

BUS LADY

Alice Drinkwater was 78 when she started her first internet business. She ran it from her tied cottage where there was no broadband connection and no mobile signal, no mains electricity, no gas or mains water. Alice was stubborn, determined, astute and creative, and her energetic nature belied her age.

When her husband, James, was alive he had been a farm-worker on a West-country estate. The wages had always been poor and despite his loyal service of 61 years his income had been an unjust reward. But with the job came a small cottage. It came at a time when homes for farm labourers were very scarce and James and Alice were grateful for it. The small stone-built cottage was on the north-west corner of the estate, far from the farmhouse. It was damp with an earth floor and a roof that was part slated and part thatched. But it had its own well with sweet-tasting water that never ran dry. A stream flowed at the bottom of the small field that came with the cottage. It was surrounded by birdsong and the only other sound was the flow of the stream that in later years overrode the hum of the generator. For James and Alice it was simply home and they never aspired to be anywhere else.

After some years, the landowner, mindful that a healthy labourer worked better, put in a stone floor with huge thick slabs, replaced the cracked glass in the small windows and slated the whole roof. After that the cottage remained untouched unless James found time and energy to maintain it. It was simply called The Cottage.

When James died, still working for 'his Lordship' as James called him, the owner waited a barely-decent three months before issuing Alice with a notice to quit the cottage. The threat would have frightened a lesser woman. Alice looked through the thin folder of mildewed papers that represented what James had called 'his office'. She remembered something James had said when they first moved in. "Ours for life", he had said. She found what she was looking for and smiled to herself. It was a single foolscap sheet, nibbled at the corners, presumably by mice, signed by the then landlord, stating that the cottage tenancy was for life. The key detail for Alice was that the document was addressed, rather unusually for the time, to Mr and Mrs James Drinkwater.

Alice caught the bus into town the next day, applied for Legal Aid, got it, went to court and won her case. The magistrate said that whilst the document was totally inadequate by today's standards, the evidence was irrefutable: Alice had the equal right to stay in 'The Cottage for life, just as James had had the right, and that right was not dependant on James' employment nor him even being alive. The landowner was bound by the generous terms of his predecessor. Alice had no intention of moving out. The first battle was won.

Apart from her own pension, Alice had few funds. James had been careful to save what he could and he had added to his income by rearing a few pigs and by selling some skilfully carved walking sticks at the local market. Alice estimated that she could afford to pay her rent and bills for the next nine months if she was frugal. After that...

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Some weeks later, Alice was sitting on the top deck of the bus to Barnstaple with her laptop balanced on her knees. It was tricky typing when the road was potholed or when the bus swung around bends but she coped. She had signed on to a free Computers for Beginners Course for the over 60s in the village hall and she had amazed her instructor with her quick understanding and her keyboard skills. His unbelieving comments made Alice laugh. When the instructor found out that Alice had no computer of her own, he came in one day with a laptop. "I've got five of my own at home. This one is a few years old but it should do you fine. Please accept it as a token of my admiration." It took all of Alice's determined spirit to suppress her independence and pride in order to receive the gift.

Once she had got some basic skills, Alice typed an article entitled, "Day in the Life of an English Slave". She wrote about James' routine on the farm when he was only 14. She posted it to a magazine who had said, 'No unsolicited material accepted' but Alice's title caught the attention of the editor as it had been intended to. The article was published. Alice was added to the team of regular contributors and she wrote monthly instalments on James' life. Monthly payments came in regularly but they were unlikely to be enough to keep Alice in 'The Cottage long term.

In the library Alice looked at the national and regional newspapers and noted that they all contained articles that went beyond the current news to include opinions and features. In some respects they were becoming more like magazines. She wrote two more articles: "Wildlife Through the Eyes of a Serf" and "When a Woman Scrimps". She sent them both to a selection of papers and was amazed when they were accepted by a national daily. The Features Editor stunned Alice by telling her that the paper was part of a large group and her articles would be syndicated within the group.

