

TRAVELLING BLUES

Carlisle United's first-team squad are back on the road with Reays this season - travelling in winning style aboard a super-luxurious coach which was previously the official team bus of England's all-conquering Test cricketers.

After a brief break, Wigton-based Reays has won back the contract to become Carlisle United's official team coach provider for the next three seasons; with the option of a further two years should it prove to be a success.

And the family-run Cumbrian travel company has invested in a superb top-of-the-range sports team coach, complete with full galley and oven, which England's cricketers used during Pakistan's tour of this country last summer.

The silver, charcoal and blue livery coach - registration number C1 UFC - features 38 all-leather reclining seats and eight tables, plus Sky TV on seven screens, wi-fi and a Playstation for those long hours on the motorway back to Carlisle

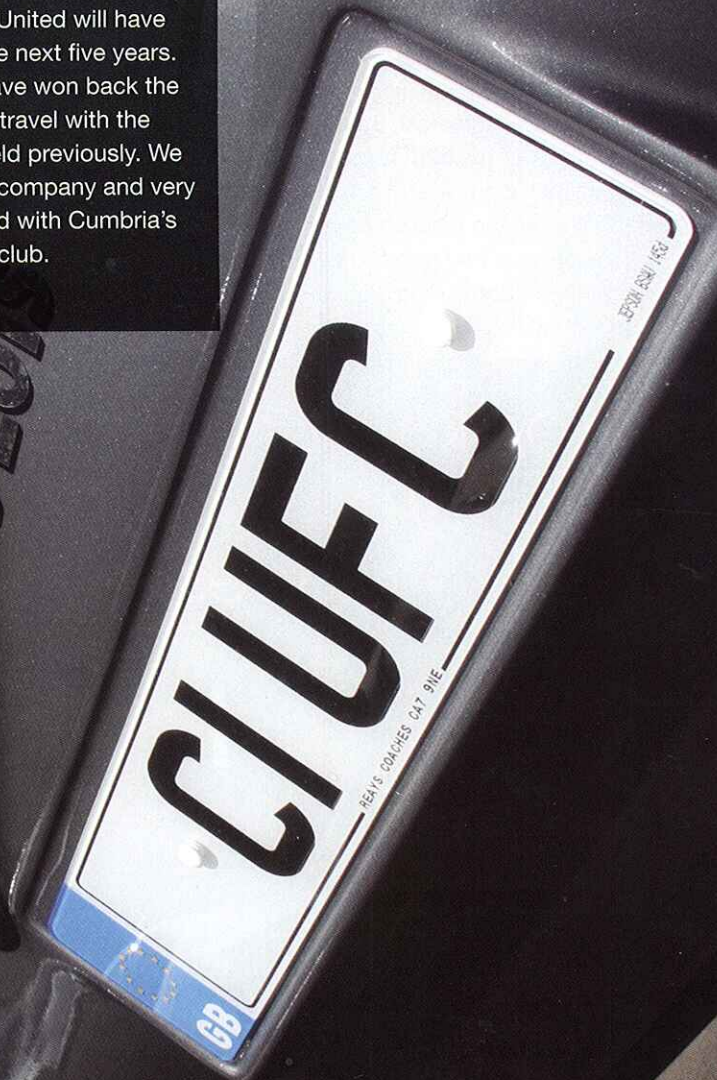
after a game. The Van Hool Astron T917 also has air-conditioning, climate control, sat nav and of course a toilet.

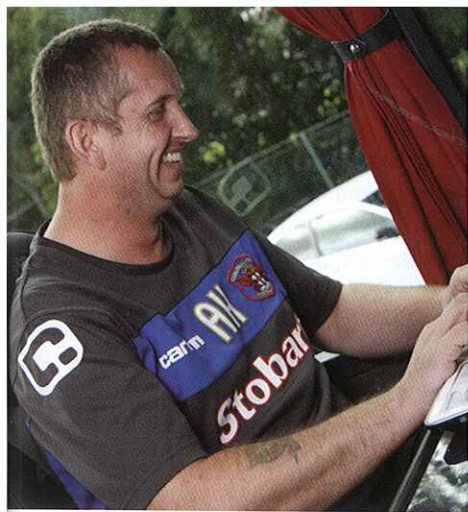
Reays' transport manager Andy Horn is certain that United's players and staff will be bowled over by the coach.

