

# CBW

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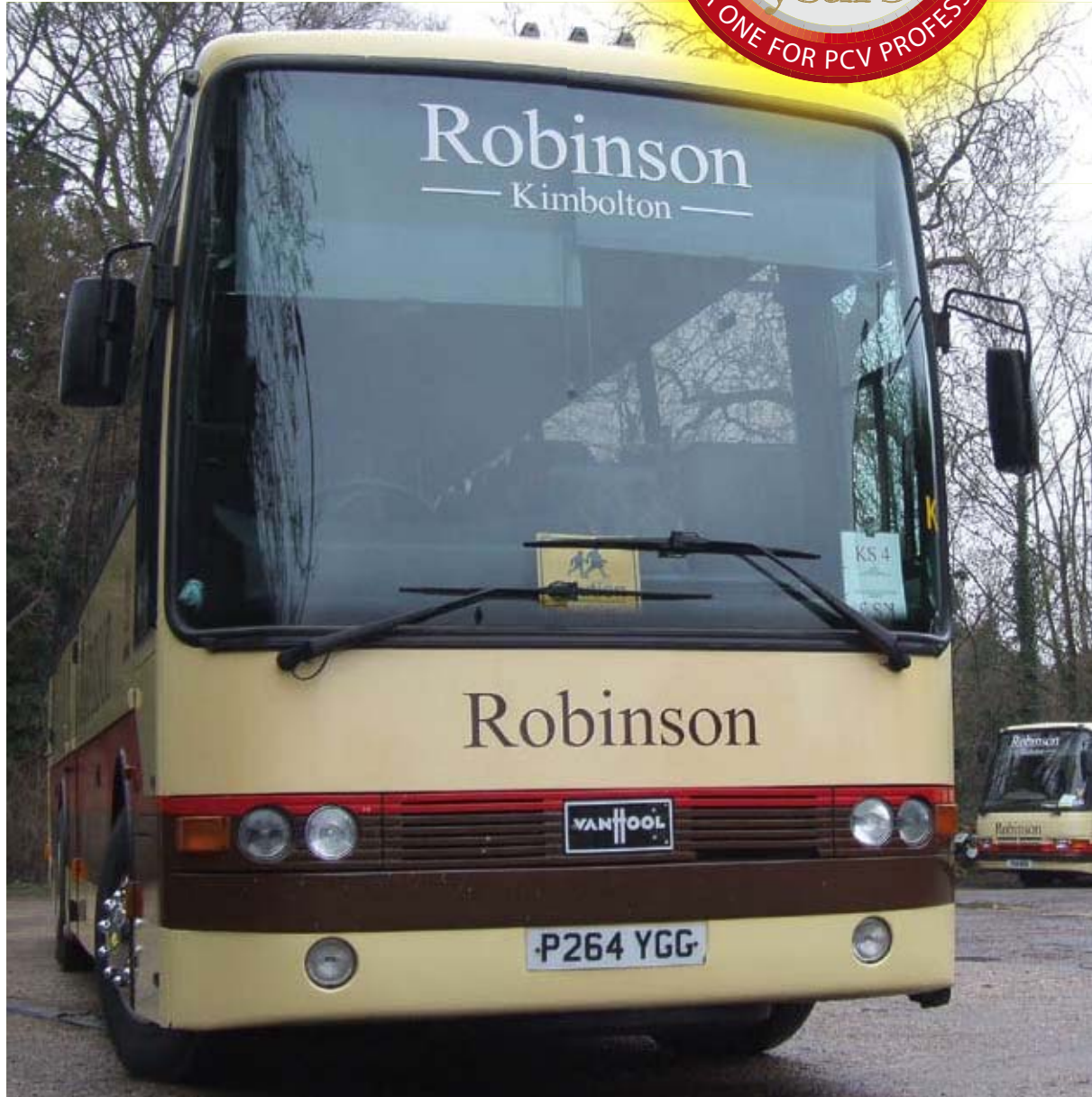


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## Rewarding Success

The epitome of a British family-run coach operator **pages 34-37**

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## Small firm with strong values

*CBW's* Gareth Evans visits a family-run operator with a long and proud history in the Cambridgeshire coach market

With its ten-strong middle-aged coach fleet, car repairs business and petrol forecourt, in many respects Robinson Kimbolton epitomises the British family-run coach operator.

Put simply, the firm takes considerable pride in the work it does and hence puts much emphasis on the way it delivers a personal level of service to its customers.

Having seen the firm's well maintained fleet out on the roads of Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire, I thought it would be interesting to meet the person behind the operation, Charles Robinson, grandson of founder Stanley Robinson.

### History

Robinson's has a long and proud history, tracing its roots back to the end of the First World War.

It was then that Stanley Robinson and a partner won a contract to salvage vehicles in Yugoslavia.

The pair bought a piece of land, that previously had been an orchard in the village of Kimbolton, which was gradually expanded until part of the present day site was purchased in 1927 and a small wooden workshop erected for the repair of cars, motorcycles and bicycles; S V Robinson's Garage was born. A forecourt and pump were built to dispense what was then known as 'motor spirit'. The business prospered and in 1936 adjacent land was bought and the central part of the current premises built.

