



SMETHWICK'S
MUSEUM **IN**
THE **PARK**

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If it happened in Smethwick—it's in The Telephone!

The Telephone

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**THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE
SMETHWICK!**

On the road with Nash's Coaches



Plus

**WHERE MEMORIES REMAIN: Our new HLF funded WW1 project
SMETHWICK'S GREAT FLOOD — THE COUNCIL HOUSE MINE
BUYING AND SELLING ON THE HIGH STREET: Part two**

NO PLACE QUITE LIKE SMETHWICK

Nash's coaches are, as ever, out on the roads of Britain and Europe. But there's still no place quite like Smethwick for owners Ian and Linda Powell. CHRIS SUTTON boards the coach for a trip into their past.

This feature also draws on a Birmingham Mail interview with Billy Nash conducted by Malcom Simkin, who caught up with him in the week of his 75th birthday.

It was printed on 12th July 1973.



Billy's grandchildren, Ian and Linda Powell, spoke to us at the Nash Offices in May 2016. It's a high tech operation with coaches tracked on their journeys via a huge constantly updating computer mapping system on the wall. More on the Powells later, we need to get back to 1933 and a man with some big ideas...

HAVE COACH, WILL TRAVEL

The founder of Nash's coaches was William Thomas Nash, always known as Billy. He is the grandfather of the current owners Ian and Linda Powell. Billy was educated at St. Matthew's School where he showed early signs of excellence. He was awarded a gold medal for seven years perfect attendance (never being late once) He left aged 14, working at a series of jobs before getting work in the tool-room at the Austin Works in Longbridge.

He used to lend a friend money, and in the end he was owed so much that his friend gave him an old coach to settle the debt. It was then that he first got the idea of a coach business, and his colleagues, who were now having a lift to work with him in his 14 seater Chevrolet, gave him plenty of encouragement.

In 1933, after working in the toolroom for five years, Billy took the plunge, handed in his notice, and set up in Shireland Road, before shortly after moving to Raglan Road, as a coach operator. Starting off with that one coach he steadily and surely built the business up. He drove the coaches himself too and did everything to keep them on the road. It wasn't long before the company was running eight coaches and well on the road to success.

WAR SERVICE

The coaches saw service during the war years, painted khaki and used to transfer troops and civilians. Billy recalled that, *"We transported child evacuees from the towns into the country and took their parents out to see them when they had the time. We were also there to pick up soldiers returning from Dunkirk"*.

There were the occasional problems due to wartime restrictions, as Billy recalled with amusement, *"During the bombing raids we had instructions to disperse the coaches when they were not being used. This meant we had to leave them parked all over the area in different streets. I can still remember the problems we had finding them again if any of the drivers who had parked them came into work late."*

At the end of the war, on VJ Day, he obtained permission from GKN to store the company coaches at their premises. With his garage now empty he was able to hold a children's party, which more than 360 children attended. *"I can remember the day well. It was pouring with rain, and we had to position large men on the doors to keep the number of children coming into the garage down to a safe maximum."*

UP IN SMOKE AND CHANGING TYRES

A few years after the war, the whole of the Nash's coach empire nearly went up in smoke. Morris's, the corn chandler's premises to the rear of the garage in Raglan Road, caught fire and all 15 coaches had to be moved...with no drivers available. For Billy, *"It was the night I realised just how many friends I'd made in the area. People came from all over the place offering to drive the coaches out of the garage – even those I didn't know could drive."* It was a risky business for all involved because of petrol and inflammable liquids on the premises but luckily nobody was hurt and the garage didn't suffer too greatly.

Billy had seen a lot of changes since he set up business. *"The coaches (back then) were much smaller and, of course, they had the old solid rubber tyres which made every bump felt."* Then there were the slower journey times, *"At one time it used to take two days to get to Torquay and back, but nowadays it only takes a matter of hours"*.

PRIDE OF SMETHWICK

His proudest memory of all came at home in Smethwick, *"When Councillor Fred Thornton visited me and asked me if I had any objections to a road being named after me in my honour"*. Nash's Walk was duly named and came into existence at the lower end of St. Matthew's Road.

After he retired two of his daughters, Mary and Rita, took over the running of the business. Billy still kept a keen eye on the business though, as Mary observed, *"My father lives for coaches and still gets a great thrill with each new one we acquire"*.

A FAMILY BUSINESS

Rita and Frank had four children - Billy, Ian, Graham and Linda, while Mary and Mick had two daughters Diane and Susan. For brother and sister, Ian and Linda Powell, it was by no means certain they would be part of the family business. Linda explains, *"There was Mom, Dad, Mary and Mick as*

the four owners after grandad. Our parents were adamant that all of us kids went and worked elsewhere to get other training and experiences". Their brother Grahame and cousin Diane also worked at Nash's for many years along the way.

