

A Century of bus and coach services in Shropshire from 1904-2004

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from this to this



Phase 1: the pioneering years from 1904 to 1918

In 1900 Shropshire was a relatively sparsely populated rural county with no urban area large enough to support a tramway system. Many people got about using the steam trains that served all of the market towns and the mining settlements of the East Shropshire coalfield. The railways served almost every settlement of any size. Notable exceptions included Clun, High Ercall, Shawbury, Worfield, Woore and Worthen. At most railway stations horse drawn hackney carriages and carts were available to convey passengers and their luggage to and from their homes, hotels and places of work.

However, the railways were not the most convenient form of transport for many country dwellers. Some villages and small towns were some distance away from the railway station that carried the name of the settlement. For example, Cleobury Mortimer station was over a mile and a half from the town centre. For people living in isolated places wishing to travel to market with produce to sell, returning with supplies and shopping, a long trek from a railway station was decidedly inconvenient. It was a hard uphill trek from Highley station to Highley village, for example. Prees station was a long way outside the village that it claimed to serve in the middle of empty fields. For many people the trains were relatively expensive. So even before the coming of the motor bus and car, road travel was an important way of getting around, at least within a few miles of home. For a lot of people who did not have the means to own or hire their own horse-drawn transport the standard form of conveyance was the general carrier or the Hackney carriage. By the turn of the century the bicycle was becoming a significant means of getting around too.

The horse drawn carrier's cart was largely a goods vehicle with some room for passengers who usually sat on a wooden bench or on top of the cargo. For many centuries these vehicles plied between farms, villages and market towns to an agreed schedule. The traffic was two-way. On the way in to market garden or farm produce would be carried for sale on stalls or in the street. On the return journey the cart would be loaded with household provisions. Some of the return cargo would be purchased by the owner of the cart for onward sale to the village store or to people who commissioned particular items to be bought on their behalf. On other days of the week the cart would be used for other purposes, such as delivering coal or grain, or moving household belongings. The carrier's cart was often the only viable means of travel for poorer people. It was slow, uncomfortable and open to the elements, but for many travellers it was the best that was available.

It is very clear from the directories produced by Kelly and Wilding that the general carrier played a vital role in the local transport scene at the start of the 20th Century. Wilding's directory for 1903 listed 82 scheduled carrier routes serving Shrewsbury, 30 serving Bridgnorth, 46 serving Ludlow, 34 serving Oswestry and 36 serving Wellington. Each route connected a series of villages to the nearest market town, terminating at an inn.

The motor bus network of the early and mid-twentieth century in Shropshire as elsewhere evolved from the legacy of the stage coach, rural horse bus, Hackney carriage and the general carrier. There had been remarkable progress during the last years of the 19th Century in developing an internal combustion engine, which made the road transport revolution of the 20th Century possible. The first regular licensed motor bus service in Britain began running in Edinburgh in May 1898. After a great deal of lobbying the speed limit for vehicles less than 3 tons was raised to 20 mph in 1903. From 1 January 1904 all motor vehicles had to have number plates and all drivers needed licences. From December 1904 vehicles with an unladen weight of up to 5 tons were permitted to travel at up to 12 mph provided they had rubber tyres. At this time petrol cost only 4p per gallon, but a set of rubber tyres cost £200. Even so, this new legislation opened the doors to wider experimentation with motor buses and lorry-buses.

The new motor buses were a dubious means of making money, especially in a relatively sparsely populated county where the roads were muddy and rutted. It took the Great Western Railway (GWR), an organisation with plenty of capital to take the plunge. The

directors had quickly recognised the potential threat of the motor bus to branch line trains, but had also spotted the possibility of using this new means of travel to feed passengers onto the rail network from places not served by a railway station. The motor bus was seen as the means of avoiding the costly construction of more railway lines in rural areas where returns on capital outlay would be meagre. So the GWR began running first motorised bus service in Shropshire on 7 November 1904 between Bridgnorth and Wolverhampton via Worfield and Shipley.

Three 18 seat Clarkson single decker steam buses were pressed into service on this hilly route during autumn weather conditions. They had abysmal hill climbing capabilities, and it was quite normal for passengers to have to get out at the bottom of inclines such as Hermitage Hill and walk up. Sometimes they even had to help push the bus up. If the bus stalled, the conductor had to put wooden chocks behind the wheels because the brakes were not good enough to secure the vehicle. After a month of this mayhem the Clarksons were withdrawn. There was a short break of service before the arrival of slightly more capable petrol driven Milnes-Daimler buses in January 1905. These managed to get up the hills with less pushing by the passengers, although one driver reported that it was easier to climb steeper hills in reverse gear. Given the rough roads and poor brakes of the time, reversing a fully loaded bus up a hill required a huge amount of skill. This route was subsequently sold to Wolverhampton Corporation Tramways on 30 June 1923. Today it is numbered 890 and is run by Arriva Midlands North.

In 1908, Ellis Chesworth of Bronington (just over the Welsh border in the detached part of Flintshire) began operating a network of bus services that eventually linked Whitchurch with Market Drayton, Marchamley, Horsemans Green, Hanmer, Bronington and Nantwich. Some of these journeys were difficult or impossible to do by rail. After the First World War he also operated buses from Ellesmere.

JR Richards began operating from Green End in Whitchurch in 1916 with one bus and one charabanc. He was an established ironmonger in Whitchurch who decided to diversify his business. His charabanc was immediately put to use to link a large military camp at Prees Heath with Whitchurch railway station. This service ended in 1920 when the camp closed. He then concentrated on private hire work. By 1930 his firm became a limited company called JR Richards and Sons and was renamed Salopia Saloon Coaches Ltd in March 1938. It became a large and well known company in North Shropshire with a sizeable network of bus routes. It also pioneered extended tour coach holidays.

Just over the Welsh border, the Wrexham & District Electric Tramway Company decided in 1913 to purchase some motor buses to extend its network. From 20 December 1913 motor bus services were operated from Wrexham to Chester, Llangollen, Brymbo and Coedpath. More routes were opened up in the Chester area by June 1914 before the declaration of war put an end to this enterprise. By June 1915 buses were run to Ellesmere on alternate Tuesdays, to Oswestry every Wednesday and Whitchurch every Friday. These services petered out in 1916 because of a lack of fuel and vehicles. The chassis of twelve buses and two charabancs were commandeered by the War Department. After the war several surplus Daimler Y type chassis were purchased from the War Department and some were fitted with the bodies that had been removed from the commandeered chassis in 1914.

The Crosville Motor Company was founded in 1906 to assemble motor cars at Chester from parts imported from France. Bus services in the Chester area began in 1911, but did not reach Shropshire until a depot was established at Nantwich in 1915. This depot provided vehicles for a service into Whitchurch from Crewe and into Market Drayton from Nantwich, both starting in 1915. It is likely that both of these services were able to be run because they were useful to the war effort by conveying troops and essential war workers.

From around 1907 several small petrol driven wagonettes were introduced to convey passengers to and from the railway station in Shrewsbury. Their limited capacity meant that fares were high and only the better off travellers could use them. The first real bus routes in Shrewsbury were operated by the Allen Omnibus Company Ltd., a London based company that spotted the need for public transport in and around the county town. It was active by

1915 using a single bus that was based in Abbey Foregate next to the Abbey. As well as several town services, this bus also ran to Bicton Heath and Bayston Hill.

This small enterprise caught the eye of the mighty Birmingham and Midland Motor Omnibus Company Ltd (BMMO), better known as "Midland Red". BMMO was formed in Birmingham in 1904 to take over the motor bus routes begun by the Birmingham Express Company a year earlier. Their buses were so noisy and unreliable that they were subsequently taken off the road and replaced by horse buses. In 1912 motor bus services resumed using slightly better vehicles. This time BMMO was successful and quickly expanded into surrounding towns outside Birmingham. Despite the war, BMMO purchased the garage and the single vehicle of the Allen Omnibus Company Ltd on 1 April 1916. It was from this small beginning that the huge network of Midland Red services in the county grew. A single Tillings Stevens TS3 single decker was employed to operate all of the routes. Just one man was used to drive, clean and maintain this vehicle until December 1916 when two more similar buses arrived to strengthen the outfit. Previously, in 1913 in Kidderminster, the Allen Motor Omnibus Company had become a partner in the Worcestershire Motor Transport Co. Ltd. whose route system included a service from Kidderminster into Shropshire at Cleobury Mortimer.

