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Early Local Motorists

Having started the "railway mania," which soon spread all over the world, Britain could and should have pioneered mechanised road transport, too. But throughout the greater part of the Victorian era our inventors were frustrated by absurd restrictions.

Old residents chuckle as they recall the time when steam rollers and traction engines—and, very occasionally, early motor-cars—chugged along the highway, speeds limited to the pace of a man who walked in front carrying a red flag. It was the repressive Highways Act of 1865 which restricted mechanical traction on public highways to a maximum speed of four miles per hour and insisted upon a flag-bearer.

In the meantime, great progress was made by Continental inventors, first with steam cars and then, in the 'nineties, with motor-cars. Frenchmen were speeding from Paris to the seaside, and even holding speed trials, while Britons broke the law if they exceeded walking pace.

MR. WOOD'S "GENEVIEVE"

In 1896, however, British motorists were given the freedom of the road—subject to a maximum speed of 14 miles per hour until 1903, when the limit was raised to 20 miles per hour.

It is not known when a motor-car was first seen in Berkhamsted. The first local owner of a car was probably Lord Brownlow, the proud possessor of Hertfordshire's first registration number, AR 1.

Another Berkhamsted pioneer was Mr. J. W. Wood, a tradesman, who created a sensation in 1897 by buying a second-hand Benz from a St. Albans doctor.

To hear about this great event I visited his son, Mr. W. Wood, who is now living at Hemel Hempstead but hopes to celebrate his 93rd birthday at

his new home at Margate in a few weeks' time.

First, a little family history. Mr. J. W. Wood opened a shop for the sale of musical instruments at what is now the draper's shop opposite the Goat Inn. Later, he built and occupied what is now the Co-operative Society's grocery shop at Manor Street corner. In 1912, the "music warehouse" was transferred to Lower Kings Road, and continued there until fairly recent times.

HORSE TO THE RESCUE

The 4½ h.p. Benz of 1897 was a typical "Genevieve": tall, sturdy and noisy, with solid tyres, large wire suspension wheels, coach-style brass lanterns with candles, and positively no windscreen.

The whole town turned out to see this strange contraption. And while Mr. Wood and his wife drove around in the Benz, their son—my informant—added to the wonders of Berkhamsted by riding what was probably the town's first motor-cycle, a Kerry.

The Benz was seldom driven more than five miles from Berkhamsted. There was always a danger that it would break down a long way from home and require a costly tow. It was, in fact, a very reliable car, capable of tackling the steepest Chiltern hills. But on one occasion it disgraced itself "on the flat": after a damaging swerve into the roadside verge at Broadway, it was necessary to engage one cart horse to tow 4½ horse-power to Berkhamsted's first garage, a greenhouse. This two-mile trip was agonising: people laughed, cheered and jeered. The horse was still supreme.

PETROL: TENPENCE A GALLON

There was another hazard: dust on the rough, unmetalled roads. In the summer, as early cars chugged along, such mighty dust-storms were created that drivers were often forced to stop until reasonable visibility was restored. Women, with their renowned motoring veils, suffered less from the absence of windcreens than their menfolk.

Petrol, Mr. Wood told me, cost tenpence a gallon. He used "Bowley" spirit, supplied in cylindrical tins of the type used for paraffin.

In those early days it was customary to take delivery of a new car at the works. Many a pioneer Berkhamsted motorist travelled by train to Coventry and drove home in the new car. But it was not long before cycle dealers advertised: "We have gone into the motor trade." Those words were used in the Berkhamsted directory of 1903 by William Foster, of Chesham, who started a branch shop on part of the site now occupied by the Co-operative Society's store. In the following year Mr. Foster moved to the centre of the town, and shortly afterwards the business was taken over by Dwight Brothers. Early advertisements pro-

claimed: "First class garaging for ten cars. Repairs, wash-down, inspection pit. Motor driving taught."

SOUTHEY MOTOR-CYCLES

In 1906, C. E. Southey & Co., of Kings Road and Elm Grove, advertised: "Cars stored, cleaned and kept in running order by contract. Repairs of any magnitude." Mr. Southey assembled motor-cycles, and until thirty years ago "Southey" machines were as familiar, in the Berkhamsted district, as makes of national repute.

Underhill and Young started business at the Kitsbury Cycle Works, and, before catering for motorists, combined patriotism and business with this poetic gem in the Coronation souvenir of 1911:

King George the V is now our King,
"Hare" Cycles they are just the thing

For easy riding and durability.

The price is right you will admit

At three pounds nineteen and six.

And what of public motor transport? One of the first bus services in the country was started by the London and North Western Railway Company in 1899, when a motor-car carried passengers between Berkhamsted station and Chesham. This service was soon replaced by horse-drawn transport.

EARLY BUS SERVICES

In 1920-21, an Aylesbury firm started running a small, single-deck bus between Aylesbury and Berkhamsted. It was such a novelty that a Prince Edward Street tradesman, instead of giving his address, advertised: "Where the bus turns round." Then came double-deck, open-top red buses operated between Berkhamsted and Bushey by the London General Omnibus Company. A few years later the country services were taken over by the National Omnibus Company, and we had green instead of red buses.

By 1923-4 another service was opened: to Watford via Chesham and Rickmansworth, a route which was discontinued when the Windsor service was started. In 1925 we had the two "National" services to Watford, and services to Aylesbury and Dunstable operated by the Aylesbury Bus Company. By 1929 one could also travel to Hemel Hempstead via Little Gaddesden, and B. and B. buses were running not only to Potten End but also to Wigginton.

KEEN COMPETITION

Then came the great "free for all" period when rival companies ran buses and coaches to and from London. Fares were slashed, one could mount or dismount wherever one pleased, and there were sometimes hair-raising bursts of speed to overtake the rival bus. The Railway Company retaliated by offering the half-crown return fare to London of precious memory.

The rivalry of the road did not last for more than a year or two. The Green Line service was born, and since that time, apart from fare increases, few changes of note have taken place in the public transport services locally.

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

December 2-8: Figg.
December 9-15: Dickman.
December 16-22: Taylors
December 23-29: Boots
December 30-January 3, 1957: Figg.
Christmas Day—Taylors
Boxing Day—Boots.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—
Mon., Tues., Thurs. & Fri.—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.;
2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—CLOSED ALL DAY.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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