Writing came easily to Alice. She avoided journalistic techniques and told her story just as she would talk to a neighbour. Several editors told her that that was what they liked about her work.

Buses were essential for her business, though she never gave away what she was doing. The whole business model was started when she had just missed her bus from town. As it pulled away without her, she angrily shouted to herself, "He saw me! A proper country driver would have waited for me." In her anger she nearly missed the key to her whole projected business. On the back window of the bus was a large sign, 'FREE WiFi'.

Instead of brooding on the driver, Alice went into a Costa and had a cup of tea. She pondered and she planned. She knew business people worked on their train journeys because she'd heard a neighbouring farmer scoffing about a local finance man who commuted to London every day but spent a shortened day in his office because he put in four hours work on the train. "What kind of life is that?" the farmer had cried. Alice thought, "Well, if the train can be a person's workplace with Wifi, why not a bus?"

Most days Alice caught her local bus. There was only one in the morning and a return in the afternoon. If it didn't turn up she waited till the next day to send manuscripts online or to contact clients and say the network had been down. When Alice reached the bus station, she had a choice of routes on which to move her mobile office. She liked the kind of route that wound through lanes to outlying villages because these slow journeys lasted longer before she had to get off. One bus route took 25 minutes meandering through lanes before rejoining the main road only 1½ miles from its start.

Her income grew as her reputation grew. She was more than able to pay her rent and living expenses and she began to save substantial sums of money. She chose to go upstairs on the double-decker buses because it was quieter. Apart from the few passengers who climbed up for the view from the front seats she largely had the space to herself. On single-deckers she found that people asked her what she was doing and tried to read her screen. Then she realised that what was a bit of a trial for her could be a new opportunity. She listened to conversations or snatched remarks; she noted different characters among the passengers, the bus-pass holders and the fare-paying; and she saw another idea for a series of articles: *Bus People*. Because Alice travelled regularly on a variety of routes, she observed how groups formed, how some people deliberately sat far from anyone else as she had on the top deck, how some were absorbed in their smart phone or tablet or were isolated from the world around them by their headphones. She heard one side of conversations from people who thought it necessary to shout down their phone and she imagined what was said at the other end of each call.

Alice had to discipline herself to concentrate on her work at times but subconsciously she was gathering material for a new project—a novel. When she submitted her manuscript of *Bus People* to a selection of publishers, her reputation as a contributor to newspapers and magazines guaranteed her work at least reached the readers who sift manuscripts and present them to editors. Three publishers bid against each other for the rights to her book and she was astute enough to recognise which one would best promote her book. *Bus People* was reprinted several times in its first six months and Alice was on a bus to Tiverton when she got a message about a film deal.

Alice was approaching her 90th birthday. She had no family, so her celebrations would be with a few ladies who had joined her on her bus. She had found out that each one wanted to catch up with technology but had never had anyone to teach them. Alice taught them how to use a laptop and a smart phone. She held her classes on the bus and other passengers were amazed to see a group of five white-haired old ladies working on computers. They became known, not always kindly, as the IT5.

At 90 Alice was still sprightly though she no longer climbed upstairs on the buses. She cut down on the amount of work she did on the bus journeys because she enjoyed her conversations with all sorts of people. Some friends and neighbours were sharply critical

of her remaining in The Cottage when surely she could afford somewhere more comfortable, but Alice was happy there. When a new film was launched called IT5, Alice had some minor improvements made to The Cottage, mainly in the kitchen. Her bus journeys were now not only her communication centres, they were also a major source of inspiration for her writing.

One day, there was a loud series of knocks on Alice's door. She opened it to her landlord.

"May I come in," he shouted.

"Whatever you have to say, you may say it here," Alice replied.

"I've come to ask you if you finally are prepared to move out. I'm sure you can afford somewhere more in keeping with the reputation I've heard about and I am selling the estate. Put it on the market last week."

"Yes, I am ready to move out. On one condition."

"Name it."

"That you sell the estate to me," said Alice.