In July 1919 the three BMMO buses on charge at Shrewsbury were moved to a leased shed at Roushill. These inadequate premises were a stop-gap measure until a very impressive brick built garage at Ditherington was completed in November 1920. This garage is still in use today by Arriva Midlands North, although it has been enlarged subsequently. It provided BMMO with a secure base for rapid expansion in Shropshire after the First World War.

The situation at the end of 1918 was that despite some valiant pioneering efforts in and around Bridgnorth, Shrewsbury, Clun and Whitchurch, the motor bus only had a fragile toehold on the market. The vast majority of public transport journeys were still made by horse drawn road vehicles or by steam trains. Early buses were unreliable and under powered. They had poor brakes and minimal suspension. Vehicles were expensive to buy and very costly to maintain. In particular, there were huge problems with the clutch and transmission mechanisms. Spare parts were hand made and often didn't fit properly. Buses were very noisy, creating lots of complaints. Roads were in a dreadful state and there was a severe dearth of skilled fitters. The shortages caused by the Great War from 1914 to 1918 greatly impeded investment in public transport. However, the demands of the battlefield stimulated the development of far more robust and reliable motor vehicles. This was the first major military conflict in history in which mechanised road transport played an important role. Many war surplus lorries were on sale at knock down prices after 1918 and there was a large pool of trained drivers who had just been demobilised waiting to operate them. These lorries could easily be converted to carry passengers. Manufacturers had a large production capacity which they wished to keep open. So the stage was set for a rapid and sometimes chaotic expansion of bus services in the county which by 1930 would cast the mould for the rest of the century.

Phase 2: Uncontrolled growth from 1919 to 1930

At the end of the Great War many roadworthy war surplus lorries could be bought cheaply. There were plenty of demobilised ex-servicemen who were trained to maintain and drive them, some of whom used their gratuities to buy a lorry or two as a means of getting started in their own bus business. It was quite an easy matter to put some seats in the back of a lorry to create a "lorry-bus" that formed a direct motorised descendent of the horse drawn carriers' cart. Alternatively the bodywork could be removed from the chassis and replaced by a purpose-built bus or charabanc body. The fledgling bus and coach industry was stimulated by the availability of vehicles that were cheaper to buy and more reliable to operate than their pre-war predecessors. In Shropshire there was little local authority control over who ran bus services. Some early operators had unreliable and quite dangerous vehicles that were unable to sustain a viable service. Soon manufacturers produced better models that were specifically designed for passenger work. Some operators turned to relatively cheap mass produced vehicle types from the USA such as the Model T Ford, the Chevrolet and the Reo.

There were also some comparable British makes that were virtually hand built such as the Vulcan and the Thornycroft. As the use of buses and converted lorries spread, most of the general carriers faded away. There was no obvious protest, as was the case when the stage coaches succumbed to the railway in the mid 1800s. A few general carriers, such as William Shakeshaft of Picklescott and John Jones of Condober bought motor vehicles and carried on as the local busman. These were the exceptions. The majority were unable to raise the capital to re-equip or to counteract the financial and technical muscle of BMMO (Midland Red) or the determined organisation of family firms such as the Boultons of Cardington and the Vaggos of Knockin Heath. Others concentrated solely on carrying freight.

The first country buses were often lorries that were used for part of the week for conveying animals, grain or coal. The owners simply washed out the interior and fitted some bench seats. Recollections of the passengers of these early country buses tell not only of the obvious discomfort but also of the friendliness of everybody and the willingness of the driver to help people out. As well as passengers, produce and even live animals were conveyed. Sometimes there were several operators who competed for custom by undercutting fares, running ahead or offering to do errands.

The early vehicles had solid tyres and brakes that only worked on the rear wheels. The main roads were made of rough stone and the country lanes were simply cart tracks that varied from being muddy and potholed to being dry and dusty. There were no arrangements for roads to be gritted in icy conditions or for clearing snow. Sometimes conductors shovelled cinders onto the road to help the driver get a better grip. There were no windscreen wipers, so in wet weather the driver had to open his cab window to see out. Lights were poor, and in foggy conditions the conductor sometimes walked ahead of the bus to guide the driver or peered ahead from the open front door. Vehicles were frequently overloaded and there was relatively little protection from the weather and no heating. Crews worked for long hours and needed to be quite stoic. Breakdowns and accidents were frequent, especially in wet or icy conditions. The road surfaces were gradually improved in the mid twenties with the use of tarmac. About the same time pneumatic tyres and better springs became more widespread. The combination of better roads and improved vehicles made regular bus travel in the countryside a viable proposition for the first time. New bus operators mushroomed and the larger companies expanded to establish sophisticated and extensive networks.

The big bus companies played a very important part in the formative stage of the development of country bus services. However, despite having the most reliable and technically advanced vehicles of the day, the crews were usually based in a town and so were strangers to the village passengers. The companies made the most money by running within and between towns, serving villages incidentally along the way. Even in 2000 some villagers living in Clee Hill were heard referring to the service 192 run by First Midland Red as "the city bus" because the crews came from Kidderminster, unlike Whittle's bus that had a local driver.

Some larger operators ran charabancs in the twenties. These had bench seats in rows that were accessed by a hinged door at the end of the row that opened above a running board. These vehicles were intended mostly for touring during summer weather. A canvas hood with celluloid side windows could be erected when the weather was unpleasant. These Charabancs were mostly used for outings to the seaside, beauty spots, public houses, shows or sporting events. They were no good for stage carriage work and so were seldom owned by small country operators as they could not afford to have a varied fleet of specialised types. Usually these operators had 14 to 20 seat coaches that could be used for the market day shopping services, the school run and evening trips. Operators who ran services for miners had real problems in keeping their seats clean. There were no pithead baths and miners travelled home in the condition that they left the coalface. Other passengers strongly objected to getting their clothes soiled, as did the conductors.

The bus and the coach unleashed a strong demand for travel both in the town and the countryside. It made it possible to seek work outside the locality using a mode of transport that was much cheaper than the train. During the 1920s four significant problems of poor roads, slow speeds, lack of official support and unreliable vehicles were eventually tackled. From the outset there were plenty of people willing to take up the challenge of opening up

new routes. As a result, shopping trips and visits to relatives became easier. Prices in village shops were much higher than in town, so it soon became worth paying the bus fare to town to make some decent savings on clothes and grocery bills. This led to a decline in some village services such as the hardware store and the tailor.

Village football and cricket teams were able to enlarge their fixture list by travelling further afield. People could get to the new cinemas in the evenings. Trips were run to nearby beauty spots and race meetings. As confidence in the reliability of vehicles increased, people booked to go farther away to the seaside or famous historical places. Pupils could attend schools that were further from home. New houses could be built outside the town centre in Shrewsbury in places such as Little Harlescott once the bus was available to take people to work. As a consequence of all of this there was boom in the industry that was not unlike the "railway mania" of the mid 19th Century. The new bus services quickly threatened some of the more marginal branch line railways, such as the Minsterley branch and the Bishops Castle Railway. Buses proved to be a much cheaper option than building any new railway lines. The Great Western Railway tried to counteract the threat of the bus by opening up several new halts on their existing network to give greater access to services. Many of these were little more than a platform with a primitive shelter. By 1930 there were over a hundred railway stations in Shropshire. However, this strategy did not stem the tide for long.

Before the coming of the country bus, most people walked, cycled or rode by horse to their nearest market. The spacing of these markets was therefore determined by how far people were prepared to walk with their produce and shopping. Within the catchment area of larger market centres such as Whitchurch, Market Drayton, Oswestry or Ludlow there were smaller local centres offering a lower level of service. These lower level centres (such as Prees, Hodnet, Nesscliffe and Cressage) lost out as people were able to travel for a greater distance by bus to go to the larger and better markets in the towns. The buses therefore hastened the decline in village services by helping the towns to become more dominant. After the Second World War this process was greatly accelerated by the private car.

A few of these early pioneers made it into the 21st Century' such as the firms run by the Boulton, Brown, Butter, Elcock and Whittle families. Some others, such as the family firms of Jones (Market Drayton) and Williamson almost made it to 2000.

