

O'Sheas of Kerry & Kingdom Coaches

John O'Shea might easily have joined many of his contemporaries who emigrated to America but in 1987 his father, Sean, offered to double the size of his minibus business by buying another Transit for him to drive. John accepted the offer and, as the 'Celtic Tiger' economy has boomed, he has never regretted it. And why would he regret it, not only is his own business thriving, earlier this year he started a new company, Kingdom Coaches, with a partner and took delivery of six new Bova Futuras.

Background

Sean's involvement with minibuses began in the 1970s when he drove for an operator running one 11-seat petrol Transit. When he decided to sell it, in 1978, Sean bought it and did bingo runs, Mass journeys on Sundays, pensions runs on Fridays and the usual mix of Irish rural work. His first new vehicle was a 14-seat Transit bought in 1979 and thereafter he invariably bought new, a tradition that John has largely followed. In 1989 the first Mercedes-Benz minibus was bought, a 19-seater that arrived with the wrong springs. It carried a bag of sand in the boot to alleviate the rough ride until the springs were eventually replaced.

A move into full sized coaches came in 1992 with the acquisition of a 1979 Bedford YMT Duple for a local school contract between Ballyheighe, where the business was based, and Tralee, where John now lives with his wife Mairead and sons Jonathan and Cathal, in a house next door to that of Sean. Through the 1990s growth continued, with John's brother Seamus joining the company in 1992 and ten vehicles of all sizes owned by the end of the decade.



Three generations of the O'Sheas with (LtoR) Sean and John at the rear and Jonathan and Cathal at the front.



A line up like this in the yard can only be seen in the winter months. In the summer there is frequently nothing at all in overnight.

1997 saw the purchase of the first new full sized coach, a Van Hool Alizee bodied Volvo B10M bought through Allan Vaulter of Moseley in the South who took a 1990 Plaxton Volvo in part-exchange. Further up market coaches followed including a Setra S215HD ex Kavanagh and, in 2000, a brand new Setra S315GT.HD with an Allison B500 automatic gearbox. 'I didn't get on with it,' said John, 'it needed a tanker behind to keep it full of fuel and had wiring loom problems as well as being very jumpy coming down the gears.' 2004 saw it traded in against an S315GT.HD with an early AS-Tronic transmission. 'They brought a guy from Germany to teach Irish operators how to drive them but they still used to change gear half way round roundabouts. I sold it privately last year and the guy who bought it is very happy with it.'

The B10M went in 2004 against a B12M Alizee T9 and in the same year a Sitcar Beluga bodied Vario was also bought, again through Moseley in the South. John's first Bova was a Futura FHD12.340 55-seater that arrived from the same source in 2005 to replace a Jonckheere Modulo bodied B7R. Although they can be seen in numbers throughout Europe, Bovas are still relatively uncommon in Ireland, and John placed a lot of trust in Allan's assurance that it would do the job for him. So it proved, giving no problems other than a broken switch on the ferry lift before being traded in this year. Last year, a further Beluga was bought as the first had lived up to the perception of quality John had gained when he

originally opted for it in preference to a Cheetah.

Kingdom Coaches

With O'Sheas doing well, John was approached early in 2006 by Denis Greene, who was running Castle Lough Tours in Killarney. He had won a



Three of the six new Futuras carry the gold of Kingdom Coaches.

contract from the Boston company, Grand Circle Travel, who offer two types of tour, one of which is the 12-day 'Overseas Adventure Travel' product for 16 passengers. Dennis was looking for backing to upgrade his fleet with the purchase of four 28-seat Iveco Daily 65C17 Indcar Wings from Noones. In 2006 these minicoaches ran as part of the O'Sheas fleet but in February this year a new company, Kingdom Coaches, was set up as a 50/50% joint venture and the Wings were moved into it. The Kingdom name was chosen because the County is known as the Kingdom of Kerry and a gold livery was adopted.

John said of Dennis, 'He's very good at finding work. He'll dig up contracts out of places I've never thought of going.' He added, 'an advantage of having two companies is that we can inter-hire if we need to, so I'm always making money.'

For this season, Grand Circle also wanted vehicles for up to 45 passengers on 12 and 18 day tours. The contract called for coaches with toilets, something John had always steered away from.



VDL Bova products are still relatively uncommon in Ireland, so O'Sheas order for six marks a significant breakthrough for the brand.

