sunk in and I felt I had a feel for what the human shields were and what they were about to do, I started to grasp how stirring, glamorous and audacious this plan actually was. We went on talking a long time, well by my standards anyway. I don't normally like telephone conversations very much at all but had made an exception in this case, and eventually bade him good bye for now, asking him to give me twenty four hours to think through what was being



proposed, come up with ideas of what I might be able to do to help, and discuss the implications with my family.

When I first went to Iraq it was as a self-funded volunteer peace activist on a disaster relief mission. I was at that time a paid up member of International Emergency Action, a UK natural disaster relief charity, and had access to all the reports, Martti Artisaari's for UNICEF in particular, that were telling of the lethal effects of Gulf War bombing and ongoing punitive sanctions. I had begged and borrowed a shed-load of professional video camera equipment, and, with Anna Smith, a twenty year old assistant who believed as passionately as I did that the West was behaving very badly in Iraq, went to Baghdad to gather evidence of the difficulties faced by the Iraqis because of sanctions. I had had a hand in making a Channel 4 film explaining the iniquities in that situation but had stepped back, somewhat damaged, to try to concentrate on being a good husband and dad and to do the things sensible, responsible people are supposed to do. With hindsight it didn't take much to turn me into a recidivist!

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I don't suppose what happened next around our family dinner table bore much resemblance to a reasoned and measured discussion, and cannot claim the decision we made, well, the decision I made, was either fair or rational. We settled down to a long late Sunday meal, delayed by my being on the phone for so long, and Thea and our children listened, mostly, while I convinced myself out loud that this was a cause we simply had to support, that it would probably be my lifetime's great adventure, and that I really had to go off and do it. I don't clearly remember many of my thoughts as we sat eating and bouncing all the possibilities back and forth, my mind whirring away at top speed, but do remember well the feeling I had that there had to be a bit more to this than that a curious coincidence had occurred. It didn't feel as if I had schemed or planned to make this invitation happen but that to take off in such a dramatic way was going to be tremendously exciting and that I really, really did have to give it my best shot whatever the consequences.

I tried to make it seem as if I was asking if I could go on the trip, and take our buses, which represent our business and are in money terms all we have in the world, but knew what I was really doing was setting out a declaration of intent. There was no need to worry, I reasoned, this was not going to be a particularly dangerous trip; after all we were going to try to help the Iraqis - so they wouldn't shoot at us;



and I wasn't proposing to stay in Baghdad for the bombing, and nor was I going to be anywhere near Saddam, allegedly the coalition's main target. I was just going to take the shields down to Baghdad and then bring the buses back. So it wasn't much more than a normal bus job. I was going to be paid for going, and I would be back home safely, with the buses, within a month or so, and then normal life would resume.

I didn't really know how the children were feeling about the trip, not too much I suspect, their own busy and intricate worlds being much more immediate and interesting to them than anything their dad was about to do. I think kids take most of what their parents do in their stride, and ours had seen me go off on trips from time to time and had seen me return not much the worse for wear. I'd even been off to Iraq before and I'd come home from that one safely enough; I did truly believe I wasn't about to be in any danger much and I'm sure that confidence rubbed off. Marcus, sixteen then and in his GCSE year says now he wasn't much bothered and wishes it had happened in his gap year when he would have been free and could have come with me. I believe him. It would have been great if he had been able to come along.

I know my darling Thea was devastated by the thought of what I was about to take on; it was an abandonment she wasn't sure she could endure. Even now, all these months later, it hurts

me a lot to examine this aspect of what happened in the first few days and how my decision to go has affected us since. She immediately recognised how I was feeling about going to Iraq, knowing how committed I had been to the Iraqi cause through the worst of the sanctions regime there. So she didn't make any effort to try to obstruct me and from the bottom of my heart I thank her for that. On the other hand the pain was clearly acute and made it pretty much impossible for her to relate to me in a normal loving way as I got stuck into the preparations for leaving.