During the 1920s competition on the more lucrative routes was sometimes intense and occasionally nasty. The big companies grew both by opening new routes of their own and by taking over routes and vehicles of others. Whilst the major operators and some family firms ran to published timetables throughout the day and week, others cut in and tried to cream off some of the best traffic. The travelling public could not always be sure when a bus would come or whether it would be wholly safe to travel in. The situation was not as bad in Shropshire as in more densely populated places in other parts of Britain where many fierce "bus wars" involving big companies and "pirate" operators took place. Nationally the government decided that enough was enough and the bus industry needed to be regulated. The far-reaching Transport Act of 1930 did this and put an end to the period of uncontrolled expansion of the "roaring twenties". Tighter regulation ensured that passengers had a safer and predictable service, but it also put a stop to the imaginative and enterprising approaches adopted by some of the people who first opened up the bus routes of Shropshire. People clearly welcomed the new travelling opportunities created by the country bus. By 1930 a substantial route network had been established. This network was formalised by the 1930 Act and remained substantially intact for over forty years.

Phase 3: Regulated growth from 1931 to 1939

After 1931, the bus operators of Shropshire, as elsewhere in England and Wales, found themselves in a quite different world as a consequence of the Road Traffic Act of 1930. Both large and small concerns were now closely controlled in terms of the routes that they could run on, the vehicles that they could use and the capabilities of people they could employ. The system of compulsory route and vehicle licensing that was set up in 1931 continued with only

a few changes until 1980 and then substantially kept on going for another six years until swept away by deregulation in 1986. Any operator could only run buses on a route if in possession of a road service licence which was awarded by the regional traffic commissioner after a semi-judicial hearing a road traffic court. In most cases this licence was initially awarded to the operator who first ran buses on the route. However, all applications for a route licence could be contested by other local operators, railway companies and other interested parties such as local councils. Drivers had to pass a test and be licensed. Conductors too had to have a licence. All vehicles had to be tested to confirm that they were mechanically fit for service.

All operators in Shropshire in 1930 who were running stage carriage services (traditional bus services for fare paying passengers); express services (with a minimum fare of a shilling) and excursions and tours (trips with a fixed fare for the whole journey) had to apply for a licence to continue these services beyond March 1931. It was illegal to run unauthorised services beyond that date. Even when in possession of a route licence, the operator had to stick rigidly to set timetables, routes and fares and not to use more than the allotted number and types of vehicles. Any changes to any of these elements required another hearing in the traffic court. Route licences were not required for private hire work and for school contracts. For some smaller outfits all this was just too much to handle, and they simply opted to give up their routes.

Sometimes road service licences were granted without modification, but frequently they carried amendments or conditions that had to be abided by. In some cases operators were refused licences on the basis that they were not fit to work the route, or that the route was already covered sufficiently and an extra operator would simply extract revenue from those already plying the route. One unlucky applicant who was refused a licence to continue an existing service was the memorably named Martin Luter of Snedshill who wished to keep running between Oakengates and St Georges. In most cases just one operator was licensed to work a particular route. Sometimes routes were worked jointly by two operators, such as the Shrewsbury-Wem-Whitchurch route which was shared between BMMO and Salopia Saloon Coaches.

The chairman of the traffic court had to consider the merits of each application using the three principles of priority, protection and public need. Not surprisingly there was a lot of work to be done in 1931 and 1932 to process around 3000 applications from the West Midlands traffic area for road service licences. As licences either gave an operator the right to earn a living or not, most applications were contested. Traffic courts sometimes had to work into the night to deal with the volume of business. The principle of priority was a fair one for the established operators, but it made it hard for newcomers to enter the scene. The large territorial companies such as BMMO, Crosville, Western Transport and Potteries Electric Traction gained the lion's share of the county's most profitable routes. Once secured these routes became part of a monopoly structure which nobody else could contest with cheaper fares or different timings.

Smaller independent operators found that their road service licences represented a considerable commercial asset as they could be sold to another operator. The big territorial companies, supported by money from the railways, set out to buy up a considerable number of these licences between 1932 and 1939 in order to consolidate their route networks still further. Sometimes the enlargement of the network led to a better usage of vehicles and crews. Some rural routes seem to have been added simply to fill in gaps on the map. In some cases the local village operator was more in tune with the needs of his customers than a large company based in a distant town. Some of the more marginal services added to the large company's networks in the thirties turned into serious financial liabilities in the sixties.

By summer 1939 the bus and coach business had grown from its horse drawn origins to a county-wide network of urban, inter-urban and rural routes. Shropshire was crossed by long distance express services that included daily scheduled routes and summer Saturday holiday services to coastal resorts. The operators ranged from one-person outfits with a single bus through to larger independents and the highly organised territorial companies. The combination of these services and a railway network that was almost complete meant that

public transport in Shropshire was immeasurably better than it had ever been at any time in the past, and possibly ever again.

Phase 4: Wartime Austerity from 1940 to 1945

Shropshire was spared most of the horrendous bombing damage that war brought to many British cities. However, the many wartime restrictions on fuel, new vehicle deliveries and travelling for non-essential journeys applied as much in a rural county as anywhere. These constraints rapidly halted the steady improvements in the public transport network that had led to the finest ever provision in the summer of 1939. Wartime Shropshire was characterised by the constant sound of aircraft flying from many airfields. There were large army camps at Donnington, Nesscliffe and Oswestry. The Royal Navy hid away a huge armament store at Ditton Priors. Many manufacturing industries turned to production for the war effort that involved round-the-clock shifts. The result of all of these factors was a very different pattern of bus usage.

On the outbreak of war in September 1939 the chairman of the West Midlands Traffic Commissioners became the Regional Transport Commissioner (RTC). He had the power to curtail services that were mostly intended for pleasure and to allow new services to be started under a wartime permit without reference to a traffic court. The normal licensing regulations were suspended. The RTC allocated fuel coupons to operators using a basic allowance linked to the route miles that an operator covered in 1938 plus some discretionary coupons for new essential routes to strategic locations. The use of private cars was very severely restricted and some car owners had to immobilise their vehicles by depositing a vital component in the police station.

In the early months of the war the production of new buses continued much as before, but new orders soon tailed off due to the uncertainties of the future. During 1941, as the demand for military vehicles soared, government orders were given to stop the construction of new buses completely. During 1940 the Ministry of Defence requisitioned sizeable numbers of buses and coaches for military use. Operators looked on aghast to see their valuable vehicles being roughly treated by inexperienced drivers and maintenance crews. When in due time some of these vehicles were returned to their owners they were in a very sorry state.

It was not long before an acute shortage of buses began to be felt, especially for conveying vital war workers and farmers. So from 1942 permission was given for a limited number of new buses to be built using wherever possible materials which were not strategically important. So steel panels replaced aluminium ones and poorer grades of wood were used for body frames. These basic buses were called "utility" vehicles. The single deck design was known as the Bedford OWB. Once kitted out with a 32 seat body and a coat of brown primer paint, one could be purchased, after appropriate paperwork, for £810. Quite a number of these OWBs were allocated to Shropshire operators because of the large number of military establishments and the need to produce more food.

As the war progressed the maintenance of buses became ever more hampered by the increasing age of the fleets, the lack of spares and the loss of skilled technicians to the armed forces. The loss of younger people to military service or essential war work meant an increased reliance on women and older men to keep things going. At the Ditherington depot of BMMO much of the maintenance had to be done in the open air because the inside of the garage was used for the production of aircraft components. Buses were frequently overloaded, causing damage to bodywork and suspension. Accident damage increased because of the blackout restrictions that limited the use of headlamps to a feeble beam. In many parts of the country around 5% of buses were run on producer gas that was generated from a coke boiler towed behind on a trailer. This was barely practicable in towns and quite impractical in hilly rural terrain. The use of producer gas was thankfully phased out from September 1944 when victory was in sight and more petrol and diesel oil was available. By December 1944 blackout regulations had been relaxed also.

In order to shift greater loads with fewer vehicles some single decker buses had some seats removed and the rest placed with their backs against the windows. This gave a large central area for standing passengers who only seemed to stay upright when the bus cornered if the vehicle was very crowded.

