

Today in Bicton we can make use of a regular bus service on the Oswestry – Shrewsbury route, which now has ‘high tech’ vehicles with low floors, space for prams and wheelchairs as well as electronic ticket machines. Those of us with bus passes may also be old enough to remember earlier times, when a different sort of company ran this service, one owned and managed by local people rather than a multinational corporation (Arriva is actually a subsidiary of Deutsche Bahn – i.e. German Railways).

Motor buses, as we know them, were first developed in the big cities during the early years of the last century, as necessary technology became available, but only really expanded after the WW1. One example of this was the Birmingham and Midland Motor Omnibus Company, which by the early ‘20s was running services around Shrewsbury, including one to Montford Bridge. Better known as ‘Midland Red’ from the colour of its buses, it established a depot at Ditherington (recently demolished) while commencing services from the Square.

Until this time, most people in the local countryside had to rely on walking, cycling or the regular carriers’ carts in order to reach town for shopping or selling produce in the market. In 1917, directories record several carriers operating in the area, five of which would have passed through Bicton each Wednesday and Saturday en route from Shrawardine, Forton and Nesscliffe. Significantly, during the following decade this trade declined as the new buses and delivery vans took over.

One such carrier illustrating this development was Charles John Vagg. The son of a Dorset butcher, born in 1879, he moved around several places in the country before finally settling with his wife and growing family on the Bradford estate in Knockin where a smallholding was an ideal base for his carriers business. Eldest son Stephen (b. 1907) found work with a local bus company, Howarths, in Knockin, but decided to leave and help father and brother, John, create a company of their own. Not only did they now take business away from Howarths with some sharp timetabling, but they also eventually took the whole company over as well. In this way the ‘Vaggs’ company was born in 1924-5.

Their first bus had been a converted van, which was then followed by a charabanc, ideal for group outings. At that time, a school or chapel day trip to Carding Mill Valley would have been a great adventure and also established the company as an asset to the community.

The first depot was in Knockin village, but as the fleet expanded, relocation to near the site of the estate sawmill on Knockin Heath took place, where it was to remain for the next 50 years. Another garage was also later built on the main road near Nesscliffe, where other aspects of the business, including a milk collection lorry, could be dealt with. Smaller garages, serving the general motor trade, followed at Kinnerley.

The growing business not only employed the Vaggs family, but also many more in the community as mechanics, drivers and conductors. Most of the latter were, in fact, ladies, while others were employed in the office. In some ways, the local community must have felt like being part of a wider Vaggs ‘family’ of friends and neighbours.

In 1936, the routes through Bicton and Montford Bridge served Valeswood, Kinnerley, Llanymynech, as well as the main road to Nesscliffe and Oswestry. As a result, the timetable was complicated, but concentrated on the morning and evening ‘rush hours’ in order to help workers in town. Indeed, such services probably encouraged the first ‘suburban’ type housing in the village. The terminus was then by the cattle market along Smithfield Road.

During the war, the Nesscliffe training camp provided special business ferrying troops to and from Shrewsbury station. Some aging vehicles needed an extra push up Grange Bank at times when overloaded, so a new fleet was urgently required when peace returned.

The new stock now included types which can still be seen at vintage rallies, such as that at Onslow. One with special memories for many of us was the 29 seater, 'bull-nosed' petrol-driven Bedford, so well suited to penetrating narrow rural lanes. They were particularly useful to Preston Montford Field Centre for taking student groups to various teaching sites, even up the Tanat Valley to Pistyll Rhaeadr. Towards the end of their working life they also sometimes needed an extra push by students in order to reach the top.

Other groups likewise booked coaches for their outings and over many years Margaret Price would have been a familiar voice at the end of the office telephone arranging them.

With an aging family and the changing fortunes of rural bus trade as a result of ever increasing car ownership, it was decided to sell the company to neighbour T E Jones of Nesscliffe. His main interest was in plant hire and transport, however, rather than buses.....

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Part of Vaggs fleet 1969