Andy, who used to be United's kit man and coach driver, said: "It is an unbelievable vehicle - an absolute joy to travel in. It is top quality throughout. We bought it from a company in Manchester who were the official travel supplier for the ECB (England Cricket Board), who used it last year."

Andy added: "Reays have invested a considerable amount of money in this coach, which Carlisle United will have exclusive use of for the next five years. We are delighted to have won back the contract for first team travel with the club, which we had held previously. We are very much a local company and very proud to be associated with Cumbria's highest-profile sports club."

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"We know the club appreciate that we have provided the official team coach at a greatly reduced cost to them to make it financially viable to have the use of such a top-quality vehicle for their players, staff and directors. The club have also thanked us for our support, which will see Reays sponsor a game this season and take two ground advertising boards. It is our way of putting something tangible back into the club."

Carlisle United fans are also able to book their tickets for away matches at Reays' city centre travel shop in Devonshire Street when they book away travel with Reays.

So who exactly are Reays? We spoke to managing director Chris Reay to find out.

Reays is a pretty well known company in Cumbria nowadays but how did it start out and when did you join the company? Reays Coaches was formed in 1985 by my parents and I started working for them in 1988. I now hold the position of managing director and I am in charge of the overall running of the company. We've worked really hard over the last 26 years to build it up into the organisation it is today where we now provide a number of services including school travel, local buses, private coach hire and even holidays in the UK and mainland Europe.

This isn't the first time that Reays have been the team coach supplier for Carlisle United? No, we have a long running relationship with the club and provided the team with travel to away games from 2003 until 2008. It was around about the time that the club went from a team that was struggling near the bottom of the Football League, and were eventually relegated to the Conference, to one that was well and truly on the up, winning back to back promotions and establishing itself in League One. Being involved with the club during this period

was brilliant and it was great to be a part of such success, which hopefully will be the same over the next five years of this deal as well.

How much does it mean as a Cumbrian firm to be involved with Carlisle United Football Club?

It means a heck of a lot to us. We like to be classed as a local firm and we're very proud of the quality of service we give to the people of Cumbria. For us to provide the first team coach travel to Carlisle United gives us a little bit of extra prestige, and helping the club to succeed can only be a good thing for the local area, as it gives people a real lift. I think the club should be applauded for working with local firms, and I know they try to do this in as many different areas as possible.

With all the travelling that the club has to do during an npower League One season, a coach that provides comfort and quality is needed, and it looks like you've managed to find that for the team this season?

The coach that the first team will use to travel to all league and cup games this season is fantastic and is designed to make sure the players arrive in the best possible condition to the game. It was originally bought by a company in Manchester to provide travel to the England Cricket team, along with another coach last year, and they spent some money on modifying them to a high standard. They quickly realised however that they only really needed one, and we were offered the chance to get the extra one. It's worth £450,000 and is a fantastic piece of kit that will do a great job on the 11,000 plus miles the team will travel this season. If the results away from home in the league at the start of the season are anything to go by, the players are certainly enjoying using it!

How does arranging travel for a football club at least twenty three times a season compare to some of the other services you offer?

You'd think it'd be a tough job but, in fairness, we must transport something like 40,000 people a week now in total, so arranging travel for the club is actually quite easy. We arrange travel for ten different football clubs now, including some teams in the Championship, so it's something we've got a lot of experience in. It also helps that Carlisle United are very easy to work with and we have a good rapport with them. They let us know what all their requirements are and we always aim to meet them. I know the directors of the club personally and they're all good guys to work with who do a great job in keeping the club moving forward.

And providing the first-team team coach isn't the only way you'll be backing the club this season?

