

1947 to 1950 - WRIGHTS BUS SERVICE

After a few days enjoying civilian life I had to decide what I was going to do. I had been offered a place at Queen's College, Belfast and my father was willing to take me into his business. I think that, after nearly four years in the RAF, the prospect of at least three years study was daunting, especially as I was married. I would obviously have to work my way up in the family business, and I mistakenly thought that I would be kept aware of any problems my father had to face, and eventually take over the company. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Winn and I were living at 20 Southlands Avenue, Louth, as her parents had moved out to rented accommodation in Blackpool. Her father was working as a gunnery instructor at RAF Kirkham but later moved to the Atomic Energy Authority at Springfield.

The weather was atrocious. Several feet of snow lay on the ground for six weeks and Wrights Buses were restricted to the Louth - Manby service. No other routes were open. Wright's Bus Service shared the East Lincs Motor Company's garage and the roof collapsed on the 15th February under four feet of snow. Fortunately it was full of buses. They carried the weight of the roof and snow and suffered only slight damage. A separate new garage for WBS only was erected later that year in Orme Lane. but I have no idea how this was financed. Perhaps this was the beginning of my father's financial problems. At one time the Council proposed changing the name of Orme Lane to Wright's Lane, but I think dad must have had some enemies on the council and it was not approved.

The reason for building a separate garage was probably because Mr Kemp, who owned the East Lincs Motor Co., had sold his share of the WBS partnership to my father for £12,000 . Mr Kemp was a very astute business man and I think he anticipated the problems facing country bus services when cars became generally available again. The only bus companies who survived that period were those who foresaw the growth of private hire for leisure trips and holidays and planned accordingly. Bus fares were strictly controlled by the Transport Authority, and any attempt to raise them met fierce opposition from the Lincs Road Car Co., our main competitor. (A nationalised comp[any])

I started work in the old garage in a poky little office behind the East Lincs Showroom. Pay £5 per week and for that I kept various records and calculated the weekly payroll. Not particularly onerous, but I felt that the other office staff resented my presence. Winn had worked at Lloyds Bank, but in those days banks did not employ married women, and so we had to manage on my wage. After paying all our bills we had 4/6d (22.5p) left for holidays and entertainment. My father taught me to drive a car. Two quick runs in the countryside and I was pronounced fit to control a motor vehicle. Driving licences were available on demand in those days and no test was required.

Within a few months the inspector at the Lincoln Depot resigned and I was asked to take his place.

We found a wooden bungalow named "Lyndhurst" on the Wragby Road, with 3/4 of an acre of land, one and a half miles outside Lincoln, price £1750. Dad put a deposit on it, and it became our home for the next four years. The mortgage repayment was £1.50 per week. We had sufficient furniture for one bedroom and the living room, and the only item in the parlour was my beloved baby grand piano. We eventually bought a three piece suite by selling an old army typewriter which my father in law brought back from Mulberry Harbour of D Day fame. It fetched £30, a very large sum in 1947.

My pay was increased to £8.50, quite good for those days, but I soon found out why there had been three recent managers. The office was an old stable in the yard of the Adam and Eve public house at the top of Lindum Hill.. When it rained water ran down the back wall and out through the door. Heating was from an ancient coke stove and there was no telephone. I was expected to use the public telephone half way down the steep hill to Unity Square, the departure point for the bus services. My hours of duty extended from the first workmen's services departing at 6 am and the return of the last buses at 11.30 pm. If I was not present in the evening the takings were dropped into the safe. This was a large brick and concrete structure with a slot in the top and baffles to prevent anyone reaching inside. The money was counted the following morning and sent on the first bus to Louth in a locked tin box. It amazed me that it always arrived safely.

If I wanted a break I was expected to take it during quiet times between bus arrivals and departures. I was allowed one day off a week, when a driver would stand in for me. This only included one Sunday in five.