Linda in fact didn't start with the business till she was 30, while Ian got there some years earlier. *"When I was 21 I was an electrical engineer and I packed it up and come straight here. I had to start from scratch. I passed my test and went out on two-man jobs first"*. For the uninitiated a "two-man job" explains Ian is, *"When we want a coach back for the next day we put two drivers on so that 21 hours can be covered in one day. New drivers go on two coach jobs."* To avoid getting lost there is a simple rule that works most of the time. The rule being that if the other coach isn't in front you keep going dead straight. If the coach in front is going to turn left or right he will stop and wait.



(Above) Ian & Linda Powell are in the driving seat at Nash's. Still a family firm today.

MYSTERY TRIPS

Did they, I wondered, ever do the famous mystery trips? Says Ian, *"We used to operate them from The Blue Gates - this was before my time. Nash's and Mann's had a board outside the Toll house, which was then a milliners. We used to run Sunday afternoon mystery trips to Stourport or Bewdley and so on"*.

One visit to Stourport took an unexpected turn for a hapless thief as Ian recalls, "They were out on the riverboat shuttle late at night. Somebody broke into the coach, put the handbrake off, and ended up in Stourport basin. I bet that is 60 years ago now!"



A pick-up near the Blue Gates

Surrounded by all of Smethwick's businesses and factories proved lucrative for the company with plenty of Works trips. Linda remembers her mom and Mary talk about work for Avery's, while Ian recalls social club trips for GKN pensioners, as well as race trips for the brewery lads. Our founder David Bryant was another customer on behalf of Smethwick Cricket Club and the Heritage Centre. Back in the day these Works trips were a big event. Nash's always kept the connections going with the Austin and Ian remembers, "We used to do 12 or 15 coaches from the Austin to Weston via the Wyre Valley".

Coach trips to the seaside have always been a staple part of their range. Says Ian: "We used to do Paignton, Torquay and Dawlish-Warren (every Saturday from Whitsun to the end of September) and that was a midnight start from here! We used to have a van outside serving teas and coffees. It could be six to ten coaches to Torquay. At Gloucester there was a cafe with drivers waiting to take over. At Torquay the driver would pick up and take back to Gloucester. Then the drivers who had been asleep all day would get in and bring them back home. Torquay is now three to four hours to get there when it used to be ten. "The a38 through Tewkesbury and the milk bar there, that was a regular stop. Then there was a stop at Bridgwater. You got into Torquay, and places on the South coast at six in the morning".



Nash's are still a big player on the coach scene today with the company hiring in extra coaches when they need to, such as the School Games, which they organised the travel for. Ian explains: *"The school games was the last event at the Olympic site before the Olympics and we had 70 vehicles down in London. We fetched all the school games teams in from all round the country. We did all the transport for the Invictus Games as well. They said you need to come down to the Commissioner's place in Regents*

Park. It was the night before the games started and we had 20 coaches bringing in the competitors. There was Prince Harry and the Foo Fighters..." Linda interjects, *"He phoned me up and said who are the Foo Fighters. He was eating the buffet with them and I said they're a very well known rock band"!*

It is the local schools, however, that remain the bread and butter for Nash's. *"The Smethwick and Warley schools are major to us"*, says Ian. *"A lot of schools will take the whole of the school to Drayton Manor or Alton Towers. We do an all in one price for travel and tickets"*. Adds Linda: *"This appeals to a lot of our regular schools. One phone call or E-mail and everything is sorted for them"*.

FOREIGN PARTS

It's not just Britain on their itineraries. Nash's have regularly gone abroad with their customary care and professionalism. It is abroad though, that has seen some of their more amusing stories. There was that time in Poland for example... Says Ian, *"We had a job come in for an England qualifier in Warsaw (in 2000). Me and another driver went down to Antwerp and we were in a hotel there. The coach was brought down to us and off we went to Warsaw, no problem so far. We got into Warsaw at the end of a 22 hour run. The police stopped us and confirmed we were England fans and took us to this field. There's a stadium with scaffolding all round it and so on. We thought nothing of it and then all of a sudden all these people started coming and they're selling tickets for £400 a time. Next thing you know this white coach pulled up by the side of us and all the England team got off – Beckham and all of them, with their bags, and walked in. We walked round the stadium and stood next to Lou Macari (who was there to co-commentate). Anyway there were no turnstiles and everyone just walked in!"*

We got back to the German border and the Germans are there and they said you are going no further unless you have an escort. Now bear in mind it is 700km from the border by Berlin all the way back. So it was a car at the front and a car at the back with police outriders. They took us for fuel and they shut the petrol station down and had rottweilers at the corners of the coach. We said to them why are you doing this and they said you've had trouble on your coach. We said we hadn't and they were all friends on board. We said look you've got the wrong coach. Still we kept the escort, went all the way through, and were 6 hours early for the boat! We went through red lights and roadworks”.