No, we're also running a supporters bus to every first-team fixture during the 2011/12 season through our Blues Travel service, to give fans the chance to cheer on the lads across the country. That has continued to grow in popularity over the last couple of seasons and you can book for individual trips or even buy a season ticket for away travel to cover the whole season. On top of that, you can now buy your away match ticket at the same time as your travel at our shop on Devonshire Street in Carlisle. Along with sponsoring a home game during the campaign, this demonstrates our commitment to the club, and how much we want it to succeed and be a source of pride for the county.



HAIL TO THE BUS DRIVER

The coach will be driven for Reays by Mick Sinclair, of Haltwhistle, who was chosen for his experience. We took a few moments of his time before a recent away trip to find out a little bit more about the man behind the wheel.

How did you start out doing this job?

Driving coaches is something I've done for a long time now. I started out about 26 year ago with a family company in the north east, covering local jobs, and then I moved up to day excursions and holiday tour work. I was given the chance to do some team coach driving about three or four seasons ago for the previous company that I worked for, and it was something I really enjoyed. I moved on to another company and went back to doing tour work before getting a phone call from Reays earlier this year, asking me if I would like to get back into team coach work with Carlisle United. I'd done work with the club before and found it really enjoyable, so I jumped at the chance.

You seem to really enjoy the role, which I'd imagine is quite different to the day excursions and European holidays you've done in the past?

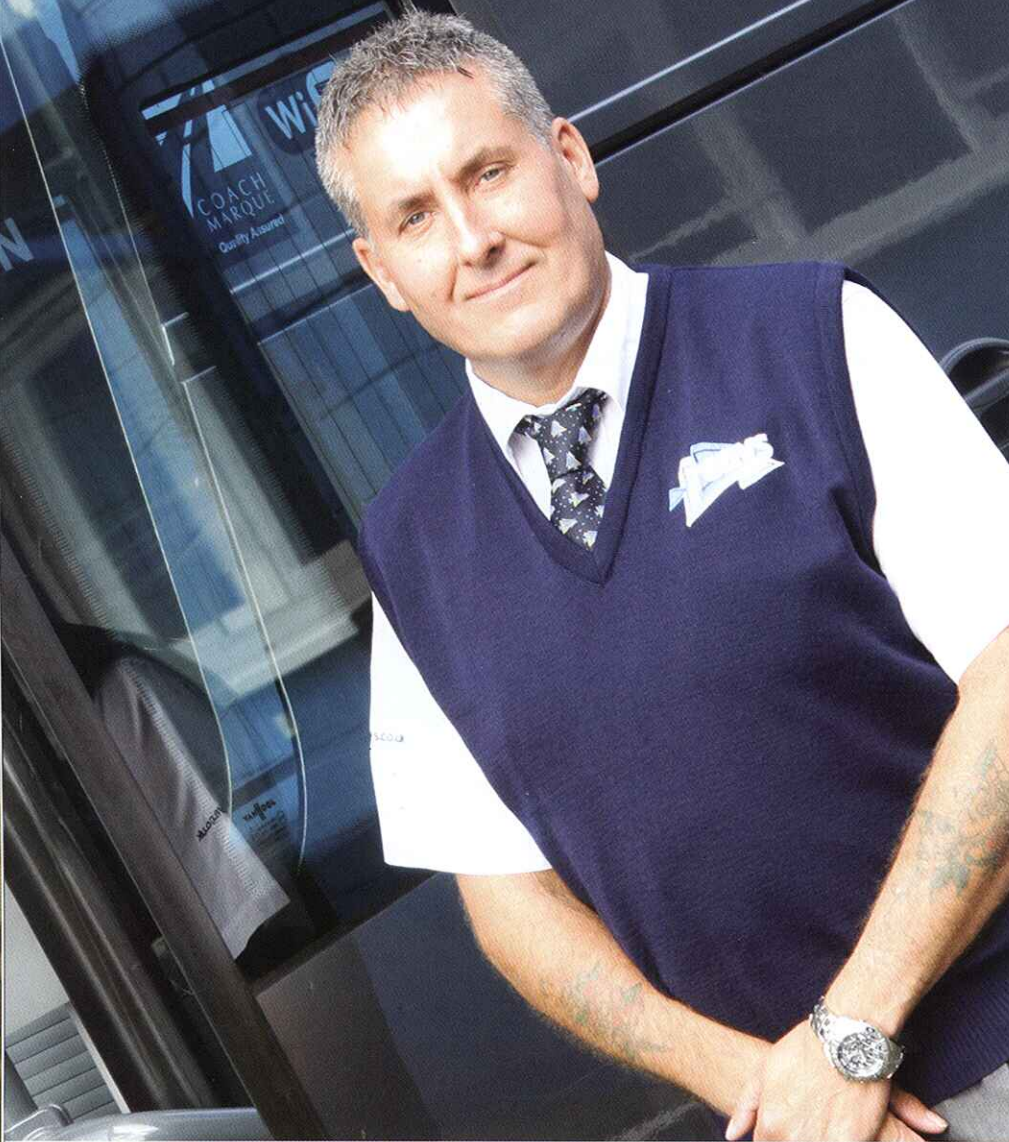
It's certainly a different challenge to those other jobs I've had. Some of the other lads you work alongside imagine there's a bit of glamour involved with taking a football team around the country, but actually there's a fair bit of hard work and planning that you need to do. You do get to know individual players from the teams you take around the country and these lads at Carlisle are a fantastic bunch. I think it does help that I'm a football fan, as it means I get to watch quite a lot of live football and I've seen some cracking games over the last few years.