With few cars to service during the war and having the benefit of fuel on-site, Stanley branched out into private hire with luxury cars, taxis and small coaches. The US Air Force 379th Bombardment Group was stationed at the nearby Kimbolton Airfield from May 1943 to June 1945, and with it came the need for transport.

After the war Kimbolton School approached the company with a view to transporting the sons of the wealthy Raunds Shoe Industry to school.

Stanley's son Colin joined the company in 1952 following his National Service. Under Colin's management during the 60s and 70s, the car sales and servicing aspects of the business expanded, together with the parts department. The forecourt had become very busy with attended service of BP fuel. New cars were also sold.

In 1976, Colin's son Charles joined the business. Following his mechanical training, he reorganised the sales department as British Leyland became Austin Rover, Triumph and eventually Rover. Stanley Robinson died in 1982. During this time the coach business had grown steadily, meeting requirements of both County Council and the independent Kimbolton School.

The Rover sales thrived during the 80s but in the 90s began to fall, in line with the manufacturer's falling market share and the emphasis on fleet sales. Thus in 1994, Robinson ceased to sell



Above: The well-presented fleet includes both large and small coaches. Left: Charles Robinson, partner in Robinson Kimbolton. Far left: Service with a smile – driver Paul Trower.

new cars when Rover axed its network of smaller dealers.

"We then focused on used cars but that market became very specialised, so we increased the amount of coach work to compensate."

At the dawn of the new millennium, Colin retired, leaving Charles in charge. In 2007 the firm celebrated its 80th birthday with the application a commemorative crest on the coaches.

### Business Mix

"The majority of work we do is private hire," explained Charles. "We don't do holidays or day trips."

"Probably 90% of our work is repeat business, which in some respects is easier because it means we don't have to advertise as much."

"You see it's always been difficult for us to advertise because of our location. We're in a corner of Cambridgeshire. Bedfordshire is only a mile away, while Northamptonshire is only two miles away, so at the end of the day, we've got to use three newspapers and three editions of the Yellow Pages."

The firm's customer base includes Kimbolton School and Cambridgeshire County Council. While contracts have previously been operated for both Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, none are currently held.

"The coach side has always been fairly basic stuff. We used to go abroad but we don't need the hassle any more. However, it might be tempting fate to say we don't need that kind of work."

"We're not at the top nor are we at

the bottom of the market."

Indeed, it could be said that the firm's middle age fleet reflects this, more of which later.

Like many an operator, Charles said modestly: "We'll never get rich but we do make a reasonable living out of it."

I mentioned to Charles about the company's professional-looking website and its ease of use, something that I believe other operators could learn from.

"Our website has recently been re-vamped," he said. "We've found more and more people are e-mailing us via the website. The web works and I see it as the future. It's very much part of our image – that of a small, family-run firm, with quality, service and value being our cornerstones. It also stresses that we're a very long established firm, so people know we'll still be here tomorrow. I suppose it's also easy for our regular customers to put their requirements on an e-mail."

On the garage side, Robinson services used cars, while the firm's filling station continues, supplemented by a shop selling snacks.

The latest development in the business is the acquisition of an eight-seater Volkswagen minibus.

**THE COACH SIDE HAS BEEN PRETTY BASIC. WE USED TO GO ABROAD BUT DON'T NEED THE HASSLE ANYMORE**

"We seem to get a lot of enquiries about airport transfers, so we thought we'd try the market. In any case, at this time of year, you're grateful for all the work you can get."

"We don't do lots of late nights, but we do have casual and part-time drivers to cover such work. Customers know they're going to get a uniformed driver rather than someone dressed in scruffy jeans. It's about attention to detail. We ought to be doing it right after all these years," he laughed.

"We run a fairly lean staff here, comprising five full-time drivers, plus me and Chris Moody our coach manager, although I tend not to drive. I'm the spare man. I love driving but from experience, if I'm out on the road, the office work piles up. If people get

# Operator Profile

## ROBINSON KIMBOLTON

a quote straight away, you'll probably get the business."

Just then I mentioned that a former boss always used to say that an unanswered telephone call is lost business.

"I quite agree," said Charles. "That's one of the reasons why we've got four or five lines here. Chris and I do all the quoting and admin between us. Being a small operator, we don't feel the need to employ specialist computer software, so we use a combination of programmes, including those written by myself over the years. You can't be too ambitious."

Charles was keen to stress the firm's desire for quality, particularly from its staff.

"We've got a strict driver's manual that sets out what we expect from them, on matters including attendance and cleaning. It's all part of their terms and conditions of employment. As obvious as it may be, you have to tell people what you expect of them.

"At the end of the day, coaching is a fairly simple thing to do. You turn up early, in a clean coach and behave in a pleasant, helpful manner to the customers. However, that can be challenging to some people. Oh, and you've got to know where you're going!" he laughed.

"It doesn't take a lot to upset customers. We put a lot of emphasis on our staff. You need good customers and you need good staff. We've got systems in place. For example, we carry out six-monthly staff reviews. We value their opinions and views. We tell them if we think they're doing a good job but we also tell them if they're not up to standard. We've found everyone is much happier for it."