John had started talking to Allan Vaulter about one new Bova for O'Sheas at the 2006 Dublin Show, and this had developed to three for O'Sheas. When the new contract was won at the beginning of 2007, the deal suddenly became one for six coaches, with three going into each fleet. The only coach traded in against them was the 2005 Bova that had paved the way for them. All are 51-seaters though they are down-seated to 49 when used on GCT work. John opted for 12m rather than the longer 12.7m option because he believes it will retain a better resale value in Ireland where coaches over 12m long have not really taken off yet.

The Grand Circle work involves a lot of luggage and the Futuras have always been able to cope. John finds that passengers are very pleased with the ride, comfort, layout and style of the vehicles.

So far, the six have each covered between 40-60,000km since they were delivered in March-May and there has only been one breakdown. One blew an intake pipe to the turbo. The dealer came out to it and it was back on the road within an hour.

Literally the only criticism he has of the Bovas is that the reverse camera screen is located in the centre of the dash. It looks a



A Van Hool Alizee Alicron Volvo B12B delivered in 2004.

up. John thinks that the Irish market is moving away from Mercedes-Benz minibuses to Iveco because they are quieter, more responsive and around €20,000 cheaper. He has already sold two of the 65C17s to operators who are using them to replace Varios.

On order for the 2008 season is a 10m Bova



Futura 10.340 to Euro5 specification. Certified as a 39 seater, it will be down-seated to 35 and tables to operate on contract for Collette Vacations and will have virtually the same interior finish as the other Bovas.

Half of O'Sheas summer work is incoming tourists split 20% Americans, 20% Germans and 10% French. A further 25% of business comes from other contractors

hiring the company in and the final 25% from private hire. In winter it's all private hire work. During the winter months seven vehicles are stood down. You can't get the road tax money back but reducing the insurance to fire and theft for a few months saves on vehicles that aren't working anyway.



Full sized wheelchair lift equipped coaches are something of a rarity in Ireland at present, though Bus Eireann has a large number on order. The Dholandia lift is generally deployed at least once a week.

One of the O'Shea's Futuras is equipped with a Dholandia wheelchair lift at the nearside. It has a capacity of 51 or 39 and three wheelchairs.

John commented, 'when I first bought a Bova I wasn't really sure what I was buying in to. There had previously only been two new Futuras in Ireland, and they had only stayed a season, as well as three or four secondhand.' Now he is a believer saying, 'the match of the engine and gearbox in the Bova drive-train is perfect. It reacts, but it isn't aggressive. There's plenty of power and everything is right. They average about 11mpg when you're pushing to get nine in a Volvo locally, though they will do 10-10.5mpg on a straight run to Dublin. It's the only downside on a Volvo. I wouldn't have looked at a DAF engine five years ago, they didn't have the reputation.'

good idea but when a driver is reversing and turning the wheel the spoke of the wheel obscures the screen. Moseley's have arranged for the screens to be relocated on all six coaches in the near future.

Currently the two fleets operate 14 vehicles between them. O'Shea's have the three Futuras, the Volvo B12M, one Beluga and an Esker Riada on a Sprinter 616 that will be sold to make way for another Indcar Wing on a Daily 65C18. A VW Caravelle has recently been sold. Kingdom's fleet is the three Futuras, and five Wings, one of which is a 2007 model on a 65C18. The four 65C17s are scheduled to be replaced with new 65C18s because he believes they represent a further step



Schools and wheelchairs

Private hire and contract work is the focus of both fleets but this was not always the case for O'Sheas. John explained, 'we used to do a lot of Bus Eireann contracts taking kids to school but we fell out with them over rates a few years ago. It didn't match up with what I wanted. A year

later, there was a bad accident in which five children were killed on an old coach and after that they would pay an extra 20% on the rate if you ran a 1997 coach or newer. We had already been running coaches that new. I still don't do any runs taking kids to school and I'm happy not to, but we do a lot of work during the school day when the rates are better. There's a lot of work between 09.00 and 16.00 in winter. Teachers like the comfort and reliability and don't want to travel on school buses. I've built up a good reputation for

operator

delivering comfort and reliability.'