As soon as possible I took the test for a Public Service Vehicle licence. The time allocated was a Saturday morning at noon just as the factories were closing. Driving up Lincoln High Street, in dense traffic, with hundreds of cycles weaving in and out qualified me for a medal, never mind a license. I passed the test in a Bedford Utility bus, but, due to a clerical error, my license stated that I could drive all types of bus including forward drive and double-decker vehicles. I didn't question this decision, and drove anything that came my way. I remember distinctly returning empty from Fiskerton in a 1931 Leyland Tiger when the engine burst into flames. I reached up for the fire extinguisher only to find that it had been tied firmly to the holder. Fortunately by the time I had untied the string the fire had gone out. On another occasion I was returning to Lincoln in the same vehicle with a full load and accidentally left the hand brake on. There is a sharp left turn into Unity Square, and when I applied the brakes nothing happened. Disaster loomed, but I slipped into bottom gear and ran the tyres along the edge of the pavement, slowly coming to a halt. I then calmly reversed and carefully negotiated the turn into the bus terminus. I acted as if this was the way I normally drove and no-one said a word.

Usually eight buses were stationed at Lincoln and I think there were ten drivers and eight conductors. The vehicles were not the best of the fleet and were mostly wartime wooden seated Bedford utility buses. They were fine for workmen, but passengers complained bitterly at the discomfort. However they still queued up on a Saturday morning for the journey to Mablethorpe, and six or seven vehicles would depart at 8.30 am fully loaded. The return fare for the 45 mile journey was 5/- (25p).

The late buses on a Saturday night were frequently overloaded as we prided ourselves that if you could get on we would take you. I have seen 70 passengers alight from a Bedford utility bus authorised to carry 32 passengers, and in retrospect shudder to think of the possible consequences if there had been an accident. Sometimes there would be three or four buses coming into Lincoln from Bardney at 10.30 pm and one conductor would cover them all. On one occasion the conductor

thought there were four vehicles when there were only three and he was left at the side of a lonely road ten miles from Lincoln.

My brother Les remembers the time when the conductors at Lincoln were thought to be selling dud return tickets. My father put his old clothes on and Les took him to Wragby where he got on the bus and was "sold" one of these tickets for a journey to Louth. A few miles farther he got off. The conductress said to the driver, "That was a queer chap, he bought a ticket to Louth and then got off the bus after two miles. The driver replied with a smile, "Surely you know who that was, it was the boss".

In Unity Square, as inspector, I either stood on the pavement or took refuge in Mrs Perkins cafe which was also the parcels collection point. I had no assistant and was expected to supervise the departure of the first buses at 6.00 am and to ensure that all vehicles were parked safely by 11.30pm. This was intolerable and eventually my father agreed to the erection of a wooden office next to the ironmongers. It was divided into two parts, the other half being occupied by Mrs Cullen's cafe, the mother of Ken Cullen, one of our drivers. An assistant was appointed, Les Lingard, who acted as inspector, clerk and spare driver. With an eye to the future I studied for the Royal Society of Arts examination, Elements of Transport, and passed.

Although six new coaches were purchased between 1947 and 1949, these were used wherever possible for private hire as it was more profitable than service routes. These were controlled by the Traffic Commissioners who would not permit fares to be increased or services to be terminated. These restrictions, the increase in car usage and heavy hire purchase repayments on the new buses resulted in a deficit of £1460 on 31st December 1949.

Shortly afterwards I was summonsed to the Louth Office to be told by my father that the company was being nationalised and transferred to the Lincolnshire Road Car Co. I was given the option of an office job at Bracebridge Heath at £5 per week, or I could continue as an inspector in Unity Square for the princely salary of £7.15p. My father paid me £8.50 plus a company car so this was a dramatic change in our circumstances

Thus ended my hopes of continuing the family business. In retrospect I am amazed how calmly I accepted the situation. I had given up the

opportunity of a university degree as I expected to take over the business eventually. There were three sons in the business but we were not consulted about the sale or possible alternatives. Looking at the accounts the deficit of £1000 per year could easily have been turned into a profit by closing down unprofitable routes, reducing staff and tighter inspection checks. I was pretty certain that the staff were milking quite a lot from the takings. He had bought out his partner's share of the business in 1947 and I am afraid that he lost a very astute business partner who had been the financial backbone of the business from its earliest days.

The business was acquired by the Lincolnshire Road Car Company, my father's deadly rival, and the price was #34,000 in British Transport Commission Bonds. We believe that equivalent to about £1m these days after clearing the HP charges on the new coaches WBS had acquired and the balance due to Mr Kemp, his old partner, he was left with about £12,000. He bought a small holding and reared pigs and chickens for several years. But this also became unprofitable and eventually, when his funds had almost gone, I persuaded him to buy a small bungalow at Manby. He spent his final years working very happily in the Manby RAF Officers' Mess.

