

Managing Out-of-Town Coaches Driving Through the Town Centre

A visitor attraction like Stratford-upon-Avon is understandably a major destination for out-of-town coach tours. Residents and town centre businesses clearly recognise that there are many *bona fide* busses and coaches that need to travel through the town centre – City Sightseeing and the coaches that pick up and drop off at the Falcon and Shakespeare Hotels. However, there is a widespread belief that many of the other out-of-town coaches simply make a drive-through visit without getting off the coach. They visit Holy Trinity Church, spend 10-15 minutes there, and then drive very slowly along Church Street, Chapel Street and High Street while an on-board tour guide with a microphone points out the various visitor attractions in the town. In other words, the out-of-town coaches are seen to impose serious environmental costs on the town in return for very little benefit.

This is an over-simplification of what actually happens. The coaches almost invariably follow a route that takes in several towns and several of Stratford's visitor attractions. The coach tours typically start and finish at the Birthplace coach park in Windsor Street, although some start from Anne Hathaway's Cottage. At their first stop – usually the Birthplace coach park – they pick up a local Stratford-based guide to show them around the town. Indeed, last year, Rita Mansfield Associates (a local travel business) supplied 220 guides to the five largest tour operators and about 100 guides to the smaller operators. They typically visit the Birthplace and then drive through the town centre via High Street, Sheep Street, past the Theatre and on to Holy Trinity Church. After that, they visit Anne Hathaway's Cottage and then return to the town and travel along Church Street, Chapel Street and High Street to view the Grammar School, Alms Houses, Nash's House, Harvard House and Judith Shakespeare's House. They then cross the roundabout, go down Windsor Street and along Guild Street to get back to the Windsor Street coach park to complete their circular tour. The coach passengers spend some time in the town where they often have lunch (mainly at Marlowe's, but sometimes at The Falcon) and also spend a short time visiting local shops. They re-join the coach in Windsor Street and continue their journey via the M40.

Most of the adverse impacts caused by coaches could be avoided if the town had a central bus/coach station with good access roads. The Leisure Centre coach park is too far away to serve this purpose. Visitors cannot realistically be expected to walk all the way from the coach park to Holy Trinity Church and school parties are put off by the prospect of having to manage school children over such long distances. The recent WCC study into a possible town centre bus station furthermore did not pay sufficient attention to the needs of visiting coaches. The proposed central coach/bus station probably needs to be re-visited in relation to the management of coaches in the town centre.

The coaches, though irritating to residents and some businesses in the town, do make a positive contribution to the town's visitor economy. One of the major irritations occurs in High Street where a combination of delivery vehicles, coaches and other traffic creates an unpleasant pedestrian environment. High Street businesses are acutely aware of this and blame it for discouraging shoppers from visiting the street. Given this concern, positive steps need to be taken to discourage

coaches from using High Street and other sensitive town centre streets. On the route from the Windsor Street coach park to Holy Trinity Church, coaches do not *have* to use High Street. They could travel via the gyratory to Waterside, thereby avoiding High Street (some coaches get confused and cross Clopton Bridge both ways before turning into Waterside). On the return trip via Church Street, it is more difficult to avoid using High Street, other than by going down Sheep Street, back along Waterside/Southern Lane and then on to the Windsor Street coach park via Grove Road and Arden Street (both heavily congested).

The only feasible solution is for WCC to identify a series of coach routes through the town to serve the needs of coach operators visiting the Birthplace, Holy Trinity Church, Anne Hathaway's Cottage and other visitor attractions in the town. Some road improvements might also be required to enable double wheelbase coaches to turn into some of the designated routes (e.g., Chapel Lane) and it may be worth considering reversing the one-way system in the lower section of Windsor Street to enable coaches returning to the Windsor Street coach park to get there via Rother Street. The routes might then be issued to coach operators as an Advisory Notice to discourage use of High Street and other sensitive town centre streets when visiting the town.

The overall conclusion is that coach routes through the town centre need to be more carefully managed – perhaps by issuing an Advisory Notice to coach operators identifying suitable coach routes through the town -- to minimise environmental impacts.