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The physical act of upping and leaving Thea, whom I absolutely adore, to rush off on a somewhat gung-ho jolly all the way to Iraq was by far the most agonising and difficult aspect of the trip, in fact the only real downside of it. I wish I could have taken her with me, she would have thrived on every aspect of what we were going for, the people who came, and what we did there; but alas with four children at home taking her was out of the question. I think I kind of understood a little of what was going on in her



mind, I could certainly sense her unease and an involuntary remoteness that I think was some sort of protective shield - but I was a million miles away from feeling, sharing, or even empathising with her pain - and I'm ashamed to say that I went ahead with my attempts to prepare thoroughly for the journey not really wanting to admit the effect I was having was so profound and in any event not knowing what to do about it.

All this was in a prevailing atmosphere - do you remember? - of heavy propaganda against the Iraqi leadership and jingoistic blather ostensibly in support of our sailors and troops. A rapid polarisation of views was being encouraged which was not especially helpful. This was not a problem for those of us who were activists, particularly those intimately involved in preparations for the demos and actions, because we tended to surround ourselves with like-minded souls; but very hard for Thea and our children who were obliged to carry on going about their regular business in our small Dorset market town, the children in particular going to school every day in an atmosphere of mounting tension.

On the parliamentary stage at that time 'old' Labour was in turmoil as it saw itself being hijacked by Prime Minister Tony Blair and his unelected Downing Street private office coterie, whose determination to go to war on Bush's timetable seemed, and indeed turned out to be,

absolute. In the end the poor old Labour traditionalists, aware of strong beliefs within the loyal rank and file, who had worked their butts off to get Labour elected after years in the political wilderness, ended up being defeated by Blair and his psychotic shower of moronic sychophants despite a spirited rebellion; and instead of continuing to harass Blair, as arguably they should have as he trashed their honourable tradition of being the party against war, felt they were obliged to quit any dissent, bound by a convention that says all parliamentarians must rally around behind our soldiers when faced with war.

It doesn't seem like there were more than just a few days to prepare for our departure between Richard's call and the scheduled date for the off, 25 January 2003. So there was more than plenty to do. The first thing was to get up to London early in the week to meet the Shield's organising team so I would know who was who in the organisation, and so I could figure out exactly what we were going to do and how we were going to do it!

Within a couple of days of Richard's call I was on the train and off to London. I had an address to aim at just off Brewer Street in Soho and discovered there a tiny office up a narrow staircase with people spilling out onto the stairs and no discernable structure in what was going on. I noticed Ken straight away; he is tall, his appearance is striking and so is his voice,



working calmly and confidently through a mobile phone, with those authoritative American tones that work so well on the Hollywood big screen. I'd heard he was an inspirational speaker, but hadn't caught any of his media appearances. He put me in mind of John DeLorean just a little, calm, confident, cool and sounding as if he cut his teeth selling Eskimos snow!

I asked for Richard who, when pointed out and shouted at, waved back at me through a mass of mostly much younger folk, and beckoned me over. He was not at all the wierdy-beardy I might reasonably have expected to see there, bearing in mind the nature of the human shields project and circumstances of our first meeting in Wiltshire; he's rather respectable looking, smartly dressed and almost dapper. I learned he is a sometime teacher and edits the Green Party magazine, 'Green World', and was much reassured by his air of calm and competence.

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We found ourselves a place to settle down for a chat and I started to learn what I was letting myself in for. Richard told me a bit more about Ken O'Keefe; that he had been an activist for a while, had been living in Amsterdam recently, and had

become convinced that the only possible way to stop Bush would be to lead thousands of mostly white Northern Europeans and North Americans into Iraq to act literally as human shields. By dispersing amongst the Iraqi people, living as their guests in all the places ordinary Iraqis might be, Bush's random 'shock and awe' policy would be rendered politically impossible, because of the carnage to both the Iraqis and legitimate white Europeans and North American protesters on the ground. Modern lightweight video cameras, satellite and internet technology, which the Iraqis in due course allowed us to take into their country, would enable instant distribution of these images everywhere without D Notice or any other controls.

We in the protest movement believed if this proposed war was going to happen it would be racist and genocidal as well as, obviously, imperialist and we wanted to protest against it; how better to demonstrate that those who were supposed to be the beneficiaries, white middle class Christian North Americans and Europeans were so incensed by what was about to be done in their name they would die rather than have it happen.

