

Birch Bros, London to Rushden...

...and many places in between.

An abridged personal recollection by Keith Brealey and stories gathered from museum visitors; originally published in the Society magazine Olde Wheels Spring 2017.

Quite a few histories have been written on the subject, especially “Birch Bros Ltd: On the Move” written and published by Peter Skinner, Bernard Coker and the Rushden Rotary Club. Firstly though and very, very briefly for those who have no knowledge of Birch Bros., they were a London based transport company in the 19th century, who gradually expanded their horsedrawn omnibus fleet to motorised versions, and then spread out north (following the A6) as far as Kettering for a start but Rushden eventually, on a permanent basis. In the 1930’s the iconic Art Deco Coach was built. The front façade of the building still stands in High Street North, in all its glory, but the coach sheds have been demolished and currently flats are in the process of replacing that structure. (Keith’s dream of it being re commissioned as a bus depot, has now vanished!)

The station stayed “Birch’s” until 1969, when most of the vehicles and routes were taken over by United Counties.

As a child and young boy, I lived in Bozeat, and we had close relations in Bedford. In 1951 the only way we could get to visit them was to catch the United Counties bus in Bozeat, via Irchester, to get as far as Rushden, then either walk to the “Lightstrung”* bus stop, or to the Birch’s itself, and get one of those modern looking double-deckers, which looked futuristic compared to the Counties equivalent, and take the trip south to Bedford.

By the way, when double-deckers left the coach station, they had to go up Washbrook, then left along the Wellingborough Road to the “Lightstrung”, because the railway bridge was in the way, and they could not go around Rectory Road.

Seriously, it was only after the railway bridge was demolished in 1973 could double-deckers and even higher trucks pass the Queen Victoria going south and use that route, but by then, Birch’s were long gone.

Now I can give you a little tech info here on the double-deckers, as the design as such has always been significantly Birch’s to me, although they were only a small part of the fleet, being far outnumbered by the single decker buses and coaches, and earlier double-deckers.

Like today, buses and coaches were based on various different motorised chassis’, with the coach work being adapted by a third party. In the case of Birch’s later double-deckers, most were either Leyland PSUI/13 or Guy Arab III chassis’ with either Windover or Willowbrook bodies.

Nearly all these buses carried names on aluminium plates on the entrance doors. Somewhere there is probably a record as to why this was done, but for whatever reason, amongst many other names, “John Churchill”, “William Cadogan”, Prince Eugene”, “Ramilles” and “Malplaquet” appeared on the buses until after they were sold off.

On disposal, many of the vehicles went through dealers, then onto other bus companies, and one eventually finished up in Gran Canaria in 1961!

Back to the journeys, the routes went through various villages, depending on which service you caught. You could go through Sharnbrook and Harold, Oakley and Clapham, before arriving eventually at the designated bus stop in Bedford. Although I remember the system, I would lie if I said that I remembered any of the actual bus rides, just a dim memory of that wonderful double-decker looking to me then like a land based spaceship (of its day) with its streamline frontend and doors instead of open access points.

Many visitors to the museum have mentioned the same experience when they as children or young adults, went as far as the capital, where the terminal for many years was Pancras Road, right next to Kings Cross Station. In fact, despite modifications carried out over the last dozen or so years at St Pancras, there is still a small part of St Pancras road that you can identify within Birch bus photographs from that era (of which the Museum has many in a fine album, check it out when next visiting), so not all progress wipes out the past.

The London trip called in many other places between here and there... Henlow Camp, just off the A1 south of Bedford where Birch Bros had another depot, then Hitchin, Hatfield, Welwyn Garden City, Potters bar and many, many others.

For example, in 1965, if you caught the Monday- Friday 07.15 am bus from Rushden you would arrive in Pancras Road at 10.20 am having passed through no less than 38 other stops!

Not all the routes commenced or finished at London or Rushden. Many started at Henlow Camp, Welwyn, Hatfield etc, going as far as the end of the line both north and south.

Of course, after the opening of the M1 around 1959, many routes were changed and “express” journeys were the norm, obviously cutting out many of the stops, although many “cross-country” routes still carried on.

In addition, Birch’s also undertook coach trip holidays to destinations such as the lake district, Yorkshire Moors and dales, and Snowdonia, at accost of £19.10.0! Even a trip by coach and air via Birmingham airport to Eire (Ireland) for the princely sum of £32 for 8 days in 1959!

The end came in 1969 when United Counties (UC) took over, and the brilliant coach station was soon vacated as UC had their own depot at the corner of Rectory Road and Newton Road, now Lidl, of course.

Although they were a London company, Birch Bros Ltd always seemed a local outfit to all who lived around Rushden.

* The name given by locals to the bus stop near the Venezia Restaurant premises, the location of the original Lightstrung Bicycle Company.