

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2023

Royal Blue coach services - Peter Delaney

Due to a late change in programme, the archivist for the Thames Valley and Great Western Omnibus Trust - who is also the society secretary - recounted the history of Royal Blue - from horse drawn carriages to the express coach services to the holiday areas of the south and west, for the October meeting.

Many people remember them as (unlike local buses, that took passengers to school or work) they tend to recall happy memories, of travel across the English countryside on day trips and holidays.

The company had its origins in a family business that was started in Bournemouth by members of the Elliott family - as shown on the company badge of the mid 1920s.



The town of Bournemouth was a new one, created in the early 19th century where previously there had just been a few fishermen's cottages. It was growing rapidly - the population had risen to 400, and there were 2 hotels there in 1849, and a decade on "It is now a fashionable summer watering place, and a favourite winter residence for invalids; having a mild and genial atmosphere, excellent facilities for bathing, and beautiful scenery in its vicinity. It has about 1500 inhabitants, having more than doubled its population and buildings since 1851. Under an act of parliament obtained in 1856, twelve commissioners are appointed for the improvement of the town and the erection of a pier." However, it was not an easy place to reach from the rest of the country, as the original railway in the area swept inland away from the fledgling Bournemouth, and a direct connection was not made until 1888.

The founder of Royal Blue was Thomas Elliott, - usually known as Tom, but he was not a 'local boy', as he was born in November 1857, the youngest son of William Elliott, who was a grocer in the Ratcliffe (near Limehouse) area of London. Sadly, William died in 1863, of a heart condition, when Tom was just 5 years old and was sent to live with an uncle - George Cutler who was a fishmonger in the centre of Bournemouth. The town was still fairly small, so many tradesmen had more than one 'income stream' and George was also a fly proprietor - a fly being a horse drawn taxi like carriage - and operated pleasure boats from the beach near Bournemouth pier. In the summer of 1880, a tragic event took place off the pier, when a boat called the Kittiwake, with George's son Jesse in charge, and Jesse's son with a group of ladies and girls on board, was returning from a "trip round the bay", when a paddle steamer called the Florence backed out from the pier without warning or proper lookout. The collision had fatal consequences, including the young boy. Whether this influenced Tom as to which aspect of his uncle's business he would pursue is not recorded - but it was that same year that Tom first gained a licence to drive a carriage to carry members of the public.

Initially, Tom was driving for one of the other carriage proprietors in the town. In 1882, he married Elizabeth Girvan, a year or so older than him. She came from Newton Stewart, in south west Scotland, and had also lost her father. Three years later, Tom bought his first vehicle - a landau. Initially, he operated from the family home, but as he added to his fleet of carriages, larger premises were needed. It was the Branksome Mews - conveniently placed close to the town centre, (and almost directly behind where George's fish shop had been). He was soon offering a wide range of conveyances - brakes, Victorias, chars-a-banc, broughams, waggonettes being amongst those listed over the doorway, Tom and Elizabeth, and their growing family, moving to live 'on site'.

In 1888 Tom expanded beyond 'taxi' type operations and bought his first larger horse-drawn coach, and about the same time adopts the name Royal Blue. (It has been said that he was the first to run a coach service to and from the railway at a station in the middle of the New Forest - but as he did not own one of those until about the time the railway ran direct to the town, this is most unlikely to be true).



Tom's business was not the first in the town, nor was it at this time the largest, but it was seen to be successful, and so a limited company was formed in 1900, with support by several other businessmen. Unfortunately, the company did not do as well as had been anticipated, and at the end of 1902 goes into receivership. A new concern is established - E Elliott and Sons - to carry on (with Tom as manager), but in 1907 she too files for bankruptcy. They have much local support, however, and so Elliott Bros is formed, and Branksome Mews continues to hear the sound of Royal Blue carriages.

Operations in this period were largely tours to the local area, to the rhododendron forest, around Poole harbour, across the New Forest or inland to places like the market town of Wimborne. Tom died in 1911, and he had been very much a 'horse' man, but his sons Jack and Ted saw the possibilities of the 'modern invention of the age', the motor vehicle. They purchased a couple of motor taxis in 1912, and in 1913 bought a pair of motor charabancs. Made by the Dennis company at Guildford, they took the registration marks EL1570 and EL1571, and the latter is seen that July about to take employees of the local printing firm, W Mate and Son, on their annual works outing.