Ken is computer literate and public relations suss, and had not underestimated the power that internet-dispersed images generated at the attack sites could have. The Iraqis had accepted this logic also and had promised that they would co-operate fully with us when we arrived in Iraq.



This meant allowing us to take the latest communications equipment with us, and was a huge concession for them to make, bearing in mind that at that time there were no mobile 'phones in Iraq and there was only very limited access to internet. For the regime to let un-screened foreigners into their country with video cameras, computers and sat-phones – meaning un-censorable world access – was a major gesture of faith in us and in our mission.

While in the London office I met (?) who seemed to be managing the office and was more than helpful over the next few chaotic days. She was always the one I hoped would answer the 'phone when I rang in, she had an extremely comforting way of seeing straight away what the call was about and what was needed and then getting it done! I also met Stephan who I think of as being the sensible one in the management group, though we did end up on different sides of one silly argument before we left England.

Then I met Sue Darling, with whom I sat for a while discussing the route we would take, looking at a large-scale map and seeing that there were unlimited options. I think Sue listened on stuff that would later be important, like that some EU nations such as Holland and Germany have a strictly enforced rule against over-height vehicles travelling their roads. That meant there were some roads we weren't going to be able to travel, and places we weren't going to be able to go. Would that I had listened to her as

well as she was listening to me: had I, I might have cognised the fact she is a qualified large vehicle driver with loads of experience driving horse-boxes. With that knowledge I might have asked for her help when I really needed it and could probably have avoided the one time on the trip I ended up almost inconsolable, when a Turkish human shield, driving one of my buses because Alex was totally cream cracked and beyond driving for a few hours, hit the back of the playbus with the front of the passenger bus half way between the Iraq border and Baghdad.

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Susan is totally good news and it was Sue and I, both fairly ragged after days of travelling in a somewhat chaotic and discordant manner through a marked absence of pragmatic decision making, though with a background worlds apart, and consequently different ways of doing things from me, that left both of us wondering from time to time where the other was coming from. She has spent a successful career serving the Crown and rising to be a Counsellor in the Foreign Service, next in rank to an Ambassador, whereas I had made a decision at school to forego the security of a career that



would put me in a uniform, read straightjacket, and pursued a much more haphazard and insecure career.

That time options of going into the RAF or BEA as a pilot, or taking a place at Sussex University – I would be better off being a student – it was the swinging sixties after all - as I would for surely fall out with the authorities, probably sooner rather than later, if I went into a job with a uniform.

Happily we have a fair bit in common too, she lives in rural Surrey with her horses and I live in rural Dorset, whilst not having horses of my own, at least being in their close proximity. Being on the road with in the buses, much more like a hippie convoy than a me must have been a bit of a trial for her, I'm quite sure nothing she experienced in her varied diplomatic career even remotely prepared her for the rigours of our journey to Baghdad.

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Some time after that, having been working in London running a small independent sector TV studio there since Thea and I were married in 1983, I found myself meeting socially and being drawn towards a delightfully oddball character, Geoff Milne, aka Geoff the Breath, famous fire-

eater and firefighter, showman and quite remarkably well informed British Fire Service historian. When I met Geoff he was still serving Somerset County Council as a retained fireman, but his real passion, having responded three times to disasters with the British Fire Service team to disasters in South America in the early eighties, was in disaster relief research, and I listened to him for hours as he told me story after story of his fire service career and particularly his responses into international disasters as part of the UK fire service's contribution in Columbia, Peru and Mexico City in the early eighties. From him I learned how far from my innocent perceptions the reality of international emergency response really is.

I have learned all kinds of stuff from Geoff, whose knowledge of fire-fighting and search and rescue is encyclopaedic: about his time working with a British team, International Rescue Corps all equipped with blue jumpsuits and Gerry Anderson badges and every gadget you can possibly imagine, about a French NGO long term relief outfit called Action d'Urgence Internationale, whose UK arm, International Emergency Action, I ended up joining, about the men who give their lives to the work of immediate relief and rescue, then those who volunteer for long term reconstruction in areas devastated by floods, mudslides, earthquakes, storms – and war. There are so many myriad catastrophes afflicting God's children all over this huge planet earth we live in with alarming



frequency, and far too few are adequately reported by our newspapers and magazines, radio and television. All that notwithstanding it hadn't take much to enable Richard to reel me in. Even now as I ponder for a moment on how the call he made to me, at best a shot in the dark, worked for Richard, I wonder what he was expecting when he dialled my number, just what was he anticipating the call was going to be like?

