

## **Two Mile Ash Site.**

These pages are about the history and development of bus and coach services in an area approximately corresponding to that covered by the largest and most influential company – United Counties Omnibus co Ltd; (Now part of Stagecoach East) From its headquarters in Northampton, it's sphere of influence stretched from Stamford and Market Harborough in the north down to Oxford, Aylesbury, and Luton in the south. From Daventry in the west to Bedford and Biggleswade in the east it covered virtually the whole of the southeast midlands.

### **Uniting the Counties**

Amongst the various good things Great Britain has give the world – such items as diverse as fish and chips the operetta's of Gilbert and Sullivan and the music of the Beatles – is the word 'Bus', an abbreviation of "Omnibus" defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "road vehicle plying on a fixed route and open to all comers". The use of the word has spread throughout the world. Although, as Francophile's will quickly point out the word and the vehicle was invented by a Frenchman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who with colleagues ran a short lived service in Paris in the early 1660's,

In spite of it's prefix 'omni' = all,

The word has acquired a social stigma for it is still considered, even in this cluttered car age, to be a socially inferior activity to use a bus.

The writer finds it amusing to hear silly motorists complaining about traffic congestion, journey times and parking problems but proudly stating they cannot remember the last time they rode on a bus – which does them no credit.

Perhaps attitudes will change as towns inexorably grind to a halt with the ever-increasing car use – even in such places as Milton Keynes, a town planed and built for car use, traffic jams ("grid lock is the jargon") are commonplace with double Decker coaches operating park and ride services entrapped and but a quarter full.

Incidentally although it is socially unacceptable to use a bus, in the late Victorian and Edwardian times the working classes used trams and 3<sup>rd</sup> class railway carriages but the middle class used the horse and early motor buses that were able to easily penetrate the leafy suburbs without all the infrastructure of train tracks and power lines.

Ever since man stood on two legs he has felt the urge to move around, granted only initially to obtain food and shelter.

Eventually track ways evolved and traces of two such ancient ways can still be found in the region covered by this book.

In the south the Icknield Way on the scarp slope of the Chilton Hills northeastward past Ivinghoe and Dunstable to Norfolk.

In the north the Jurassic Way, progressing from the Cotswold's and Downlands again northeastwards thorough the Northamptonshire uplands to the Lincolnshire Wolds.

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The innovative Romans realised the importance of good, well maintained roads for the successful running of a far flung Empire and again we have Waling Street heading northwest across the area from London to eventually North Wales and much used by buses and coaches these past years.

With the demise of 'Pax Romania' the roads soon degenerated into muddy indiscernible tracks although with an important castle at Northampton Monarchs and their retinue traversed the area.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the Civil Wars, both Royalists and Parliamentarians used the roads for munitions convoys.

Once peace and prosperity returned the need for a vehicle suitable for public use became apparent, Private coaches had been available and used by the wealthy and well to do since medieval times and by the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century the forerunner of the modern taxi cars made it's Appearance.

Called a Hackney Carriage this adopted the principle still used today it could be hired by members of the public for travel, Usually within towns,

However financial success for it's owner departed, obviously on frequent use an element of chance became apparent – the problem of finding a carriage when one was needed.

It was soon realised the advantages to be gained by running services of vehicles over a give set timetable over a given routes and the stage coach system came into being. These gave reasonable opportunities to travel between London and the provinces. Although journeys were still long and difficult they were a considerable improvement in the alterative of the slow and cumbersome Stage Wagon.

Passengers had seats and company – in a Stage Wagon you were amongst goods and chattels, all right if they were bales of woolen cloth or fleeces but not so if wooden barrels.

One of these Stage Wagons was advertised in the Northampton Mercury newspaper of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1782 as leaving town at 2am on Wednesday and Friday and arriving in London at 4am on Thursdays and Saturdays – journey time of 26 hours for some 66 miles.

Allowing for stops to pick up and set down goods and change horses – a speed of 3 mph.

It was give the title Flying wagon – presumably indicating an express service.

Indeed in the same newspaper some months previously in January 1782 a farm at Cold Ashby was advertised for sale and one of its attributes was the butter for the London Markets.

The village is over 10 mile north of Northampton so nearly 80 miles from London – let us hope the butter arrived before the expiration of its sell by date!