As the war drew to a close, the bus industry was in an overstretched and run-down condition. The demand for essential travel was high and the impending end of restrictions on leisure travel meant that a huge number of additional journeys were ready to be made. The bus operators had few new vehicles and many of the older ones were in a poor condition because of inadequate maintenance, a lack of spares and the effects of continual overloading or military use. Unlike the position at the end of the First World War, there had been relatively few technical advances made in vehicle design, except in the case of BMMO who had been experimenting with underfloor engined single deckers. The highly regulated state of the industry prevented a repeat of the situation when ex-servicemen purchased cheap vehicles to run in an entrepreneurial way. Therefore the industry had to cope very quickly with an unprecedented demand for travel using the existing regulated systems of control with an inadequate stock of vehicles.

Phase 5: Peak loads from 1946 to 1951

When the Second World War came to an end in May 1945 it at first seemed as if it might only be a short while before pre-war standards of public transport would be resumed. This was not to be the case. Very quickly demand for bus services boomed. Few people had the use of a private car and those who did were severely limited in the use they could make of their car by petrol rationing. The railways were so badly run down that they could not absorb all of the additional demand and certainly were way off replicating pre-war standards of reliability and comfort. The end of hostilities meant that restrictions on pleasure travel were lifted. There was an instant demand to visit friends and relatives, to go to the seaside and places of interest, attend sporting events and to go out in the evenings to dances and the cinema. Not surprisingly people felt that after so many deprivations and tragedies they deserved some pleasure. National Service was compulsory for young men and the traffic generated by them travelling home on leave was considerable. In Shropshire there were many army camps and RAF stations. The navy also had a presence in the county, particularly at Ditton Priors. Each weekend personnel would travel from all of these establishments to the major cities of Britain. Post-war reconstruction meant that there were plenty of jobs available, many of which required bus travel to reach them.

Restrictions on long-distance express services and on excursions and tours were lifted in spring 1946 and people began to go on a week's holiday to a seaside resort by coach or train again. Many people had more money in their pockets but there wasn't a lot to spend it on in the shops. So they often decided to use their money to get out and about to see friends and relax. The new freedom to travel was often seen as a way of throwing off the shackles of wartime hardship. Many new housing estates and industrial areas were built away from railway stations and town centres, generating more travel journeys for work, school and shopping.

Quite often the bus operators were not in a position to meet this sudden and massive rise in demand for travel. There was an acute shortage of vehicles. Many of the ones they had were in a very run-down condition. Production of new buses during the war was only a third of what was needed and many of these were uncomfortable utility types with wooden seating. When new buses entered service after 1945 they were often used to enlarge the fleets to help cope with the extra passengers rather than to replace obsolete vehicles as intended. It was less labour intensive to produce a bus chassis than a bus body. This fact led to many small bodybuilders starting up business. Sometimes the inexperience of such firms coupled with the lack of good quality construction materials led to bodies that were not robust enough to do the job. Many of these firms lasted for only a few years and faded away when the demand for new vehicles was satisfied. Additional bodybuilding capacity was also needed to reconstruct or replace older bodies to be placed on reconditioned pre-war chassis. Body repairs were

hampered by a lack of aluminium panels and suitable hardwood. However, by 1950 the fleets of most operators had been duly enlarged to meet the demands of the time. Some fleets were at least 50% bigger in 1950 than in 1939.

The majority of independent companies had either stocked up with some new buses and coaches or had bought second hand ones that were cascaded down from wealthier outfits. Only Salopia Saloon Coaches and JT Whittle invested in sizeable fleets of new vehicles. Some companies, such as SC & J Vagg of Knockin Heath bought a few to strengthen capacity in key areas. Bedford had built up a big market with their wartime OWB and this was hugely consolidated after the war with a peacetime derivative called the OB. Most of these OB chassis were fitted with a curvaceous pre-war style 29 seat coach body by Duple Coachworks of Hendon in London. By the time production of the OB ended in 1950 a staggering 12693 chassis had been manufactured. Although some of these were exported, the OB became a very common sight on British roads and especially so in Shropshire where most independent operators had at least one. Market day in places like Oswestry or Ludlow would produce rows of parked Bedford OBs in a multitude of liveries. The petrol engined OB was based on proven pre-war technology that was easy to maintain. It was economic to use on country services right up to the late sixties. It is fitting that one of these vehicles is maintained in workable order by Boulton's of Cardington, Shropshire's oldest surviving independent bus operator.

The big pre-war manufacturers of heavier chassis, such as AEC, Bristol, Crossley, Daimler, Guy and Leyland, were back in business again. They considered that the best way to satisfy the huge and immediate post-war backlog in orders was to upgrade pre-war designs and to use established methods and tools. BMMO managers argued that it would be foolish to build new post-war buses to pre-war specifications. The company therefore standardised on advanced under-floor single deckers with a front entrance beside the driver in a format that is now totally familiar. Soon after the introduction of these remarkable single deckers in 1946, BMMO produced some magnificent luxury coach versions which were generally seen on Shropshire roads such as the A5 and the A41 en route from Birmingham to destinations such as Llandudno or Liverpool.

Traditional rear entrance double deckers were placed into service after the war, even by BMMO. Double deckers could not pass under the railway bridges at Shrewsbury Station from Ditherington, so limiting their deployment on Shrewsbury town services. Crosville made extensive use of double deckers in the Oswestry area. Mid-Wales Motorways and Vaggs of Knockin Heath used double deckers between Shrewsbury and Welshpool and Oswestry respectively. You could also take a double decker for a town service in Oswestry run by JW Lloyd of Town Walls. GH Austin used double deckers in the Newport area and especially on the Stafford run. In the period 1946 to 1951 all buses apart from small country vehicles with less than 20 seats required both a driver and conductor by law. Double deckers therefore gave more seats within the legal size limits of buses of the time. This gave lower operating costs on busy routes. However, double deckers were unpopular as country buses because they had no boot space to stow larger items bought in the town. Fifty six people each with armfuls of shopping clambering aboard a bus with no storage space would have been a real problem.

The election of a Labour government in 1945 heralded a shift from private to public ownership in the bus industry. The Transport Bill of 1946 indicated that fundamental changes were on the way. The Bill became law in August 1947, with a keystone being the setting up of the British Transport Commission (BTC) to control road, rail and canal services. The railway companies held major financial stake in the territorial bus companies (BMMO, Crosville and Potteries Motor Traction served Shropshire). When the railway companies were nationalised in January 1948 the government (through the BTC) acquired a stake in these bus companies. The threat of full nationalisation encouraged the Tilling group (which included Crosville) to sell out completely to the government in November 1948 and so to become fully nationalised. As the deal with the Tilling group also included the Bristol chassis works and the Eastern Coachworks (ECW) plant at Lowestoft, from 1949 the great majority of Crosville vehicles were Bristol types with ECW bodywork. In contrast, the British Electric Traction (BET) group (which included BMMO and PMT) resisted nationalisation vigorously and kept their independence

even though the BTC owned up to 50% of the shares via the railway involvement. BMMO continued to build its own buses and coaches at Bearwood in Birmingham.

In the late 1940s operating costs rose considerably as wages increased and as the cost of new vehicles escalated. Despite rising numbers of passengers in 1948 and 1949 expenditure rose more rapidly than income for some operators. Bus crews were asked to work more overtime. Ways of reducing costs were first explored, such as doing away with the conductor on smaller buses and using larger vehicles at a reduced frequency on busier routes. On some country services the loss of the conductor was a bigger blow than might be imagined today. The conductor did a lot more than collect the fares. He or she would help passengers with their luggage, open the sliding door, load the boot, provide information and run errands. Some of those duties passed to the driver. Conductors were legally required on any vehicle with more than 20 seats and every vehicle where the driver was in a separate cab and so could not control the door. Increased operating costs in 1950 and 1951 led to a series of applications for fare increases to the traffic commissioner. Although the territorial companies began to consider the prospect of pruning some marginal country services, at this stage they were still reluctant to surrender parts of their territory to smaller family firms with lower overheads, especially as they had fought so hard to acquire them before the war.

In 1948 the government intended to introduce "area schemes" to integrate the complete public transport provision with defined areas of England and Wales. Detailed plans were drawn up for a pioneering scheme in North East England in 1949 with a second scheme sketched out for East Anglia. The 1950 General Election cut the Labour majority down to a very small number of MPs. This slowed down the work on the area schemes considerably. The defeat of the Labour government by the Conservatives a year later put a complete stop to area schemes and any further moves towards nationalisation. Doubtless if a Labour government had been elected in 1951 Shropshire would have become part of a West Midlands area scheme, which would have radically changed the story. So, by the end of 1951 the organisational upheavals in the bus industry were over and a settled period was entered into that would last, in essence, until 1968.