There he was in a corner of a tiny crowded office in Soho, tasked with sourcing London buses that would make it to Baghdad, finding drivers happy to drive across Europe and down through the Balkans, to Turkey, and then on down through Syria to Iraq to arrive in the nick of time for a major war. He was supposed to be sorting out licenses and insurances to make the trip legal, for many were paying a substantial fare, and was wondering who in the bus industry might conceivably give him the time of day, let alone useful advice on how to get his bus convoy to Iraq. The out of the blue an image of me pops into his head! Now what are the odds against that happening? He doesn't even know my name and has to track me down through the Green Gathering organisers. He figures any Green is quite likely to be sympathetic to the cause and will probably at worst only guffaw politely; but finds within a few minutes he's talking to a passionate peace activist whose specialist subject is Iraq, an anti-war bus operator who has been to there already as a protester and isn't

averse to going again! Was that an answer to prayer? Is there a God?

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The general state of the buses was pretty good, I had had both of them painted in the Spring so they were looking rather smart and the fact is that Routemasters, if they are running and used regularly, tend to be running well. The regime for buses that are in service, when they are being used for passenger transport by a licensed operator, includes a six-weekly safety inspection by a competent engineer in an approved workshop. Because the buses are unusually high, and I happen to live some way from the nearest large town, I have mine inspected by a local haulage contractor and am always confident the buses are in good shape it's never more than six weeks since they were last inspected and in any case they were designed to be out up to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week and are constructed of the very finest materials by the world's best engineers. The proof is that I've had very few safety related maintenance problems in the ten years I've been an operator, and the buses almost always pass their annual Class VI (Passenger Carrying Vehicle) inspection at the local Ministry Test Centre with no problems at all. But you don't set off on a three thousand miles round trip journey with two thirty seven year old vehicles, each with several hundreds of



thousands of miles 'on the clock', without a sense of trepidation. What you make sure you have done, of course, is take every precaution you can possibly think of to ensure there will no breakdowns due to silly mishaps that could have been avoided. Fresh oil went almost everywhere, new drive belts, etcetera, were fitted, and a basic spares kit, with all the very obvious stuff like cans of lubricants and hydraulic oil were packed, and I ordered up sets of new batteries that we fitted in London just before we left. There was every reason to suppose we'd be OK mechanically. There were glaring omissions though, which I'm loath to own up to but will anyway. Somehow the wheel brace got left behind. It was a very stupid thing to fail to pack the wheel brace, though. Well actually I know how it didn't get packed, my preparations not having anticipated I'd spend the whole of the last three days absolutely glued to the walk around 'phone talking to the press. That caught me out badly. I had to deal with the calls, obviously, getting information out to the press was ninety nine percent of the reason we were going, and every call was important and had to be given maximum attention, but even including the inevitable cock-ups I figured we would probably make it, God willing!

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My thinking on whether we'd make it without show stopping mechanical hitches was swery and inconsistent: on the one hand I was optimistic 'Well it's not so far really, after all it's only what I'd normally do in a busy month in the summer, and I certainly don't expect to get much in the way of servicing problems in a month'. Then again it was the middle of winter and we weren't going to be in places blessed with a twenty four hour delivery service from my trusty suppliers of bits who always seem to have any parts I need and will always put themselves out to get stuff to a courier if I'm desperate and if I insist. We didn't even know for sure the day we left which countries we were going to be travelling through, let alone our exact route, so it really was rather a different kettle of fish from the usual jaunts when we are not more than a half day's train ride away even if an engineer does have to be summoned with whatever bits are needed for a tricky repair. Murphy's first bus law states that the likelihood of emergence of a hard to fix problem is directly proportional to the distance the bus is from its base, and you don't mess with Murphy's laws because the consequences if you get caught are dire.