More recently Linda remembers, *“Graham coming back from Spain and the pass was sheer ice....and they had sat there for 12 hours, as it was physically dangerous to move”. He phoned up and said I think I'm going to be over my hours...”*



And then, says Linda, there was the time that the tracking system really came in useful. *“Two weeks ago, and this is no word of a lie, we sent a coach to Lille and on the Saturday morning we had a phone call from the driver saying can you have a look*

on the tracking system and see where I parked the coach please? When he explained it was quite understandable. He had got into Lille on the night and it was a rugby outing for the weekend. He had been in traffic in Dover for over five hours and he didn't get into Lille till nearly midnight. He took the group to the hotel and the porter from the hotel then led him to the coach park. He then got into the porter's car to go back to the hotel and to bed. Next morning he went down to reception to ask for the porter and to tell him where the coach is parked. They said he isn't in till later this afternoon. Fortunately the tracker worked – we clicked on it and told him the postcode and everything”.

Ian, *“We try to focus now around the schools and the UK really. One reason is because of another Polish trip. We had been to Krakow and on the way back they had drawn Polish fuel (which is terrible quality) and the coach konked out just before the border. Now these coaches hold 600 litres so that's a lot of fuel. We ended up having to put the passengers up in a hotel and send another (Polish) coach to bring them to the changeover point. In all it cost us about 12 grand”.*

CHANGES IN WORKING PRACTICE

What has changed since their grandfather's days of running the company? Ian: *"The vehicles obviously, but now there are tracking systems in the coaches. We can tell within a meter where each of our coaches are and what speed they are travelling". It tells us minute by minute where they are. As soon as they start the engine we have them on real time tracking. And we have cameras on the coach with logs that go back thirty days".*

It is a fascinating system to watch in operation and means they are aware of any problem right away rather than in the old days when it would be often be when a coach returned. It was long hours back then. Ian remembers that, *"My mom and dad would be here from first coach going out, half past five or whatever, and they wouldn't leave till the last one was in. Then you had to sort out any problems with the coaches and get them ready for the next day".* Linda adds that, *"We didn't see a lot of our dad when we were younger. There weren't the driver's regulations like there are today. We lived in Upper Grove Street and we moved in here when grandad passed away. I would be in bed when dad got home at 11 o'clock at night. The he would be back out at 6 in the morning. It could be a day trip to Blackpool for the illuminations on a Saturday then up on a Sunday early to take the fishing clubs out, down to Evesham and so on".*

Some things are still the same today. *"Every Saturday we do Weston and Burnham"* says Ian. There is something quite reassuring and comforting in that for me. And they still get one familiar request, *"We still have people say Not Over The Wheel"*, laughs Linda, *"They think there is still a big hump over the wheel. We say they are not like that nowadays – they are flat".*

Their grandfather's old maxim still holds true as well. *"I won't give any driver a job to do I wouldn't do myself"*, says Ian.

NASH'S TODAY

Despite a life spent around coach travel, neither of the Powells are at all fed up of coaches, and both go on trips to this day. Linda recently went on one of their coaches to Granada Studios. She is rightly proud of their programme, which is much more diverse than back in their grandad's day. Now they have an attractive glossy brochure to display it all, a far cry, as Linda recalls from when, *"Mom used to put it together on A4 sheets run off on a gestetner"*! Determined to get them ready on time she would sometimes end up doing them during the night

The staff's father figure now is Michael Tideswell, known affectionately as "Mad Mick". He started at Nash's after working at Scribbans and has been here now for 61 years, He is 80 this year and still puts in appearances every day, coming in for a

couple of hours and doing odd jobs such as looking after the lovely garden and making the tea. He is thought of as one of the family at Nash's. As well as Mick, says Linda, *"We are also proud that some of the staff, drivers and office workers have been with us for many years"*.

There are plenty of original features to be found in the site buildings. Ian points out that, *"In the garage there are wooden beams and you wouldn't even get a screw in them. You need a pilot hole to get a screw in, So that's old but there is the new part down the back, I say new part but it was built at the end of the war. The wash part was built around 1965"*. Inside the house there are original fireplaces and the original Aga stove too.



The garage at Raglan Road

Across the road is a lovely old building which was the former doctors' surgery, perhaps best known for when it was the practice of Doctors Hamilton and Joseph.



Former Doctors' surgery opposite Nash's

But it is Nash's that attracts the sight-seers most to Raglan Road. Former Smethwickians paying a return visit to the area invariably end up at Nash's. *"People tell us they remember going on our coaches when they were five"*, says Linda. *"They can't believe we are still here and say can we take one of your brochures. We have had people from as far as Australia call in and say hello"*.

THE FUTURE

I asked the Powells if they think Nash's will stay a family firm. Linda: *"We hope so but who knows what is around the corner"*. Ian has two lads, *"Once again I said go and sort yourself a trade out first and let's see what materialises from there"*.

Whatever happens, one thing is certain. As Ian and Linda say, they have been all around the world and the UK but there's still no place quite like Smethwick. I think we can all agree on that!