The immediate post-war years were characterised by peak numbers of passenger journeys and a massive restocking of vehicles. Nationally the number of passenger journeys fell slightly from 1949 to 1950. That was the turning of the tide. Bus companies from then onwards had to concentrate harder and harder on balancing income and expenditure against a background of falling numbers of passenger journeys and rising costs. Although the brief period between 1945 and 1951 involved vehicle shortages, overcrowding, uncertainties and rising costs, it was from the operators' point of view a golden age. From then onwards, despite technical improvements and government subsidies, the bus would never again be so central to the travelling habits of the people of Shropshire. Indeed, there would be some very difficult times to live through.

Phase 6: First signs of decline from 1952 to 1960

The election of a Conservative government in 1951 marked the start of a period of considerable stability in the organisation of the bus and coach industry. In Shropshire the majority of stage carriage services within the Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth and Wellington areas were operated solely by BMMO (trading as Midland Red). This was the largest bus company in Britain outside London and served a massive area that stretched from Oswestry in the north west to Biceter in the south east. It was a member of the British Electric Traction (BET) group and so had resisted being nationalised during the time of the previous Labour government. BMMO also had routes in the Ludlow, Oswestry, Whitchurch and Market Drayton areas, but did not have such a tight monopoly. Along the Welsh Border, the main operator was the nationalised Crosville Motor Services based in Oswestry. Crosville also ran some routes into Whitchurch and Market Drayton from its bases in Chester and Nantwich. Some services into Market Drayton and Woore were operated by the Potteries Motor Traction Company (PMT) which was another BET group member.

Independent operators filled the gaps in the network of the big territorial companies. In some cases these gaps were in remote rural areas where small village-based operators were best suited to meet the local needs. Some of these only had a handful of vehicles and sometimes ran stage carriage services only on market days and Saturdays in the tradition of the old general carriers. There were also some medium-sized independent companies that served significant parts of Shropshire with daily services. GH Austin and Sons of Woodseaves (in Staffordshire) served the Newport and Shifnal areas. Salopia Saloon Coaches of Whitchurch had a large network of rural routes in North Shropshire. SC and J Vagg of Knockin Heath had a considerable route mileage in North West Shropshire, having taken over JP Arthur & Son of Oswestry in 1947. In North East Shropshire Jones Coachways Ltd of Market Drayton and CH Butter of Childs Ercall were significant players. In the south of the county many routes were in the hands of Corvedale Motor Services of Ludlow, M&M Motors of Cleobury Mortimer and JT Whittle of Highley. There were some independent firms that served urban areas too. In the Wellington, Donnington and Oakengates area a determined group of small independent concerns who were members of the Shropshire Omnibus Association (SOA) successfully continued to run intensive urban services on a shared rota basis in defiance of the big BMMO organisation. In Oswestry, some town services were run by J Hampson and J Lloyd.

Surprisingly, the double decker bus gained in popularity in the fifties in Shropshire, mainly because it could carry more passengers at relatively little additional expense. (Double deckers with 56 seats had the same chassis size as single deckers with 44 seats). The unions would not agree to driver only working of buses with more than 44 seats. BMMO used double deckers on Shrewsbury town services to Monkmoor, Springfield and Bayston Hill and on some inter-urban routes such as Shrewsbury to Hereford via Ludlow and Hereford to Birmingham via Ludlow. Crosville used double deckers extensively in the Oswestry and Wrexham areas and PMT used them between Market Drayton and Newcastle under Lyme. SC & J Vagg purchased two new Leyland Titans in 1950 to handle the busy traffic between Shrewsbury and Oswestry. GH Austin used second-hand double deckers between Stafford, Newport and Donnington. Mid-Wales Motorways also required double deckers to work the Shrewsbury to Welshpool service. JT Lloyd ran double deckers on Oswestry town services and to Chirk via Gobowen.

Smaller operators lacked the scope for making the same degree of efficiency savings as the larger companies. For example, they could not afford mechanical washers and lacked the capital to buy new vehicles that needed less maintenance. Although they earned most of their income from school contracts, private hire and private hire, they could not use their vehicles as flexibly and intensively as the big firms. So whilst car travel was becoming more luxurious the rural bus was seen to be increasingly down at heel. It was certainly not the thing for fashionable people to be seen in. The bus never featured in the *Shropshire Life* magazine and seldom appeared in county guide books.

The period between 1952 and 1960 was a transitional time between the post-war boom years with healthy surpluses and a major period of decline characterised by a lethal combination of rising costs and falling revenues. The larger companies kept going by pruning running costs and ditching uneconomic routes. Smaller rural operators had less scope for these actions and became economically ever more marginal. This was a national problem that prompted the Ministry of Transport to set up a committee to search for solutions to the rural bus dilemma under the chairmanship of Prof DT Jack OBE.

Phase 7: Urban problems and a rural crisis from 1961 to 1968

By the early sixties quite different issues faced urban and rural bus operators. In towns buses were carrying less people but the receipts were still enough to generate at least a small profit. The main problems were traffic congestion and a shortage of staff. More cars on the road not only took away custom but made travel for those who stayed with the buses much slower. This became evident with early morning traffic queues to cross the English and Welsh

Bridges in Shrewsbury, for example. At that time the road layouts were not engineered for large volumes of traffic, with few by-passes and one-way systems. In the countryside the lack of passengers was becoming quite acute. Car ownership was higher as a proportion of the population in rural areas. The crisis in income was even more severe for rural railways whose relative inflexibility and high overhead costs made them especially vulnerable to competition. Some branch lines were economically very marginal even in the days when railways had a near monopoly of public travel. In 1963 Dr Robert Beeching's notorious report 'Reshaping of British Railways' advocated wholesale closures of rural branch lines and intermediate stations on main lines. Whilst not all of the recommendations of this report were acted upon, there were a significant number of rail closures in Shropshire between 1963 and 1968. When railway lines were scheduled for closure, replacement bus services were licensed. The rail replacement buses laboriously served every intermediate station, taking a long time to complete a rather tedious through journey. Unsurprisingly the number of users dwindled to the point where the replacement services were also uneconomic.

The enquiry into ways of solving the rural transport dilemma led by Prof DT Jack OBE that was begun in September 1959 was completed in March 1961. The report (known as the Jack Report) recommended that essential rural services should be subsidised. The money for this would come from both central and local government sources. This idea was not popular with the Conservative government of the day and so no immediate action was taken. The problem therefore continued to get worse with no remedy in sight. In the 1962 Transport Act the British Transport Commission was broken up and the nationalised bus companies of the Tilling group became part of the Transport Holding Company (THC).

A change of government in October 1964 led to a significant change of direction. Very quickly the newly elected Labour government decided to give selected bus operators relief from fuel tax duty as a means of helping hard-pressed operators to survive. In 1966 the Minister of Transport, Barbara Castle, played a key role in the production of a very significant White Paper on the future of public transport. For large urban areas new Passenger Transport Authorities (PTAs) were proposed, whilst in rural areas local authorities would be given financial resources to subsidise routes considered to be 'essential'. To help integrate routes and make economies of scale the government worked hard to arrange a marriage between the privately owned British Electric Traction group and the publicly owned Tilling group. This was to be done by persuading the reluctant BET chairman to sell out to the Transport Holding Company. BMMO was especially opposed to this move and anti-nationalisation posters appeared on some of the company's buses. Despite strong opposition, the deal was done on 22 November 1967 and BMMO became a wholly owned subsidiary of the Transport Holding Company on 14 March 1968. Soon afterwards the Transport Holding Company was wound up and the combined Tillings and BET fleets were transferred to the ownership of the new National Bus Company on 1 January 1969.