All those hours on the road means you spend a lot of time with the players, and I guess they give you a bit of stick and get you involved in the banter?

Oh definitely! There's a lot of good natured stuff that gets thrown around and I'm on the end of a fair bit of it! Anything that goes wrong on a journey ends up being my fault, especially traffic jams. But it's all just a bit of fun and you can't take it too seriously.

There must be a lot of preparation that goes into planning these away trips, especially the long journeys down south?

There is a fair bit of preparation that takes place as there are quite often a number of different factors that affect what time you set off on the different legs of your journey. My first point of contact is Andy Hall who sends me a text message with details of the hotel, whether it's for an overnight stay,



or just a pre-match meal. For those games where we do travel down the day before, the team often trains at another football club on the way, and the players who live in the north east, Yorkshire or Lancashire get picked up along the route, which again affects what time you leave. Then there are the regulations about how long we are able to drive before having a break, so it's not as easy as putting a post code in a sat nav and setting off! On an overnight stay, the match day is a little bit more relaxed as all you have to worry about is getting the kit to the ground early on, which is not a problem thanks to the help of Andy, Colin Nixon and Dolly. Then you head back to the hotel and make sure the players are at the ground for about half past one for their 3 o'clock kick-off.

Do you get to relax a bit when kick-off arrives and watch the match? In one sense yes, but in another way, no. That's because you're desperate for the lads to do well and get a win. If they can pick up all three points, the mood on the way home is fantastic and the lads are all in high spirits. But if you lose then everyone's feeling quite down and the

journey seems a lot longer, even for me! I've been doing the coaches on and off for three years while Greg has been manager and he's a great guy, so I'm always hoping Carlisle can win. I see the work he puts in first hand, and he deserves success. When it gets toward the end of the game you actually switch back into preparation mode as you've got to leave before the final whistle to get the bus to the player's entrance, and organise the pick up of the post-match meal.

Since you started doing the team coach driver job, what would you say your best experience has been?

I know the result and performance weren't so good, but the Johnstone's Paint Trophy final against Southampton at Wembley was an amazing weekend. I think we stayed away for three nights and it was fantastic, training at places like Watford and staying at a great hotel. Being involved in the whole cup final experience was something not many people get the chance to do, so I'm very grateful that I was involved. I even had to lend my shoes to an individual who had forgotten his, so in one sense I was actually out there on the pitch!



Even afterwards, despite losing, the lads picked themselves up and we had quite a few drinks in the hotel. Unfortunately I wasn't driving the team coach for the final last season, and although the club has gone out of the trophy already this season, hopefully they can go on a good run in the league, get to the play-off final, and make it three seasons in a row at Wembley.



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