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The Industry Leader



Prentice setting the standard

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Seizing the moment

While standing next to the bus stop on York Place, Edinburgh, I was worried I wouldn't recognise the coach. Ross Prentice, Proprietor of Prentice Coaches had sent to collect me. As commuters waited for their morning bus, I couldn't help but chuckle when an empty Volvo B12B Plaxton Paragon, with 'Prentice Coaches' emblazoned on front and side pulled up. The driver John Shanks who has worked for the operator for 15 years, was on his way back to the Hospital Road depot, and was kind enough to give me a lift.

History

"My father Don Prentice used to work as a manager for a bus operation run by Ian Glass," explained Ross. "Lowland Scottish, which became part of First, had been privatised by that point and they made Ian an offer he couldn't refuse. My father lasted three weeks with them, before they let the management team go. He decided to start his own operation in 1991. I was working as

The last time *CBW* visited Prentice Coaches was in 2013. Since then, Ross Prentice and his team have won the gold award for Top Independent Bus Operator 2016 at the UK Bus Awards last year. **Elizabeth Howlett** visited their Haddington-based depot to discuss developments over the past four years and plans for the future

a mechanic at the time, but I decided to give that up to go into business with him. My dad seized the moment and the rest is history."

As we were discussing the history of Prentice Coaches, Don came into the office and sat down next to his son, Ross. The pair are firm believers in seizing opportunities.

Ross said: "If we had left it a year longer to start the business I don't think it would have worked. Sometimes opportunities come

along and you have to go with it. That is when we saw our window to go in together.

"The business grew organically. We started off with one vehicle and a school contract in late August 1991. Following that, we bought a small coach and won another contract for a local service. Gradually we secured more contracts and private hire. It just grew and grew."

Don explained that he found it difficult

A Plaxton Leopard on a Volvo B9R chassis and an Enviro 200 parked up in the Haddington-based depot. **ROSS PRENTICE**



turning down new opportunities. He said: 'I always said that I wouldn't take on any more than 10 licenses. However, if more contracts come up in your local area, it is hard to say no. Someone else will be on hand to take them if you don't.'

'Every time we set ourselves a limit, something else would come along and we would always take it. That has happened quite a few times over the years and we have made it work. If you don't try you will always end up regretting it. That is how our business has grown.'

Don had to run an errand and we said our goodbyes. Seeing the father-son-duo together made me wonder what it had been like for Ross, working alongside his dad.

Ross explained: 'I remember reading Richard Branson's autobiography. He said that everyone needs a mentor. That line in the book made me realise that my father is my mentor. We bounce off each other. Over the years the dynamics between us have changed.'

'He used to be completely in control and I was 'learning the ropes'. Now he is semi-

retired and I am making all the decisions. I still go to him for advice and to let off steam. My father isn't afraid to tell me when I am being stupid.'

Since 2013

CBI visited Prentice Coaches in 2013 (Issue 1093) and Ross had divulged his plans to help revive the town of Haddington, East Lothian. I asked him more about these plans.

He explained: 'Right on the edge of Haddington there was a Mitsubishi factory that got shut down and Sainsbury's got plans to build a new supermarket in the area. It still has permission but nothing has been built there. I was part of the Haddington Business Association but I had to stand down as I just don't get the time anymore. It's difficult as it is a small town.'

'There are a lot of local businesses but we don't have any big companies in Haddington. Trying to get those owners to pull together can be challenging. Haddington Community Development Trust seems to be making some progress, but I'm stepping back from it all.'

'Getting people to engage with small businesses relies heavily on social media. I tried an online campaign where each week I would give reasons for passengers to use our buses into Haddington on our Twitter page. I would tag a local business in the post and the owners would rarely if ever respond, or retweet. It clearly wasn't going to work as nobody was pulling together in the community. It's all about embracing technology and using the tools you have at your disposal.'

'I don't understand how anyone can run a business without a smartphone or without social media. The council's business gateways have run courses on social media and I've attended some. Haddington is a commuter town to Edinburgh so developing businesses isn't a main priority.'

Social media

Ross started using social media, specifically Twitter, to keep his passengers updated. 'I remember we had a bad winter in 2010. I would go out and check the roads to make



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Entering into business with his father, Don in 1991 and inviting his son Stuart to the UK Bus Awards in 2016. There is no doubt that Ross (pictured) ensures that the family is fully involved in this family-run operation. *ELIZABETH HOWLETT*

sure the buses could run," said Ross.

"I was originally just updating our website with information. It would take me a very long time because I would be trying to put the information on the site, while people were ringing to complain that the website wasn't updated. I couldn't deal with the site and the phone simultaneously. I realised that we needed to find a better way to do it and that's really when Prentice's social media presence started.

"I initially went to Twitter I thought that would be a quick and easy way to update people. I had to build our followers up otherwise I would have been tweeting to myself. I built up our followers by engaging and sharing photos, but mostly through trial and error.