In December 1967 a further White Paper was published, which led directly to the far-reaching 1968 Transport Act. This set up Passenger Transport Authorities in Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Tyneside and the West Midlands. Shropshire was initially affected only slightly by this move as buses owned by Wolverhampton Corporation serving Albrighton, Beckbury, Bridgnorth and Tong were repainted in West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive livery. The National Bus Company (NBC) was set up to take control of the former BET and Tilling group companies, by then both owned by the Transport Holding Company. In Shropshire the NBC subsidiaries serving Shropshire were Midland Red, Crosville and PMT. A new bus grant scheme was introduced, providing 25% of the cost of new buses from the autumn of 1968 provided that they conformed to set specifications and could be operated by one person. New limitations on the hours that drivers could work were introduced. Government support for key rural services to be subsidised along the lines proposed in the Jack report of 1961 was finally agreed. There would also be an increase in the fuel duty rebate on stage carriage services.

The 1968 Transport Act provided a valuable lifeline for independent operators who could gain from the new bus grants, route subsidies and fuel tax rebates. These initiatives helped to keep operators such as Valley Motors, Boulton, Salopia, Vagg, Williamson and Minsterley Motors afloat. The rural routes of the newly formed NBC similarly benefited. However,

trouble was brewing for the NBC subsidiary Midland Red because so many of its most profitable routes were within the West Midlands PTA where its operating organisation, the WMPTE, also ran its own buses. Initially Midland Red buses were permitted to work alongside WMPTE vehicles, but soon there was pressure to absorb the Midland Red routes into the PTE network. Profits from these West Midlands services helped to subsidise uneconomic Shropshire services. The prospect of this source of support being cut off caused great alarm.

At the end of 1968, with the far-reaching new Transport Act just coming into force, the bus industry entered a new era of increased nationalisation, more government control and subsidised operations. This was indeed a major turning point in the story. The Act did not stop the decline in the bus industry, but it did enable it to survive in a modified form in an increasingly hostile trading environment.

Phase 8: Grants, subsidies and reorganisation from 1969 to 1980

The 1968 Transport Act was of massive importance to the story of bus services in Shropshire and ranks alongside the Acts of 1930 (introducing licensing) and 1986 (introducing deregulation). The 1968 Act received Royal Assent on 25 October 1968 and came into force at the start of 1969. The creation of the National Bus Company on 1 January 1969 affected all services operated by BMMO (Midland Red), Crosville and PMT in Shropshire. There was a regional structure for the NBC which placed BMMO and PMT in the West Midlands and Crosville in the North Western divisions. Whilst these regional structures were subsequently redrawn three times, this basic arrangement remained until 1980. The NBC was set up with an accumulated debt across all companies of £97.6 million. This debt was largely the result of the need to pay back share capital. The government somehow expected this debt to be paid back with 5% interest by 1984.

By saddling the new company with a heavy debt burden the NBC got off to a bad start. Things got worse and the number of passengers using NBC buses remorselessly fell throughout the seventies, leading to nightmare economic scenarios. The NBC had to operate in a climate where vehicle costs were rising fast, wages were shooting up and where revenues were falling. Not surprisingly the NBC companies were preoccupied with survival rather than innovation or expansion. The great majority of the rural services run by the NBC companies in Shropshire were not profitable, and yet there was reluctance to let them go to independent operators. It took a long time to integrate the differing traditions and conditions of service of the various NBC constituent companies into anything like a corporate organisation. Outwardly a greater sense of conformity was displayed by the adoption of corporate liveries for all NBC vehicles from the autumn of 1972. BMMO and PMT adopted a poppy red colour whilst Crosville used leaf green. BMMO buses were painted red overall with a white band, dual purpose vehicles were painted red below the window sills and white above them and coaches were painted white overall. All vehicles carried the double N arrow symbol.

All operators gained from a government decision in October 1971 to increase the new bus grant from 25% to 50%. Before long gleaming new 'grant buses' were seen on country routes that previously had only seen second hand types for many years. The arrival of new vehicles, sometimes into fleets that had seen very few new acquisitions for bus work since the late forties, was a revolution in itself. In addition, they displaced some good quality used vehicles for contract work. Rural operators often used their grant money to buy vehicles with coach seats and folding automatic doors that could be used for both bus and coach work. There were strict regulations about how grant buses should be employed and one operator in south east Shropshire was taken to court for not abiding by the rules.

The most significant event during the seventies for Midland Red was the sale of the Birmingham and Black Country services to the West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive (WMPTE) on 3 December 1973. This meant that 413 buses and 1240 employees

were transferred to the WMPTE, leaving a massive hole in the centre of the BMMO network. The possibility of using these profitable routes to cross-subsidise the rural services was lost. It even became necessary to change the name of the company from the Birmingham and Midland Motor Omnibus Company (BMMO) to the Midland Red Omnibus Company (MROC) as Birmingham was no longer the centre of operations. This renaming occurred on 1 April 1974. As a small compensation, some former Wolverhampton Corporation country services (including those to Albrighton, Beckbury, Bridgnorth, Claverley and Tong in Shropshire) were transferred to MROC and given route numbers between 874 and 890 from 1 April 1974.

Overall, MROC was substantially weaker economically than was BMMO. This fact was reflected in accelerated cost-cutting moves that included the shedding of many Sunday, evening and off-peak journeys. It also saw the pruning of some rural routes completely in the Bridgnorth, Ludlow and Wem areas. 1974 was a poor year for bus operators because of the effects of the prolonged miners' strike and the consequential three day working week. A new pay code made staff recruitment harder and there were delays in the delivery of new vehicles. The NBC recorded a loss of nearly £10 million in 1974, compared to a profit of nearly £8 million a year before. The government's prices and incomes policy blocked large fare increases to compensate, requiring the NBC to take out a further loan to cover its mounting debts. 1975 saw the position worsen, with operating costs rising by over 30% as a result of severe inflation. The NBC companies had no option but to make deeper cuts into their networks.

The days in which profitable routes could help to support uneconomic ones were on the way out. To avoid making uniformed cuts and to make the optimum use of the resources available, Midland Red joined other NBC companies in using outside consultants to advise on the reorganisation of local service networks. The aim was to get the maximum return from each driver and vehicle whilst providing the least amount of inconvenience to passengers. Early types of computers were used to redraw route networks and timetables to improve efficiency and respond the passengers' wishes as expressed through questionnaires. This work was called the Viable Network Project and was tried out in 1977 at Stratford-upon-Avon, Evesham and Kidderminster. This scheme was then developed further as the Market Analysis Project (MAP) in a form that could be more widely applied across the whole of the National Bus Company. The outcome of the MAP survey in Shropshire was the adoption of local network identities, with vehicles based in Shrewsbury and Ludlow being branded as *Hotspur* and those in Telford gaining the somewhat contrived name of *Tellus*. Stafford based vehicles worked into Shropshire bearing the name *Chaserider*. Some routes that had grown up over several decades were recast or replaced.

Major revisions took place in Telford from 1 April 1978 with the launch of *Tellus* services following the take-over of the Shropshire Omnibus Association (SOA) operators in the Oakengates and Donnington areas. A fleet of new Leyland National buses was purchased to work this new Telford network. A handful of this batch was still in service in 2001. Shrewsbury area services were radically reorganised with the introduction of *Hotspur* services on 24 November 1979. The Staffordshire services were reorganised and branded as *Chaserider* on 30 May 1980.

MROC made a loss of £3.4 in 1978-1979 despite the improved efficiency brought about by MAP, the increase in one person operation to 80% of buses and increased grants for uneconomic but essential services. MROC was a financially sick company by 1980. It was not surprising therefore that on 6 September 1981 it was split up into five new companies. Also in 1981 the last buses built by BMMO (class S23) were withdrawn from service. Definitely this was the end of an era. Each of the five new companies was given back-up facilities from a neighbouring NBC subsidiary. The majority of the former Midland Red services in Shropshire passed to Midland Red North. The company name was quickly subsumed under the local identity names of *Hotspur*, *Tellus* and *Chaserider*. The depots at Ditherington, Ludlow and Wellington passed to Midland Red North whilst the Bridgnorth outstation passed to Midland Red West.

Another landmark Act of Parliament was passed in 1980 by the newly elected Conservative government. This was the 1980 Transport Act which came into effect on 6 October 1980

which deregulated all coach services that terminated over 30 miles away from the starting point. Some minibuses were removed from the licensing system to help set up new types of services without interference. The traffic commissioner's control over the fares charged by operators was removed. Some trial areas were identified where road service licences would no longer be needed. One of the three trial areas was Herefordshire, a county with very similar operating environments to Shropshire. These trials, and the liberalising of coach services, pointed the way towards a complete deregulation of bus services in England and Wales outside London in 1986. The Market Analysis Project paved the way for the break-up of the larger constituent companies of the National Bus Company into smaller and more accountable localised units. These smaller units could be privatised more easily when the time came. The problems of rising costs and falling revenue continued and increasing numbers of routes were being subsidised. Thus the scene was set for the run up to full-scale deregulation that changed the face of bus operations for ever.