'One secondary school locally has 1,100 children including three in wheelchairs who need transporting to different events. I thought there was a need for a wheelchair-lift-equipped coach. At present there are only two 12m wheelchair equipped coaches in Ireland, ours and one with Cronins of Cork, though next year Bus Eireann will get 129 and I'm buying them as a taxpayer. There are quite a few 14-20 seater accessibles around but they won't take a wheelchair and a class of children and the kid's parents don't want them following behind in a taxi. We find that we're out at least once a week with it using the lift.'

'I tried to get a grant for the wheelchair from various Government departments but I couldn't. We had to stand the €20,000 extra ourselves, though there's no problem with the Government paying for them for Bus Eireann.'

As you can tell from this, the publicly owned Bus Eireann operation, with its outdated practices and monopoly of most express routes, is something of a sore point with John. He refers to it as, 'the third company that I own.'

The Irish authorities rarely stop coaches and weigh them, though it is not unusual for a coach visiting the UK to be weighed at Holyhead. By chance, the lift-equipped Futura was stopped there when carrying 51 passengers and their luggage and there was no problem.

Something of an Irish phenomenon is the annual Rose of Tralee event. It is a personality contest rather than a beauty competition open to any girl with Irish blood. Every August, people from across the globe come to the town to for the eight day event, the first four days of which is spent touring Ireland followed by four days in Tralee. It receives extensive television coverage and O'Sheas provides the coaches, using the latest vehicle with special sign-writing that stays on thereafter. This year the wheelchair equipped Bova carried out the main work.

Family

It is a family business in which John is MD and both Sean and Seamus are directors. In addition, another brother, Anthony, runs the company's Boston, Massachusetts office, having been in the USA for the past six years. Anthony has reason to thank the family involvement in transport. One Friday, some years ago, John got a call from three



Positive experience with a Futura bought new in 2005 encouraged John to return to the marque this year. A shorter Futura 10.340 is on order for 2008.

girls in London who were flying into Cork to spend the weekend in Dingle. One of the girls missed her flight and arrived three hours late and needed another car. Anthony didn't really want to go, but



John's only complaint about the Futuras is the location of the reversing camera in the centre of the instrument panel, because it is obscured if you turn the wheel when reversing. Moseley in the South are arranging for them all to be relocated.

he did in the end and met Melissa, subsequently marrying her. 'So good things do come out of taxi runs,' said John.



The premises at the rear of Seamus O'Shea's house have been the base for the past 11 years. John doubts that he would have been permitted to run from such a site in the UK but has never had a complaint from the neighbours, despite the need to reverse into the entrance off a busy road.

Premises

It is true to say that the yard that is currently the company's main operating base is unlike many you will see in the UK. It sits behind Seamus O'Shea's modern house, in the middle of a residential area of Tralee that was only erected 11 years ago. Furthermore, getting in and out of it requires either that you reverse in off a main road, or that you reverse out. Space is available to park up to five full sized coaches and two of the smaller ones, but manoeuvring them isn't easy. No mechanical work is undertaken at the site, as this is all contracted out, with Kerry Truck Sales, a DAF dealer outside Tralee, looking after the

Bovas. Were they needed; mechanical facilities exist at the original garage site in Ballyheigue where the business started.

Surprisingly, there have never been any complaints from the neighbours, though John recognises that the situation is far from ideal in the long run. To this end, he has bought an 18-acre farm two miles further out of Tralee. Though it would clearly be an immensely more suitable location to operate from, he is currently having some difficulty obtaining the planning permission he wants. He has the go-ahead to convert the site but not for the entrance arrangements to the main road. 'I'm hopeful it will be resolved in the next six months so that we can build a three-bay workshop, offices and driver's accommodation.'

He also has another vision for the site. 'There's enough land up there to house a park and ride site for the town' he said, though it may be a while away from being needed. At present Tralee's population is 25,000 and growing at around 1,000 a year, though many more people are about in the summer months.

Since he bought the farm, a new road has been announced that will pass nearby and provide much quicker connections locally and to the main roads out of town.

Drivers

The heavily seasonal nature of the work sees a full time driving complement of 20 drop to seven during the winter. However, 'winter is getting shorter. Our last tour finished on 16 November and we start again on 1 March.'

Seasonal drivers come from a variety of walks of life. Some are framers, some go back to building and others take the winter off. They are all drawn from the area between Killarney and Tralee. John finds that operating newer coaches helps to attract enough drivers to get by. He is conscious that the driver's CPC is coming in next October but says, 'if you have a licence already you'll have five years

to do your 35 hours.' He does think the legislation will ultimately create a problem for part time drivers.



