

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - Oct 2018

Smith's Coaches of Reading

Local historian and author Paul Lacey recalled the history of Smith's Coaches of Reading in an illustrated talk at Wargrave Local History Society's October meeting.

Alf Smith had been the gardener for a north Oxfordshire vicar, but following his father's move to Berkshire, Alf took an apprenticeship at a Reading garage. During WW1, he served in France in the Army Service Corps. When the war ended, he was employed at the "Slough Dump", from where thousands of former military vehicles were sold, many to ex-servicemen, who set up haulage, bus, or charabanc companies. Alf was made redundant in 1921, so bought an ex-army Thornycroft chassis and a load of spares. However, having refurbished it, he could not find a buyer, so his mother-in-law



suggested that the lorry body be replaced by a char-a-banc body one. Called The Bluebird, and in partnership with Charlie Tanton (engaged to Alf Smith's sister-in-law) this was put on the road in 1922, the first trip being from Reading to Bracknell, Bagshot and return via Finchampstead (an area mainly gorse and heather at the time). Soon they were being asked to take parties to the coast, Southsea being particularly popular. In 1923, Smith and Tanton bought a new charabanc based on a Lancia chassis of much more modern design. It a 6 cylinder engine, 4 wheel brakes, a lower built chassis and had pneumatic tyres (so it was allowed to travel at 20 mph, rather than the 12 mph maximum for solid tyred vehicles). As a result, much longer trips were possible, with Cheddar Caves becoming popular. The 1924 British Empire Exhibition was very popular (Thames Valley ran daily trips there) and many other competing vehicles were put on the road, and the Exhibition was repeated the following year.

Towards the end of 1925, however Alf Smith and Charlie Tanton had a major disagreement (following an accident to a hired vehicle Charlie had been driving), and so the partnership was ended. Charlie Tanton traded independently until 1929, when he went bankrupt trying to compete with Alf Smith. Both used the name The Bluebird for a while, but to distinguish the two firms, another of Alf Smith's sisters-in law suggested he adopt the name The Rainbow Coaches, and it was at this stage that the orange was added to their livery.

Meanwhile, the development of coaches was continuing apace. Side windows were added, and although there was still a canvas roof, there was a back panel, later extended to allow for the addition of a large rack on the roof, whilst later a solid front dome was added to the front of the roof. These last two features became necessary as the long distance express services introduced in the late 1920s needed to carry passenger's luggage, and announce at the front where the coach was going and who owned it. More

express routes were added to the initial Southsea one, serving resorts from Margate to Weymouth. Smith's also took over the Silver Grey Coaches, of south Reading, run by Charlie Cox. Mr Cox also had a holiday village at Highcliffe (Hampshire), served by his coaches, and part of the sale agreement was that Smith's continued to operate this.

When WW2 started, much coach work was stopped, and about a third of Smith's vehicles were requisitioned by the military. Alf Smith had good relations with vehicle dealers, however, and managed to acquire a number of replacements, notably from the Isle of Wight. Work at this period included carrying workers to munitions and aircraft factories, and prisoners of war to work on farms.

After the war, there was difficulty in obtaining more vehicles, but Smith's again bought vehicles from the military, including some of those they had requisitioned. Many were in poor condition, but the company staff were skilled in getting them back to a usable condition. One of the other vehicles obtained at the time had pre-war been a Green Line coach. Smith's installed a new engine, windows and seats etc, upon which Green Line wanted it back. As they were not prepared to pay the cost of the work done, it remained, re-registered, with Smith's. To aid the shortage of vehicles, 32 old single deckers were obtained from Scotland. They were not 'pretty', but meant the company got services running again quickly. People were keen to travel - on just 1 day Smith's sent 66 coaches out on their express services, each passenger being booked on paper charts (long before computer systems could do such tasks). The company also had a fleet of cars, so that if 3 or 4 people from an outlying village had booked, they could be taken by car to meet the coaches in Mill Lane. Church groups, outings, factory workers and villages would all arrange an 'annual outing' - the Biro factory, for example, hiring a dozen coaches for their's, and a rent collector in south Reading would arrange an annual trip to the pantomime for up to 500 people.

Vehicles acquired at this time included many made by Dennis - newer ones used for tours and express services, and older vehicles for contract work. This included taking workers to Aldermaston and Harwell, and also to a rocket works near Aylesbury - unusually, the vehicles on the service to the 'secret' factory did not display 'Smith's Private' on the front, but "Westcott - Aylesbury"! To cope with the numbers of workers, Smith's added double deckers to their fleet for these contracts, some of the drivers being employees at the factory, the bus staying on-site during the working day to avoid journeys empty back to the garage.

Meanwhile, garage provision in Reading had become a problem. It had been hoped to rebuild on their sites in Katesgrove, but the company could not get permission to buy the steel needed. The site of the former Silver Grey garage was another option, but the surrounding area was by then used for housing, so the council refused planning consent. In due course, land at Rose Kiln Lane was acquired, and a former RAF hanger 90ft wide and 140 ft long put up by Smith's workforce. The fleet was expanded and modernised, and grew to become the largest private coach operator in the south of England.

Alf Smith, a former Mayor of Reading described as a wealthy but generous man, died in 1976. The family continued to run the business until 1979, but it was then sold in to an investment company and soon 'faded' after that.

Information about Paul's books on local transport history, including the latest one on Smith's, can be found at: <http://www.paullaceytransportbooks.co.uk/>

The next meeting takes place on Tuesday, November 13th, when David Lewis will reveal some of the history of Old Windsor, whilst on Tuesday, December 11th, the Society will hold its Christmas Party..