"Once the audience had grown, I started using it as a quick easy way to update our passengers on the services we provide. I quickly realised that it was a brilliant free marketing tool and that it had enormous capabilities.

"I wasn't so proactive with Facebook. That took a bit longer. There was a man that ran conferences every month for local businesses. He did a presentation on Facebook tools and I can remember sitting there feeling very unconvicted. All the kids were using it and I worried it could turn nasty with negative comments. As the presentation went on, I realised that I was missing out on another opportunity to

'I didn't think I had a chance against these people, it was a massive shock and I never saw it coming. I remember getting on the stage and looking out and thinking how on earth did this happen. I was glad I had my son beside me. When I'm older and even more decrepit, at least it will be a moment he will remember, even when I can't'

grow my business. That weekend I set up a Facebook page.

"I have since realised that I was wrong about the negative comments. I have only ever had to ban or block three people for being inappropriate on the Facebook page. By and large it works fantastically and its free publicity.

"I had become connected with local journalists via Twitter and LinkedIn. It was beneficial because they would be able to see what we were posting, and from that they would either call me up to investigate or they would just run it straight to press. It gave the company a lot of exposure in the local media.

"Local papers and their content have since shifted their focus since then and the journalists working there have moved on. It was unusual as it isn't often that coach operators have a working relationship with the local press. It was always considered out of the ordinary for a coach operator to even have a social media presence. Nowadays, Twitter and Facebook are oversaturated with news so it has to be something different and exciting to get people's attention.

"It's a learning curve. I have found that Google can be counterproductive. I had left the old timetable on the website portal but removed them from the webpage. When passengers entered the search term:

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'Prentice timetable' for example, it was automatically directing them to the old page.

"There isn't an exact science to what gets the most reaction online. I can put up things about our latest developments or new services and I may get a minimal response. On other occasions, I can post a picture of a vehicle and it generates lots of response."

"We have around 2,000 followers on Twitter at the moment. It's obviously slowed down as time goes on. It really depends what is happening and what you do. If we start a new bus service, it can generate followers and obviously if we are featured in the press, it can boost our numbers. It works well and it never fails to amaze me."

Bus and coach

Turning the focus onto coach hire, Ross divulged how time has made a significant change to the services Prentice provides. "A lot of the coach hire work we used to do is disappearing, which is a concern," he explained.

"There are fewer social groups and the older generation don't 'feel as old' so their social activities have changed. It is a challenge, but we are getting on with it. The coach hire business seems a lot more outthroat than it used to be. That is part and parcel of any business."

"Our school contracts should have been up for tender in June but have now been extended for another year. I'm not quite sure why. There are a lot of new houses being built and there is a council election coming up, so there may well be a change in administration. In some respects it's good as we have another year of stability. In other respects, I am stuck with what I had. I was hoping to be able to fit in other contracts to give us a boost. Everything evolves."

Currently, Prentice is focusing its attentions on bus operations: "It's become much more important now. It's over half of



The Mellor Coachcraft Mercedes-Benz minibus that now operates on the 101 route around Haddington town centre has been a success with passengers. **ROSS PRENTICE**



This ADL single-decker proudly sports the Prentice website URL that Ross has single-handedly managed. **ROSS PRENTICE**

'Gaining the 111 that runs from Haddington to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary was a blessing. Had we not won that, and successfully run it, then I doubt we would have the commercial work we have now. We are now entrenched with running rural routes'



Stuart Prentice always knew that his dad would win. He is pictured at the UK Bus Awards 2016, proudly holding the gold award. **UK BUS AWARDS**

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what we do," said Ross.

"We have always run buses. We ran the 123 Gifford service for 18 years continuously up until 2011. At that point, FirstGroup came in and wanted everything in the area. They undercut us quite dramatically to get the route. After 10 months they went back to East Lothian Council and said that they wanted a significant increase. I don't know what their price was, but I know it was double figures. Naturally, the council said that they would retender. The council came back to us with a short notice tender and we won two routes with two months' notice – the 123 Gifford Circle and the 121 from Haddington to North Berwick.

"We ordered two new ADL Enviro 200s and a DAF as a back-up vehicle. I thought that it would take three to six months to restore confidence in the routes, but within the first few weeks the 123 went back to the same passenger numbers as it was when we had it 15 months prior.

"The passengers came back. The 121 took a bit longer but after around six months, the numbers increased and we calculated that it had 30% growth. Unfortunately, another



Prentice Coaches won the gold award for the Top Independent Operator category at the UK Bus Awards 2016. ROSS PRENTICE

operator pitched to run a cheaper service when the 121 came to tender and we lost the route. I was pretty upset but that's life.

"As it turns out, gaining the 111 that runs from Haddington to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary was a blessing. Had we not won that, and successfully run it, then I doubt we would have the commercial work we have now. We are now entrenched with running rural routes."