Phase 9: Easing the regulations from 1981 to 1985

Having made many efficiency savings and with an ever-increasing reliance on subsidies, new approaches to bus operation were sought in the early eighties. The Transport Act of 1980 loosened the restrictions on applying for a road service licence so as to enable newcomers with innovative ideas to try their hand. The traffic commissioner no longer had control over fares, allowing operators to charge what the market could bear. Express coach journeys that finished more than thirty miles away from the starting point were deregulated, so sweeping away restrictions that had been in force since 1930. This introduced competition on long distance coach services. In October 1980 JT Whittle quickly took advantage of this new legislation to start a service from Bridgnorth to London with the branding "*Goldhawk*". Coach deregulation challenged the dominance of the National Express network. In response, the National Bus Company decided to upgrade the National Express trunk services using *Rapide* motorway services and to devolve the shorter local and regional routes to the territorial companies. Thus Crosville introduced the *Townlynx* express network whilst Midland Red North joined up with other former Midland Red companies to create *Midland Express*. Some new long distance services were not profitable and soon folded, such as one from Newtown to Birmingham via Shrewsbury run by Mid-Wales Motorways Ltd between February and July 1981.

The simplification of the rules governing minibus services was generally welcomed in Shropshire and several operators benefited from this. For example, the long established business of Albert Parish of Morda was transformed into a new one called *Parish Minibuses 82* when the bus and coach services were sold to FG Owen of Oswestry. From 1982 Parish operated only minibuses. Philjo Motors Ltd of Wellington was a dedicated minibus company that was operating by 1980.

Neighbouring Herefordshire was chosen as a trial area for full scale bus deregulation from 27 July 1981. The aim was to reduce the amount of subsidy being paid out to support uneconomic but essential rural routes. It was also the intention to promote increased frequencies of buses on commercially operated urban and inter-urban routes. Some success was achieved towards both of these intentions. However, this success was gained at the expense of destabilising existing arrangements and putting longer term investment in vehicles and publicity at risk. Within the trial area, which covered much of the county, road service licences were no longer required and operators only had to give 42 days notice to the local authority and post an advert in a local paper before starting a commercial bus service. The County Council invited tenders for subsidised services rather than paying subsidies directly to the established operator on routes that were grant aided. Midland Red West made significant service cuts in the Hereford area on the basis of operating without a subsidy.

The experienced bus historian John Dunabin, writing in his book "The Hereford Bus" expressed great concern about the ways in which several operators were battling against each other for custom on the streets of the City of Hereford. At one stage this included the

running of free services to starve out the opposition. He also wrote about the adverse effects of low cost entrants who set up a business with old vehicles that were not backed up by proper maintenance facilities. These low cost operators were creaming off passengers from the routes of established firms that had reliable and well maintained vehicles. The old timetables were thrown out of the window and passengers were often unsure about when the next bus would come or who would be the owner of it. Despite serious concerns about the process and informed opinion being offered that the rightful place for competition was in bidding for contracts and not fighting it out with passengers, the Government declared the experiment to be a success. As a consequence it was decided that in October 1986 bus services in the whole of England, Wales and Scotland other than London would be deregulated.

The Conservative government elected in June 1983 was committed to increasing competition on public transport and set out to scrap the system of licensing of services and operators introduced in 1930. Nicholas Ridley was placed in charge of this controversial political process. First proposals were published in a White Paper in July 1984 followed by the Transport Bill in January 1985. The government was not inclined to be diverted from its mission and the Transport Act 1985 was enacted on 30 October 1985. The date set aside when local bus services outside London would be deregulated (the so-called 'D-day') was 26 October 1986. A transition period was arranged whereby prospective operators were required to register details of their post-deregulation intentions to the traffic commissioners by the end of February 1986. Services in place on 26 October 1986 were only required to operated as registered for a period ending on 25 January 1987. From then onwards any local service could be started, varied or withdrawn with 42 days notice to the traffic commissioners. Services not registered commercially and deemed by the County Council to be essential were to be put to open tender. The County Council was bound to accept the lowest tender. The removal of the regulation system terminated the co-ordination of operators on shared routes and area agreements. All this meant that the bus industry was about to enter a new era with both opportunities and threats. The historical significance of deregulation was massive.

Phase 10: Market forces rule from 1986 to 1997

The effects of the 1986 Transport Act have been far reaching both nationally and in Shropshire. The need for operators to hold a road service licence was removed, leaving them free to run commercial services as they wished, running at whatever frequency they chose and charging whatever fares they felt would optimise profits. New entrants could try their hand, perhaps with innovative new approaches. More than one company could operate routes that attracted plenty of custom competitively without subsidy. In larger towns and cities this led to 'bus wars' with buses of different companies filling the streets as their drivers sought to capture passengers from the opposition. This almost put the clock back to the pre-1930 trading environment. In Shropshire, whilst there were challenges to the established town services of Midland Red North in Shrewsbury and Telford and on some inter-urban routes such as Telford to Stafford, buses touting for new customers did not swamp the roads of Shropshire as they did in places like Oxford and Glasgow.

The majority of routes in Shropshire were subsidised by the County Council through central government allocations. Operators were able to register their immediate post-deregulation route intentions between March and October 1986. A three month freeze on service changes was enforced from 26 October 1986. Once that ended in January 1987 all operators were free to introduce changes with six weeks notice. From 'D-day' when bus deregulation came into effect, the County Council allocated grants for each subsidised service after holding a competition between bidding operators. Frequently the new contracts were awarded from the first week in September to coincide with the academic year, as many subsidised services were tied up with school contracts. The County Council created a rational system of route numbers for Shropshire tendered services. It published area timetables and route maps for all services whether commercial or tendered. Buses working subsidised services carried a yellow card in the windscreen with the words *Shropshire Bus*.

Looking back it is also clear that several of the immediate post-deregulation ventures (such as commercial minibus services in sparsely populated areas) were poorly thought through and were not properly researched or costed. Frequent route changes destroyed the 'mental timetables' that many established passengers had developed. Up-to-date printed timetables and route maps were initially hard to come by because they so quickly became out of date. For many people the bus network became a mystery which they could not penetrate easily without some determined research.

From 1995 low floor single decker buses that could be entered from the curb without any steps and which were accessible by wheelchairs started to appear on selected services. Shropshire County Council sometimes stipulated that these vehicles should be used on tendered services. The first such vehicles to work in the county were four Scania's used by Midland Red North on the Meole Brace park and ride shuttle and a Dennis Dart used by Midland Red West on rural services from Bridgnorth and Ludlow. By 1998 it was sometimes the case that passengers travelling on sparsely populated routes could stretch out in an almost empty modern low floor bus whilst those travelling on popular commercial routes might be crammed into a twenty year old vehicle with few concessions to those people with mobility problems.

The National Bus Company subsidiary Midland Red (North) Ltd made considerable route changes after the deregulation 'D-day' of 26 October 1986. Open tendering for routes and cost-cutting competitive measures led to the withdrawal of 104 buses in April 1987 and 80 unprofitable routes across the whole of the company's network in Shropshire and Staffordshire. This drastic action greatly reduced operating costs and helped restore company's ailing fortunes prior to privatisation.

Following successful experiments in Exeter, the National Bus Company was keen to introduce minibus schemes in many towns and cities in Britain. Minibuses wearing a new *Hotspur* livery were introduced into Shrewsbury on 19 April 1986. The turn of Telford to have *Tellus* minibuses came on Monday 12 May 1986 after a promotional 'fun day' on the previous Saturday. Further significant changes occurred in the Telford area on 1 September 1986. The Ford and Freight Rover 16 seat minibuses were small and not very comfortable, but they could reach places that full sized buses couldn't. They brought increased frequencies which passengers liked. In Shrewsbury minibuses stimulated a 40% increase in passenger growth within their first year of operation. They initially proved to be very popular because they ran so often that a timetable was not necessary. Their seating capacity was limited to sixteen, which meant that they were often too small to handle peak loads. Gradually they were superseded by 23 and later 33 seat vehicles that offered greater comfort. In contrast, early experiments in using minibuses in rural areas proved to be uneconomic because the main cost was the driver's wages.