So the practical aspects of preparation had to be addressed. I'm extremely fortunate that for the last ten years or so most of the maintenance on the buses is handled by my friend Alan Sharman who has been around since the very early days, and took over the maintenance after I quit



having it all done at London Coaches on the grounds that driving to London for a straightforward service was not all that sensible.

When our first bus was bought a lot of thought had gone into which type would be best for us and exactly which model. First we decided on Routemaster, that was an easy decision as they're made mainly of aluminium so don't rot, are beautifully engineered, so are reliable, and thousands were made and are still operating so spares are available, and we did actually look at an RMC sitting rather sorry for itself in a midlands scrapyards. That ex London Country bus, with rear doors and stairs, but a coach rather than bus with double headlights and a high(er) ratio back axle had belonged to Greenpeace at some time, but had had its back end scrunched disembarking from a ferry on the way back from somewhere in Europe, probably because the air springs hadn't been given a chance to pump up, and was a bit scary because then we had no real idea how simple they are to repair. I know about the grounding-through-lack-of-air-in-the air-suspension problem, I've been there and had it happen to me too!

Then I saw an RMA, the 'BEA' or airport bus, which I thought was a really cool design. It had its doors and stairs at the front, and was even fitted with a towbar. I was smitten, so much so that I decided that's what we had to have a while that we started looking for one really hard. I heard that Wandsworth Garage, originally

London Buses Tours and Sightseeing Division now privatised as part of London Coaches, had six RMAs for sale. The RMAs had only had thirty two seats upstairs, where the tourists prefer to sit, as opposed to eighty eight, the number on the three axle motorway double decker coaches that replaced them; as the sightseeing bus business is about bums on seats the RMAs were sold and we were able to buy RMA 65 the last one made.

At London Coaches, owners of the Wandsworth Bridge business, I met Colin Hills, their chief driving instructor, and found myself easily persuaded that if I was going to trade in our bright red family Citroen 2CV for a 9.6 litre, 115HP 56 seater London Omnibus I had better make sure I was competent to drive it. I was confident I would be able to handle learning to drive a bus, and was highly motivated, being utterly unable to afford an extended driving course. I thoroughly enjoyed the learning process, some of which took place in what was to be our bus, though I actually took the test in an RCL, a longer version, bizarrely with a conversion which made it convertible, either open top or enclosed, to avoid a restriction on my license which would have stopped me driving full length coaches.

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It took a while for the full implication of what I was getting into to actually lodge in my brain and in my heart. As the practical stuff, such as where the money was going to come from, gradually fell into place I had to think more and more practically about how we were going to do the journey. We had three buses so we needed three drivers. Where was I going to find at least two drivers who would want to drive all the way to Iraq, where a war was scheduled to be starting anytime very soon?

I had a couple of ideas. In 2002/3 I had been working for several months on a project making disposable plates and trays out of potato starch with a friend, Paul Roberts, met through Geoff Milne and a fellow member of IEA. Paul has a delightful sense of the absurd and not a jot of respect for authority in general and anyone on the planet who tries to pull rank on him in particular. He had been in the Fleet Air Arm/Royal Navy for many years as a fireman, had years of experience of driving large vehicles and I knew he'd be able to cope with the less than ideal accommodation/working conditions involvement in the trip was bound to entail. We'd become close buddies at Potatopak, I like his sense of humour and his general outlook and knew for certain he'd be totally dependable, so I called him up. Bingo. He was able to arrange to get away and would arrive with me a couple of days before we were due to leave. By the time it occurred to me that airport firemen are trained

to point their appliances at where the fire is, usually several fields away, and drive straight at them at full throttle regardless of what's in the way, is not maybe ideal training for the trip in hand it was a tad late in the day. The point is he was up for it, which makes him a hero in my opinion and needless to say hired in the absence of any competition.

Where was I going to find at least two drivers who would want to drive all the way to Iraq, where a war was scheduled to be starting anytime very soon?

Paul has a very cool, wry take on life, and has seen enough of war and what happens because of it to be opposed to war in general and to this invasion for oil in particular. He needed a little money to cover his commitments while he was away, and had reservations about coming all the way to Baghdad, really because of his military experience – he'd spent some time in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere and didn't want to find himself either at the pointy end of a British or American serviceman's gun in the heat and excitement of an invasion and nor did he want to get himself into any kind of trouble, read custody, in an Arab country. I sympathised, and was chastened by his candour. I agreed I would let him go home when we got to the Syrian border but was hugely glad to have him along.