The company sees the introduction of the Driver CPC as a positive thing.

"We've got Lancashire-based Specialist Training Consultation Services to do ours with. They gave a presentation to the Mid-Anglia Coach Operators Association.

"Our first session is due to take place in February. With safety being important, we've chosen defensive driving as the subject. Touch wood, we've got very low insurance and all complaints are followed up, but I think we can all learn something. We're hoping to complete the D-CPC within three years. I don't

**WE'VE GOT A STRICT DRIVER'S MANUAL. AS OBVIOUS AS IT MAY BE, YOU HAVE TO TELL PEOPLE WHAT YOU EXPECT**

anticipate losing any of our current staff and in any case, I see it as largely formalising what we already do."

### Premises

Robinson's garage enjoys a prominent site in the beautiful Cambridgeshire village of Kimbolton.

Once located on the busy old A45 trunk road, since the opening of the A14, the large village has reverted to a relatively quiet backwater, dominated by St Andrew's church and the independent school.

While maintenance is carried out inside a dedicated garage bay, the coaches themselves are parked in a yard a short distance away.

Charles explained that the current premises will need investment to meet the needs of the future and that the



Above: Full-size coaches are principally of the Volvo/Van Hool combination.

Below: Caetano-bodied Toyota Optimo V54MOD and Van Hool-bodied Volvo P264YGG.

Below left: The garage forecourt includes a filling station.

firm is looking to relocate locally.

"It's a lovely site," he said. "Unfortunately it's not a good time to sell commercial property at the moment, so the plan is on hold for a couple of years."

### Fleet

Like many operators, the firm ran a fleet of Bedfords through the 1980s, before moving to the popular Dennis Javelin and more recently Volvo.

The ten vehicle fleet comprises six Van Hool T8-bodied Volvos, a solitary Van Hool T9-bodied Scania, a Plaxton Paramount-bodied Dennis Javelin and a 24-seater Caetano-bodied Toyota Optimo midicoach. Not to be forgotten is the Volkswagen Transporter eight-seater Private Hire minibus.

"Our next vehicle is probably going

to be a T9 if it doesn't go too bad this year," explained Charles.

The firm believes maintenance is of paramount importance and hence employs a no expense spared policy. All vehicles use Michelin tyres.

Explaining the reason behind the Volvo/Van Hool combination, Charles said: "Volvo parts are both competitive and high in quality. We've found Volvo coaches are better able to withstand the ruggedness of country roads. Furthermore, we've got Van Hool UK at Wellingborough and Volvo are at Kettering, so we've got good back up if we need it.

"The reliability of our Volvo coaches is such that we almost seem to look for thing to do on them," laughed Charles. "I don't mind because I'd rather have the option for the mechanic to do little jobs on them rather than be in the scenario of struggling to keep them on the road!"

While it is common for coach operators not to apply fleet numbers to their vehicles, with part of the registration often being used for reference such as 'OIB' or 'HCF', Robinsons coaches carry letters, as in A, B, C and so on.

### Future

I asked Charles what he felt the future holds for the business.

"The current economic climate is a worry," he said. "The EU Working Time Directive puts a lot of restrictions on the business and it is not suitable for a service industry. Customer demand is not limited to five days a week.

Obviously, we comply with the law but we've had to turn work away because we can't get drivers. And I'm talking about nice work on Saturdays and Sundays. The drivers want to do it because they want the overtime but as things stand, for them to do so would be illegal. The matter is particularly acute in the current climate but like I say, we have to operate legally.

"I understand the need for restrictions. We'd never put a tired driver on the road, but you know, it's not as if we're doing long-haul Spanish runs, driving hundreds of miles at a time. Our drivers do half an hour here, half an hour there. It's led to a reduction in business and lost opportunities for us. Like I say, I can understand the need for the regulations but it makes life difficult for a good, honest operator. Unfortunately you're always going to get those who abuse any form of regulation, but the matter needs to be

publicised. The powers that be need to understand the benefits of coaching, including the environment, congestion and so on.

"We're fortunate so far that we are waiting to see the effects of the recession. On the coach side, our business is not necessarily subject to the same cyclical nature as say holidays. What I'm saying is that the children still need to get to school. Also with increased environmental awareness, I believe there is a future for public transport."

### Conclusion

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Robinson. Indeed, it seemed my initial impression of them as representing the typical British family-run coach firm was not wrong as I found them to be a very friendly crew, who take considerable pride in what they do.

●CBW is indebted to the staff at Robinson Kimbolton.

### AT A GLANCE

**OPERATOR:**  
Robinson  
Kimbolton

**LOCATION:**  
Kimbolton,  
Cambridgeshire

**FLEET:**  
10 coaches,  
1 private hire  
minibus

**ESTABLISHED:**  
1927

**BUSINESS MIX:**  
Private hire &  
school contracts

**CONTACT:**  
01480 860 581  
www.robinson  
kimbolton.co.uk/



Above: The family-run firm celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2007 with a commemorative emblem on the vehicles. Left: The firm's Van Hool T9-bodied Scania. It is hoped that future acquisitions will carry Van Hool T9 bodywork.