I opted for the inspector's post, and the Hillman Estate car provided by Wright's Bus Service was immediately withdrawn. Working conditions deteriorated, no Saturdays off, one Sunday off in five, no prospects, veiled threats from the union representative as to what would happen if I didn't join the union.

Three months later I got a job with Ruston Hornsby Ltd. as a progress chaser, £6.15 for a five day week. £1 per week less but no hassle. The office systems were rather antiquated and letters were dictated on to wax cylinders. When the correspondence and cylinders were returned to you, you shaved off a layer of wax and used them again.

Life at "Lyndhurst" was very basic compared with today's standards. There was only one tap, and it was a cold one in the kitchen. We bathed in a galvanised tub, filled with a length of hosepipe from the brass tap on the water tank built into the blackleaded cooking range in the living room. We installed a small electric geyser in the kitchen and our daily ablutions took place in the kitchen sink. The toilet was off the garage next to the

coalhouse. Later we installed a bathroom in the third bedroom, which was a luxury indeed. Unfortunately the cesspool did not cope with the extra drain water. It was emptied occasionally by the council but otherwise it was my job to drain it by the bucketful into the ditch at the bottom of the garden.

Wash day **was** a day long affair. First we had to light the coal fire under the copper. This was used to boil water for the white wash and to fill the galvanized tub which acted as the washing machine. A posher vigorously agitated up and down produced that Persil Whiteness shown on the adverts. On fine days the clothes were dried outside, but on wet days the kitchen and living room had an atmosphere like a steamy Turkish Bath.

The copper was also used for boiling potatoes for the pig we kept in the adjacent field during the winter of 1949/1950. (Meat was still rationed). He was a bad tempered brute, and as I was working long hours it mostly fell to Winn to satisfy his voracious appetite. She was pregnant with our first child, and remembers with horror falling on to the pig-swill bucket and expecting to lose the baby. In the spring we employed a local butcher to kill the pig and turn it into cured meat. Mary Goy, wife of one of the drivers, came to help dispose of the pig. She was a country girl and knew how to prepare sausages, fry etc. from the meat that wasn't cured, so we ate very well for a few days. We looked forward with anticipation to our first bacon joint and rashers, but the old pig got his revenge on us. The pork turned out to be "green" and uneatable and had to be buried in the garden. The butcher had not cured it properly with saltpetre.

A few chickens were kept in an old galvanised hut. In order to qualify for a meal ration, the eggs had to be carefully washed, boxed and sold to the Egg Marketing Board who collected them once a week. We also kept rabbits which were auctioned at the Friday market and usually fetched about 2/6d (12.5p). One memorable year we kept geese for sale at Christmas but only once.

The drive was lined with daffodil bulbs and we sold these at the gate to pay the rates. Apple and plum trees provided fruit which we stored or bottled and a garden plot provided vegetables. The chickens provided eggs and meat so to some extent we became self sufficient.

In 1949 we bought a new chicken hut with the proceeds from the sale of my BSA 250 motor cycle. (Actually this was the property of WBS and licensed by them but I kept the money) The reason for the sale was that we had gone on holiday to Blackpool to stay with Winn's parents. On the way the bike skidded on a wet corner near Clitheroe. We were not seriously injured but were taken to different hospitals. Eventually we were reunited and continued our journey to Blackpool. The accident rather alarmed us and on our return to Lincoln we were given the use of a Hillman Estate car belonging to WBS, hence the sale of the motorcycle.



On holiday in Blackpool

Our lovely daughter, Marilyn, arrived on the 5th May, 1950. It was a long labour and in those days husbands were not encouraged to be present. Winn was a natural mother and we were very proud of our golden haired little girl.

By the end of that year income was not matching expenditure, and we reluctantly decided to sell the bungalow and join Winn's parent's in Blackpool. With a little temporary financial support, say #100 a year, from my father we could have stayed there but he was busy losing money raising pigs and chickens.

The property was sold by auction and we made a profit of £400 less expenses. So, in March 1951, we set off for a new life at the seaside.