In November 2016, Prentice Coaches took

delivery of a Mellor Strata Sprinter for the 101 Haddington route, making it the third to enter service (as reported in CBW 1266). Ross explained: "I saw information about the Mellor online and thought it seemed really interesting.

"Mellor Coachcraft's National Sales Manager, Lorna Miller added me on LinkedIn and sent me an invitation to give feedback on the vehicle. My father and I went down to Rochdale, Manchester to have a look. We were very impressed.

"As I was looking at it, I could immediately get an idea of what routes to use it on and how it could be an asset to my fleet. It is a narrow, compact vehicle, perfect for travelling on narrow roads and villages like those on the 101 service.

"The passengers like it, so it's been a success. It does service every day and a school run. On the weekends we use it on one of our subsidised routes and it saves us fuel."

UK Bus Awards

The UK Bus Awards 2016 (UKBA16) saw Prentice Coaches recognised for its bus

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Ross is hoping to launch Smart Products very soon. This will allow multi-journey passes to be purchased online and uploaded to the Smarttrip card. **ELIZABETH HOWLETT**



operations. The firm won Bronze for the UK Operator of the Year award, but was most proud of its Gold award in the Top Independent Operator category.

Ross said: "To be honest I have no idea how we won. I am still shocked by it all."

"The shortlist event was being held at Volvos premises in Warwick, last October. I needed an excuse to travel south as I knew fine well if I woke up with a sore back, I would find a reason to stay in bed. I arranged to meet up with Richard Grey of Grey's of Ely and look at a vehicle.

"Once I had arrived at the event, Chairman of UKBA2016 Tony Depledge told me that you have to always be thinking about next

Having been previously interviewed by *CBW* in 2013, Prentice Coaches has seen many developments both in its business and fleet. **ROSS PRENTICE**

year's story. Having taken a commercial route from the council that Lothian buses didn't want, I thought our story was okay. I would never have thought in a million years that we would have been chosen as a finalist let alone go on to win.

"I took my son, Stuart to the award ceremony in London. My father was on holiday and my son was desperate to go. I spoke to his head teacher to get him out of school. I explained the awards to her and that I wanted my son to come. She said that technically it would be an unauthorised absence but that I had to take him because he may not want to go in a few years' time.

"My son always thinks that we will win, at any award show we go to. He has this innocent air to him, whereby he assumes that we will win everything. I on the other hand, could see the competition we were up against.

"We sat down at our table and when the screen came up saying we had been nominated for the award. I took pictures of it on my phone. I was so convinced we wouldn't win; I at least wanted to show people that we were nominated. I could also put it on social media to say that we were a finalist at UKBA2016.

"I put my phone down and sat back. They announced the winners and it didn't register that it was us. Stuart kept saying: 'I told you we were going to win.'

"I got as much of a shock as anybody when they called our name. I am too close to my business to be able to take a step back and acknowledge it.

"I didn't think I had a chance against these people, it was a massive shock and I never saw it coming. I remember getting on the stage and looking out and thinking how on earth did this happen. I was glad I had my

son beside me. When I'm older and even more decrepit, at least it will be a moment he will remember, even when I can't.

"When we got our award we spoke to a few people, said our goodbyes and headed to the airport. The flight was delayed. The next flight was delayed, and the flight after that. All of the flights to Scotland were cancelled and we were put in a taxi to another airport. We spent our entire evening in airports and taxis rather than celebrating, which was quite funny looking back!"

Future technology

Having been commended at UKBA2016 on their use of technology, I wanted to ask Ross about his plans for the future. Modern ticketing solutions have been on his mind for the past five years.

"In 2012 we started developing an app and have since started using live tracking online," said Ross.

When I asked what gave him the idea to track his buses so early on, he explained:

"A tracking services company called Pinpointers Telematics got in touch following an article we did for a trade magazine in 2011. They approached us to see if we had any vehicle tracking on our fleet.

"I was impressed with Pinpointers Telematics as it allows you to use their public webpage to track vehicles. It also has all our timetables and route information uploaded. If a passenger is in a remote location waiting for the bus, we want them to feel confident that the service will arrive on time - this tracking service should help."

"Another development is the Smarttrip card. It doesn't work perfectly yet and we are still sorting through some of the issues. Essentially you can pre-load the card with a set amount of money and pay your fare on the bus without cash.

"Using a company called sQuid, the Smarttrip cards have the ability to make contactless payments in the same way as an Oyster card.

"We are hoping to launch Smart Products very soon, which will allow multi-journey passes to be purchased online and uploaded to the Smarttrip card. This is where the app, which is being developed by Transport Scotland, will allow passengers to top up online. Through near field technology, passengers can top up their smartcard on the app too.

"My aim is to get more commercial routes under my belt. Having previously run rural routes, I was not used to managing traffic. With a rural route, there are rarely any delays. Now I am running commercial routes it has given me more to consider and adapt.

"It was quite a steep learning curve but it has paid off and I look forward to whatever the future brings. I will always take opportunities in my stride and seize the moment." ■