This is the second of two Sitcar Beluga 2 bodied Mercedes-Benz Variator that have been operated.

At present, 'I get calls in March from drivers saying, "when am I starting?" or calls from their wives asking, "when is he going out?"'

Ireland

I asked John in what ways he felt that operating in the Irish Republic was different to operating in the UK. 'It's a small country,' he said. 'Do we know too much about each other nationwide? We all



One of four Indcar Wing bodied Iveco Daily 65C17s in the Kingdom Coaches fleet. All were supplied by Noones.

talk, but do we all say the truth - that's another thing. We have lots of contacts and I'd be hopeful that if I had a problem anywhere in Ireland that I'd have a coach to cover within an hour.'

'Apart from Bus Eireann, there are perhaps only five companies in the country that are not family

owned businesses, nearly all are,' he said, adding, 'the roads are getting better too. The national speed limit for coaches is 80km/h so all of my vehicles are limited to 95km/h which is under the car limit and is acceptable outside Ireland.'

In terms of regulation, the rules are somewhat different in that single route licensing remains the order of the day, meaning that there is generally only one operator allowed to provide services on a given route. Invariably that operator is the state owned Bus Eireann operation although it has lost out recently on a couple of

new routes including the Dublin port Tunnel route and the direct M1 motorway route from Drogheda to Dublin. 'The wall is being broken down slowly,' said John, who believes that CTC, the Irish trade organisation, is doing a good job putting the case against Bus Eireann using its subsidy to cut out private operators. He isn't a member of CTC yet, but says he probably will join.

Another campaign CTC is running is to push for the retention of the fuel rebate that operators currently enjoy. 'We're paying €1.16 (around 77p) a litre for diesel and we can't claim VAT back on anything except coaches bought that are no more than two years old, providing that they are above a specified and have a certain amount of luggage space.'

'At present we can claim 0.34533cents per litre on fuel used on tours, school contracts, service and express. The EC are trying to stop it. Our rebate on tours this year is €20,000 for O'Sheas and around €15,000 for Kingdom Coaches. I still have to put in for the service work I do for Bus Eireann. That's a variety of relief, breakdowns and

other exceptionals, train as well as bus, because this is the end of the line to Dublin. I would need €100,000 more turnover to make that €20,000 and if they take the subsidy away rates would have to go up.

The current price of AdBlue is around €0.45 (33p) a litre plus VAT at 21% but garages don't have it. O'Sheas get theirs through Kerry Truck Sales.

Returning to rates, John thought that those for mini and midicoaches were generally acceptable but that those for 12m coaches were at least €100 a day behind where they should be.

Perhaps more of a problem in Ireland than the UK is tour companies insistence that vehicles are no more than five years old, and preferably no more than four. As every Irish plate starts with the two year numbers and private or dateless plates are not permitted, it is easy for anyone to see how old a vehicle is. 'The industry has tried to get



The rear of the lift-equipped Futura showing the 'Rose of Tralee' branding.

private plates for buses, coaches and taxis but the Government won't budge,' said John.

On vehicle retention he said, 'we might push it to six years but that would be the maximum.' Everything we have is new. Apart from the 2004 Volvo the oldest we have is now 2006. I don't like nines in plates. I probably won't buy in 2009 because a few years later it will seem much older than a 2010 because it is of the same decade.'

Future

A concern at present is the very weak state of the dollar, with Iraq announcing that it no longer wants to sell oil in dollars. John commented, 'Ireland has a big dependency on the dollar and 90% of Kingdom Coaches' work comes from the USA. A recession in the USA affects Ireland.'

In the past Ireland has not enforced regulations as tightly as we do in the UK, but John believes that they are heading that way. He is really critical of the 12-day rule which he sees as treating the bus as a truck. 'The passengers don't like changing drivers in the middle of a tour and the drivers don't like it either.'

Last word

It isn't long ago that Ireland was where the UK industry sent its tired old coaches to get rid of them. Now, fleets such as O'Shea's of Kerry and Kingdom Coaches are running only the most modern coaches, you see very few elderly coaches about and it's far more likely that Ireland's cast offs will migrate to the UK than the other way round.

Stuart Jones



This farm four miles out of Tralee has been purchased to provide a new depot. Planning permission for the new buildings has been granted but access to the main road is proving more difficult to obtain.