For the record, despite being a military trained fireman Paul was the only one of us who didn't crash his bus – but more of that later!

Hoiking anyone who had the driving skills, qualifications and courage necessary for such a journey away from their warm, cosy and safe family environment on a wild ride should have weighed on me heavily, but as I wasn't the slightest bit afraid of what we'd meet on our way. I was protected and not at all bothered by my conscience. Which was just as well.

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There was one other driver, Gary, with whom I'd worked several times, usually at green events and shows for just a few days at a time, and I reckoned he would be able to handle the camping out and general unusualness of the trip. Skills required included putting up with whatever we could improvise without finding a whole load to whinge at, and with generally sound views about war, oppression, our assault on our beautiful planet and so on. And he's a full on properly qualified PCV holding bus driver. Though I know he's not generally 'employed' as such preferring to attract higher pay rates, and

that by relief driving he allows himself more time to spend with his wife and his family. So I called him, and was delighted with his first response – which was a bit like mine that he was interested but would need to talk it through with Mary his wife – and with his return call a little later that he would give it a go. Again he needed to make sure he'd have enough to cover all his bills while he was away, and he also didn't really think he ought to go right into Iraq. Gary's mother works somewhere in the Foreign Office, so he was under pressure not to embarrass her by getting himself arrested or caught in a country with whom we were at war, so I felt sympathy for his position, agreed his terms, and as with Paul was extremely glad to have him on board.

Now two drivers and me for three buses was sort of OK but didn't make any allowance – well for anything at all in the way of mishaps. Our aim was to cover three thousand miles in two weeks, and we were committed to keeping to the European passenger transport driving rules, meaning proper stops for breaks and rests; so we wouldn't be attempting heroic drives through the day and night. Nor, though, would we have the slightest cover for sickness or injury, even a bit of mild food poisoning, so I really wanted to find a third regular driver so that I could keep myself in reserve to keep a close eye on every aspect of the expedition and relieve anyone who was suffering, either illness or just needing a break. So number three driver was a problem. Alan Sharman would have loved to have come, but

had been working in a small specialist truck body manufacturing concern as their chief mechanic for three years, and though he tried to get their permission for leave of absence found himself under very heavy pressure to be loyal and not to let them down and eventually decided to stay, a decision he now regrets.

The Sunday two weeks before we went corresponded with the AGM of the Routemaster Owners and Operators Association AGM, so I took myself off to Praed Street, Paddington early for the meeting. At what seemed like an appropriate juncture I asked whether anyone had any ideas about where I might find an extra driver for a trip to Baghdad to stop the Gulf War. Nobody laughed out loud, which was kind, but there wasn't much of a positive response, either. So we set off with three drivers for the three buses and no driver for the taxi at all.

At what seemed like an appropriate juncture I asked whether anyone had any ideas about where I might find an extra driver for a trip to Baghdad to stop the Gulf War. Nobody laughed out loud, which was kind, but there wasn't much of a positive response, either.

A plan was emerging with regard to use of the buses. I'd been asked how many I thought I could carry in my two buses and reckoned the maximum would be about fifty, though I knew we could carry more for short distances if we'd had puncture, accident or breakdown problems. RMA 65 configured the way she was will carry fifty on seats, and while there are tables and a bit of extra storage space I wouldn't want to carry fifty with all their stuff for a month including camping gear which is what we were expecting, say forty-five. The playbus, which just had a big play area

upstairs would be basically crew quarters for the drivers who had to be protected and able to rest properly whatever else was going on, would carry only a few, mostly volunteer crew I anticipated. We could cook a bit on the playbus, too, and use it as a mobile hospital if anyone got sick. So with Ken's black Metrobus also I reckoned we had places for about 100 top whack.

Thanks for reading this sample chapter of *Humanshields*.

We're actively seeking advice and connections from book agents and publishing companies, as well as church leaders and community organisers interested in booking Joe as a public speaker.

Got questions?

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