One other form of transport, whilst having little effect on passenger transport in the area did have an affect on the carriage of goods was that of canals.

Once the Industrial Revolution gathered momentum in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century reliable and cheap transport was required to distribute the goods, mainly textiles and coals to consumers at home and for export.

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Roads were in a parlous state and rivers were affected by the weather and perversely were often missing from areas where needed, for example the Black Country and Birmingham.

Canals were the answer but their fascinating history lies outside the scope of these pages.

Suffice to say the important Grand Junction (now the Grand Union) between London and Birmingham (for onward connections to the north), entered our area at Tring and passed through Leighton Buzzard, Fenny Stratford, Blisworth, (with its famous tunnel) and onwards to the Midlands, Branch canals served the market towns Aylesbury, Newport Pagnell, Buckingham and Northampton.

Turnpike Trusts were set up in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to improve the major highways; tolls were imposed on users of the roads the income being used to pay for maintenance.

Civil engineers, including the respected Thomas Telford were employed to realign and re-grade existing roads and Telford in particular was involved in such work on Watling Street (now the modern A5 road)

The Royal Mail was carried on these improved roads in specially designed and constructed vehicles called, not surprisingly Mail Coaches that maintained a speed of at least 6mph, much faster than Stage Coaches and Wagons.

The routes between London, the Midlands both passed through our area from Peterborough in the east (the present A1), Luton, Bedford and Kettering (A6) Northampton (A50), Dunstable, Towcester (A5), and Aylesbury (A41).

Many long distance Mail and Stagecoaches - 20 a day to and from Birmingham passed through Towcester alone, (but the Royal Mail to Birmingham went through Aylesbury and Banbury).

In 1830, five coaches went daily through Northampton bound for Manchester including the Royal Mail at 3am having left the post office in the Strand at 8pm the previous evening and traveled via St Albans, Dunstable, Woburn and Newport Pagnell.

In addition to these long distance progenitors of National Express there were local coaches starting from the market towns in our area and whilst mostly their destination was London, there were a variety of cross-country routes including;

Cambridge, Huntingdon, Northampton, Daventry, Birmingham.

Cambridge, Northampton Oxford.

Cambridge, Bedford, Leighton Buzzard, Aylesbury, Oxford.

Routes incidentally still exist in some form nearly 200 years later – the X5 Stagecoach Express, Cambridge, Bedford, Milton Keynes, (a small village on a country lane between Newport Pagnell and Bletchley 200 years ago) and Oxford being a good example.

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The local coach routes were organised and financed by local people, often local merchants and innkeepers (who it might be said had a vested interest as the usual pickup points were Inns).

They also generate local patronage in their use, travelers preferring to use the local town coach rather than that of a long distance competitor providing of course the local operators fare was not excessive!

The settled situation of coach travel of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was soon to be uprooted for in 1838 came the London to Birmingham Railway providing competition on the London services that no coaching organisation could resist.

Rail travel was quicker and cheaper for the prime mover; a steam engine pulled many carriages each containing more passengers than a single coach pulled by four horses.

However until the proliferation of main and branch railway lines by the 1850's, some coaches continued to be used as feeder services and even the London to Birmingham passengers had to revert to coach travel between Bletchley (Denbigh Hall) and rugby whilst the Kilsby Tunnel and earthworks at Roade were completed.

Just before railways came into general use the motive power of the train engine was used in road vehicles.

These steam carriages were faster and larger than their horse drawn sisters, speeds of up to 20 mph were obtained but this speed had an adverse effect on the road surface applicable tolls were increased by the Turnpike Trusts to recover their maintenance costs,

Such measures soon killed off the experiment.

Moreover Parliament, concerned about the damage and cost to highways, passed various Acts including the famous (or Infamous) one of 1865 limiting mechanical speed to 4 mph with a man bearing a red flag preceding it to warn horse traffic of its approach, it seems Parliament had a down on road transport, for almost a hundred years earlier in 1773, an Act was passed ordering the wheels of the Stage Wagons to be at least 16 inches (about 40 centimetres) (about 40 cm's) wide as narrower rims cut up the road surface.

The only mechanical road vehicles, apart from bicycles, likely to be encountered in mid /late Victorian England were the slow cumbersome traction engine used by Agricultural Contractors to power threshing machines and to plough and cultivate the land for arable crops.

A few of these engines have survived and fully restored, are the centre of attraction at rallies throughout the country.

