

Bus and beyond

Last December, Austin Birks FCILT received the Meritorious Award at the annual CILT Fellows' Lunch. Focus catches up with Austin to discuss his career journey, life lessons and the future of the bus industry.

surprise. I am absolutely delighted and very proud." Here, Austin outlines his vast experience and words of wisdom to impart to others.

Career journey

At an early age, Austin became familiar with the bus profession through his father who encouraged him to apply for a graduate scheme in the profession after university. He shares: "After graduating from Manchester university, I was voted as president of Student Union. Then, I was chosen to become one of the 12 of the graduate trainees of the National Bus Company's Senior Management Training Scheme, which was a quite tough and auspicious graduate training opportunity and so I started my career in the bus industry in 1983." Subsequently, Austin pursued a long and varied career in the profession. A key moment being that he along with others sold their bus company to Grampian Regional Transport Holdings which then became First Group, one of the world's biggest transport companies and at its peak, employed 125,000 employees and turned over £7 billion. Austin continued his career with First Group and worked his way through the ranks. Eventually, in 2003, he was told that



Austin Birks is an inspirational legend in the bus industry. Not only as a great bus person, with years of innovative delivery behind him, not only also because of his commitment to recording and preserving the history of the industry through his support of the Bus Archive, but of course because he has turned his bowel cancer into a quest for life and survival, and a charitable cause, which has all our admiration. There's no one better to receive this award from the Institute.

Peter, Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill FCILT, Chair, Network Rail



Recently, at the annual Fellows' Lunch, Alan Jones FCLIT, Chair, CILT(UK) presented Austin Birks FCILT, Chairman of our Bus and Coach Forum and BusMark benchmarking group with the Meritorious award. The award is given to those who have displayed outstanding commitment and service to the Institute. It was a significant point of recognition for Austin as he received recognition due to his longstanding involvement in the bus profession. On his achievement, Austin said: "It was extraordinary to win the Award. It was a complete and utter

Austin is an absolute legend of the industry! I've known him for nearly 20 years and proud to see him recognised for his work and to see him receive the Meritorious award.

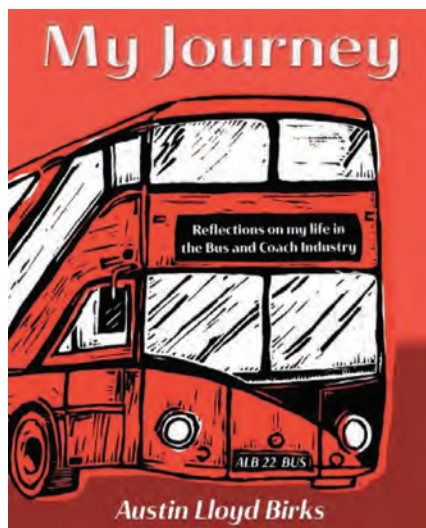
Ben Gilligan FCILT, Managing Director, East Yorkshire Buses

he needed to recruit new bus drivers into the profession which saw him travel to Poland. Austin currently works as the Chief Executive Officer at Verita HR Poland: "Back in the day before accession of the EU, no one really knew what to expect, but we had a project in Poland to train bus drivers for learning this language and to get acclimatised. This required a lot of mutual respect, duty of care and good value. Long story short, the project went on to become very successful and chosen by the European Union as best practice," he tells *Focus*.

Lessons to share

Last October, Austin Birks launched his book, *My Journey: Reflections on my life in the Bus & Coach Industry*, a collection of episodes and experiences which he shares with those in the profession and the wider public.

"Originally, I used to write a blog and used to post three times a week, and it ended up being around 1200 blog posts and essentially this was a means for me to share my various life experiences. By



chance, people found it interesting and funny, and it led to these experiences being communicated into a book after a two-year process. This book is an outlet where I detail the absurd and wonderful characters I encountered throughout 40 years in the industry," Austin tells *Focus*. The proceeds of the book sale will go to the Bus archive, a charity originally started by Austin's father who encouraged him to embark in the profession. In addition to this, Austin continues to share his thoughts on his blog, *The Bag for Life*, where he detail's his own journey which goes beyond the bus journey but also includes life, health complications (as alluded to in the blog's name) which has encouraged Austin to make the most of out of life and to share his passions such as stand-up comedy and karate.

The future of the bus industry

Austin recommends a career in the bus profession as he credits it as providing him with a fulfilling career which other people can experience once they step into the profession. "The bus industry is one of the best kept secrets. We don't promote ourselves. We don't tell people what we're all about and it at its centre it is about people and relationships. There is an element of keeping the nation moving, and this was displayed through lockdown and the pandemic. So, If you want a job that's different and interesting and you want to meet new people and you are honing diverse skillsets where each day is different, then this is a career for you." he tells *Focus*. ❌

I got to know Austin well as a member of the CILT Bus and Coach Steering Group which he chairs. Austin has the ability to value everyone's comments and the skill to draw them into the discussion however random or 'off topic' they are.

Peter Bradley FCILT,
Managing Director, UK Coach Operators Association

Austin has been both a colleague, and a good friend of mine for 25 years and I am delighted he has been recognised with this award. His positive outlook on life mixed with his determination and sense of humour simply inspires others to achieve more and be better versions of themselves.

Andrew Hunter FCILT, Group Performance and Commercial Development Director