On 27 January 1988 Midland Red (North) was sold to Drawlane Ltd after a protracted process and a false start. This involved 248 vehicles and 491 employees. A considerable contraction of routes and services had taken place between 1981 and 1988, but subsequently, under private ownership, the company began to expand again. For example, there was a major revision of Telford routes from 29 February 1988 with several new services. On 29 December 1991 the Oswestry and Abermule depots of Crosville Wales, also under Drawlane management, were transferred to Midland Red North ownership with the title *Cambrian Midland Red*.

In 1992 Drawlane Ltd was renamed British Bus plc. In August 1994 Stevenson's of Uttoxeter was sold to British Bus and from April 1995 Midland Red North and Stevenson's were jointly managed. In August 1996 British Bus became part of the Cowie group and in October 1997 it was announced that the group would be rebranded as *Arriva*. Midland Red North and Stevenson's were brought together in the renamed company Arriva Midlands North in April 1998. Vehicles started to appear in the new Arriva corporate livery of turquoise and sandstone from March 1999.

The first post bus service in Shropshire began on 3 November 1997 as route 225 from Stanley Green (near Whixall) to Whitchurch with rail connections at Prees Station. The

vehicles used were small Ford Escort estate cars with only three seats. It was run as a pilot scheme for a year and was continued with some route modifications subsequently. A second post bus service was introduced as part of a reshaping of services in the Clun area called the *Valley Link* by Shropshire CC, starting 4 January 1999. Despite being launched with much publicity in November 1997, route 225 quietly fell victim to County Council budget cuts in April 2000.

The use of subsidies largely stabilised the rural bus network and arrested the decline of former years. The annual tendering process and fluctuations in the amount of money available to be spent on transport led to frequent changes of operators and many route and timing changes. In the case of larger operators, some money that might have been spent on new vehicles was spent instead on raising capital to buy out other businesses or to fend off hostile bids. It was all too easy for smaller enterprises to enter the scene with only a small capital outlay on second hand vehicles. Orders for new buses slumped. Bigger companies who traditionally had purchased most of their fleet from new now seemed reluctant to invest in modern equipment if they could not be certain that they could retain a viable network of routes to use them on. After a period of severe instability and uncertainty coupled with low investment from 1986 to about 1993, things gradually picked up. By 1998 a number of new generation fully accessible low floor buses were employed in Shrewsbury and on some tendered routes. New sources of money were appearing. There were signs of optimism after so many years of decline.

Phase 11: Serving Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin from 1998 to 2004

On 1 April 1998 the Wrekin District of Shropshire became the unitary authority of Telford & Wrekin. On the next day Arriva Midlands North Ltd was legally formed to take over the former businesses of Midland Red North Ltd and Stevenson's of Uttoxeter Ltd. In May 1998 Arriva Midlands North Ltd took over the Shifnal base of Timeline Travel Ltd, which had been its biggest local competitor. This move included taking over all of Timeline's routes in Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin and nineteen vehicles. This removed a major source of competition for Arriva, especially in the South Telford. It was clear evidence of a move away from intensive local competition towards a partnership approach between the local authority and designated operators. Literature published at the time stressed the value of having a more integrated network, so challenging the philosophy of deregulation as expressed by the government of the day in 1986.

The April 1998 Budget included the surprise announcement of an additional £50 million allocated for the provision of rural bus services in each for three successive years from April 1998, expiring in March 2001. England's allocation was £41.7 million, of which £32.5 million was for the Rural Bus Subsidy grant, £5.0 million to the Rural Bus Challenge (for bids for innovative schemes) and £4.2 million to a new Rural Transport Partnership fund for rural community-based initiatives. The Rural Bus Subsidy has been distributed to County Councils and Unitary Authorities on the basis of rural population (meaning people living in settlements of less than 3000). To qualify for support, services must be wholly outside settlements of 10,000 or more or must be run for at least three miles outside such settlements. The grant could be used to introduce a new service or upgrade an existing one by adding journeys or route extensions. This most welcome boost to the funding of rural services enabled some dramatic improvements to village services to be made, sometimes reversing cuts made in the seventies.

The benefits have been especially evident in medium sized villages and market towns which were previously served infrequently. In a few instances, especially in the rural parts of Telford & Wrekin, unserved villages gained a service for the first time. Some inter-urban services had additional evening and Sunday journeys after an absence of many years. In some cases there was a much improved frequency of weekday services, additional days of occasional services and the filling in of some missing links to create better connectivity. Opportunities were provided for access to main employment centres (especially in Telford) from areas of

high unemployment. Access to hospitals was improved, particularly for day patients and visitors. Some of these new services were, at least initially, relatively poorly patronised. This suggests that either they were not needed because people had got used to living without them or that more marketing was required to make potential users more aware of their existence, timings and value.

The tendered bus services in Telford New Town and Newport and rural areas such as Roden, Ellerdine, High Ercall, Charlton and Tibberton came under the control of the new Telford & Wrekin Authority from 1 April 1998. This took a sizeable chunk out of 'old' Shropshire, leaving the 'new' county with the District Councils of Shrewsbury & Atcham, Oswestry, South Shropshire and Bridgnorth. Arriva Midlands North worked with the Telford & Wrekin Authority to provide upgraded services using modern low floor buses, starting with the *Redline* service 44. These improvements introduced on 14 February 2000 involved a £2 million investment in low floor buses. A further similar investment was needed to launch the *Blueline* service 33 on 23 April 2001. The new Telford & Wrekin authority used the Rural Bus Grant and other funding to support Sunday services run under contract by Arriva Midlands North and Pete's Travel. An innovative network of rural minibus services called *Wrekin Rider* was established with interchanges with low floor full sized buses at High Ercall and Crudgington. There were improved bus and train connections at Telford Central Station as part of a drive to make transport modes more integrated. Two new state-of-the-art Optaire Alero low floor small buses were introduced in November 2001 bearing the logo *Wrekin Connect*. Further funding was gained in late 2001 to set up new public transport connections between Telford housing and industrial estates.

Shropshire also used the new Rural Bus Grant to support a network of Sunday bus services that met each other at two hourly intervals at the Raven Meadows bus station in Shrewsbury, so enabling county-wide connections to be made providing all vehicles got there on time. Local schemes such as the *Valley Link* in the Clun and Teme valleys and the service 576 from Shrewsbury to Oswestry via Baschurch provided improved services with fully accessible modern buses. New town services were introduced for Ludlow, Market Drayton, Wem and Whitchurch. In Shrewsbury, Arriva Midlands North worked with the local authorities to form a 'quality partnership' for passengers travelling to and from Sundorne and the Town Centre. Improved bus connections with train services at Gobowen enabled Oswestry residents to make better use of the Shrewsbury to Chester line.

Tourist services run during summer weekends and public holidays became increasingly significant from 2001. In 2003 there were tourist shuttle services in the Long Mynd, Stiperstones and Clun Forest areas, along Wenlock Edge, around Ironbridge, along the Severn Valley south of Bridgnorth and across North Shropshire. New low floor, fully accessible buses became increasingly common, especially on town and tendered rural services. New partnerships, such as Transport for Everyone in South Shropshire and the North Shropshire Rural Transport Partnership sponsored innovative new approaches to serving isolated villages. The A49-Link (introduced in April 2003) was allowed to divert for up to a quarter of a mile from its scheduled route to pick up or set down passengers. The North Shropshire Link (introduced in November 2003) could be diverted anywhere between two towns given a prior booking made at least two hours in advance.

In September 2004 a much improved service between Shrewsbury and Oswestry using low floor single deckers was introduced. However, the need to make savings meant that some of the least used rural services, where the subsidy per passenger was very high, were threatened with withdrawal from the start of 2005. Negotiations are still taking place to minimise the need for such cuts. Meanwhile, in Bridgnorth (where bus services first began in Shropshire), improved town services with better vehicles and a greater frequency led to a huge rise in the number of people using the bus within the town. This is surely a good pointer to the next hundred years.

For further details contact Chris Warn at 11 The Meadows, Shawbury SY4 4HS or visit www.shropshireroots.org.uk