Whilst country and inter-urban roads degenerated into rural backwaters the omnipresent railway and cities and towns the tramway and horse bus catered for the traveling public's needs.

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As early as 1829 George Shillibeer began running an omnibus from Paddington Green in West London eastwards along Marylebone and Euston Roads and then through Islington down to the Bank.

The vehicle was single deck with a rear entrance and perimeter seating – quite different in shape to the Stage Coaches.

It left Paddington at 9am, noon, 3-6 and 8pm and the fare was one shilling (5p) an awful amount of money in 1829.

Other routes and operators were soon established both in London and other large cities.

Tramcars running on tracks had commenced in New York by 1831 and the idea soon spread to Europe.

The first in England was at Birkenhead in 1860 followed by routes in London a year later, The Tramways Act of 1870 the procedure to obtain Parliamentary approval simpler and from then on tramways proliferated. Horses were still the most popular means of haulage but cable and steam power were also used.

A well-known steam hauled tramway ran between Stony Stratford and Wolverton with a short-lived western extension to Deanshanger.

The line was nearly three miles long, It opened in 1887 and its huge cars seating up to a hundred passengers each, were used mostly by workmen at the LNWR works at Wolverton, There were three steam engines to pull the cars, each engine carefully designed to comply with the Act of 1879 that “*no smoke or steam be allowed to escape*”, The tramway came under control of the LNWR in 1920 and closed down in 1926, a casualty of the General Strike of that year.

Northampton, fittingly for the largest town in this area commenced operation of a horse drawn tramway in 1818, Operated initially by the Northampton Street Tramways Co, it was taken over by the Corporation in 1901 and electrified in 1904;

By 1914 there were nearly six and a half miles of route,

A Trolleybus cross-town service linking with the tramway terminus was authorised in 1911 but not constructed,

Corporation Buses replaced the trams in 1934.

Luton started running electric trams in 1908 over 5.25 miles of route,

The track was owned by Luton Council but the actual services were provided by a private company.

Eventually the Council took over the whole operation until replaced by buses in 1932.

The Council sold the bus undertaking to United Counties in 1970 and subsequently resold to Luton and District and, currently Arriva.

The red flag Act was repealed in 1896 with the maximum speed increased to a startling 12mph! Motor Bus services soon came into being, the first apparently in Edinburgh in 1898.

One of the first rural bus services nationwide was in our area and ran a 12 seated bus between Newport Pagnal and Olney,

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One of its backers was the local MP; Sir Walter Carlile who lived in his country mansion, Gayhurst House nearby, Sir Walter was an early motor enthusiast and was the first MP to arrive at the House of Commons in his own motorcar.

Vehicles became reliable and although predominantly petrol engine a few companies used steam power.

The Companies were set up and managed by men with entrepreneurial skills and, foresight with a indeed, foresight with a vision of the future. Sharing their foresight were the railway companies for the Great Western commenced services in Cornwall in 1903 with others soon following including the LNWR and Midland Railways who were both responsible railway services in our area.

United Counties origins just preceded the Great War for although Wellingborough Omnibus Co. was registered on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1915, becoming United Counties on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1921, with a fleet of some 40 Leyland single and double-decker buses some dating back to 1912. The delightful story of the origins, whilst sounding apocryphal is apparently true.

The London General Omnibus Co, had a depot in Bedford and in early 1913 a driver and conductor hired a bus “for a private party” one Saturday. This continued for several further Saturdays so, with suspicions aroused the LGO sent an official on a motorcycle to follow the bus and log its activities.

It was found to be operating a very profitable Wellingborough Town service with its enterprising crew, So the Wellingborough Motor Omnibus Co was formed to take advantage of the potential.

The Great War had a dramatic and to our generation, an unimaginable effect on the social side of society.

The young spared from the conflict returned to civilian life with changed attitudes and a more independent view of society.

The dreadful war machine had, as a side effect, done much to enhance vehicle design and construction.

With their independence of mind and a plethora of refurbished Army lorries, many young men spent their gratuity on purchasing a vehicle and setting up as transport carriers.

Many of the vehicles had ingenious “convertible ” bodywork, a lorry version being used on weekdays to carry goods whereas on Friday evenings this was removed or adapted for passenger use. On Saturdays it would carry passengers to and from the Market Towns.



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