Further motor charabancs - all with chassis by Daimler - were added to the fleet later that year and the next, but when war was declared in 1914, many of these were requisitioned by the military. Undaunted, the Elliott brothers bought some Selden chassis (which did not match the military specifications) from America. However, the Government then declared that motor spirit could not be used for 'pleasure trips'. Both Ted and Harry had enlisted by this time - Ted losing his life in a flying accident in 1917 - but Jack was determined to carry on, modifying the engines to use paraffin oil. However, the magistrates found him guilty of using motor spirit - ie paraffin - for pleasure trips, so they ceased for the rest of the war, although Elliotts could still run vehicles for carrying the military, such as convalescing soldiers.

After the war the various local firms petitioned the Town Council to be allowed to resume motor charabanc trips, which began again in 1919, Elliott Brothers (now run by Jack and Harry, along with their mother Elizabeth) claiming that the company was "Established 1880" even though Tom Elliott only bought his first carriage in 1885. Motor charabancs at this stage were still on solid tyres, with open tops, over which a canvas canopy could be pulled in the event of inclement weather. At the end of September 1919, the railway workers went on strike. The effect in Bournemouth was that many visitors were stranded and the Elliott Brothers 'came to the rescue'. A local paper reported that "The company put their fleet of twenty-seven "Royal Blue" Daimler motor chars-a-bancs to service, and journeys were made from Bournemouth to London, Birmingham, Derby, Leicester, Nottingham, Bristol, Gloucester, Oxford, Exeter, and other places, and by Monday, October 6th, over 4,000 people had been conveyed from Bournemouth by the company's vehicles."

This had been a way to cope with an emergency, but had obviously set minds thinking with the Elliott Brothers, and so in May 1920 they advertised the start of a new venture - a regular express service between Bournemouth and London, which began at the end of the month. At that stage, it only ran on summer weekends, but was an innovation to later be copied by many others. It was successful and so from the summer of 1922 the service was made daily. The fares were moderate, and were to be reduced over time - in part with competition from others.

The speed limit for such vehicles at the time was 12 mph, only raised to 20 mph in 1928, pneumatic tyres having been introduced in 1923, and vehicles with a roof rather than a canvas hood had taken over the routes. It was a time for expansion in long distance coaching, and Royal Blue became one of the major companies for this type of work, reaching as far west as Plymouth, whilst inland they reached both Derby and Nottingham. There was much competition on the open road (often leading to exceeding the speed limit!), and so Parliament passed the Road Traffic Act in 1930 to regulate such services by requiring the grant of a licence for each service by Traffic Commissioners. It was intended to avoid 'wasteful competition', but the Act did also raise the speed limit for coaches to 30 mph - although these were capable of going much faster! The process also led to co-operation between operators on the same route in a network known as Associated Motorways.



The Elliott brothers decided to sell the business and so from 1935 the Royal Blue services were run by the large bus companies from the south west. Additional routes included one north to Liverpool, but the system remained much the same until the early years of WW2, but in order to save materials (especially fuel and tyre rubber) they were withdrawn 'for the duration' in 1942, restarting in 1946, with a similar route pattern, and vehicles. (the structure at the rear of the roof was for carrying luggage).

From 1952, however, the new vehicles - like this Bristol LS type - had the engine put under the floor, between the axles, and the driver sat in the saloon with the passengers - who had a better view forwards. Seen here in Weymouth, the coach still has the traditional roof luggage container, as well as a large boot. Although initially in the dark blue paint, the roof has been painted cream by the time of this picture - a result of an incident when a small plane landing at Exeter skimmed the roof of a Royal Blue coach! (in the subsequent enquiry, both the pilot and driver were exonerated from any blame).



The speed limit was raised to 40 mph in 1962, which is about the date of the photograph on the left. The Royal Blue route through Wargrave was that from Birmingham to Portsmouth - the southbound coach is in the foreground, whilst 2 northbound ones are at the Hart Street stop in the distance on the left. The regulations as to size were gradually altered to permit them to be up to 36 ft long and 8 ft 2½ in wide., and the engine moved to the back meaning there was less sound in the passenger saloon. They were also able to go faster and could top 70 - ideal for the new 'motorway age' - even though at the time there were no motorways in the south or south west.

At the end of the 1960s, Royal Blue became a major part of the National Bus Company. The latter decreed that all express coaches should adopt a new livery of 'all-over white', with the National name on the side. For a while, a 'concession' was allowed in that the individual company name could be put in smaller lettering on the side above the front wheels. The white paintwork soon looked 'dirty' on the road, whilst the Royal Blue name in RED lettering looked ridiculous! In due course, all 'local identities' were swept away, and the long-distance services were all branded as 'National Express'. The latter celebrated a 'centenary' in 1980 - on the basis that the instigator of long-distance services - Royal Blue - had been formed in 1880. It was definitely not 100 years since National Express or long-distance motor coaching had begun - not even 100 years since Tom Elliott began his own business --- but it 'looked good' !!

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk