

BUS SERVICES IN MONMOUTHSHIRE AND GWENT BEFORE 1947

Norman Griffiths of Brynmawr traces the local area's public transport development from its earliest days. Much of the information was gained from Bill Griffiths, the writer's father, who was for many years Foreman Engineer for the Griffin Bus Company.

Providing power to drive road vehicles was first solved when Otto Daimler in Germany designed and built the first petrol engine whose weight and power output enabled the motorbus to be born, although much development was needed. The first petrol driven bus appeared on London streets of in 1897, a time when there 3190 horse drawn omnibuses in the city. By 1900 there were 10 motor buses and 3,730 horse drawn; in 1910 1,200 motor buses and 1,103 horse drawn, and by 1912 2,098 motor buses and 176 horse drawn – buses had brought travelling within the means of ordinary people.

In taking over, the motor bus had damaged the livelihoods of blacksmiths who shod horses; ostlers who looked after them, and those who supplied both animals and feed-stuffs. Many other towns began to follow the trend. One company that played a great part in bus transport development was the London General Omnibus Company (LGOC) later to be known as The Associated Equipment Company (AEC) that established standards of bus design for many years to come. As London buses became more reliable, older stock was sold to private companies operating in the rest of the country.

The 1914 -18 war triggered rapid development of motor engines and the metal technology required for their manufacture and maintenance. In 1914 aero engines of the period could hardly lift a very light aircraft off the ground but four years later the Sopwith Camel fighter was equipped with a rotary engine developing 130 hp providing a top speed of 113 m.p.h. while a four engine bomber could carry a bomb load to German cities. This technology helped the motor industry to produce engines and gear boxes that were more reliable, quicker and cheaper. At the war's beginning a four cylinder bus engine developed 16 hp but, by 1918, was capable of producing 40 hp at 1000 rpm. The war had also created the many skilled craftsmen essential needed to make, service and repair, such engines.

After the war a great many War Department motor vehicles were put on the market, often bought by ex-service men possessing maintenance and repair skills learned in the forces, who believed a living could be made from public transport. The railway companies had found it too costly to develop routes to new growth areas away from their stations, so buses now filled the gaps, needing only roads on which to run. Passengers could be picked-up almost outside their homes and transported at an affordable price, especially since early buses did not have to conform to rules, or run to a timetable. Bus running costs were lower that that of

trains and, even though the G.W.R. could compete with major bus firms, it could do little about the smaller one-man bus operations.

The first bus service in the local coalfield had been started by the G.W.R. on 14th March 1912 between Cwmtillery and Llanhilleth, considered as a railway feeder service, using German-built Milnes-Daimlers. But this was not a success and withdrawn in 1912. An example of how the railways companies tried hard to compete with smaller bus companies was a proposed railway link between Brecon and Abergavenny that proved impossible when land owners refused. The G.W.R. had instead to introduce a bus service from Brecon to Abergavenny to enable passengers to catch trains there.

Ralphs' Garages of Abertillery had operated a public transport business just before the 1914-18 war, when the War Department requisitioned two of their Daimler charabancs for military service, returning them in 1918. In early 1922 a Mr. Moon of Abergavenny set up the first post war bus service in this area trading as Moons Motor Services of Abergavenny, operating from Abergavenny to Abertillery via Brynmawr. The buses used were ex-London General Omnibus Companies B-type Double Decker chassis to which a 24 seater saloon body was fitted. However this type of bus was unreliable and valleys' roads and gradients caused constant break downs. The Black Rock hill between Clydach and Brynmawr especially took a toll and the service ended later in 1922. Moons was acquired by T.J. Jones of Brynmawr about whom more later.

Brynmawr is a market town that catered for the rapidly growing coal mining population of the upper valley between Brynmawr and Llanhilleth. Coal-mines were situated in valley bottoms and the only means of getting to and from work for the miner was walking, or by horse or railway. Since railway stations were generally situated in the bottom of the valley, colliers might have to walk some distance to and from trains, adding much to a long working day.

During this period in the early 1920 a few ex-WD lorries were used locally mainly to transport goods and foodstuffs, and it became realized these could be the answer to collier transportation. Using seats fixed in the lorries' miners could be taken directly to their colliery, and returned at the shift's end. This was the embryo of a bus service and a very cheap and convenient method of moving people.

A group of Brynmawr miners asked local furniture shop and lorry owner Mr T.J. Jones whether he could provide a similar service with a ex WD Leyland lorry used to deliver furniture. This proved an outstanding success because not only was the price he charged very much lower than that of the GWR, but men were picked up and later returned near their houses. Soon similar vehicles were taking people to work and also to places of leisure outside the area. The railway companies were unable to match the cost per person charged by T.J. Jones and, with the business growing, he acquired the old Griffin yard behind Lloyds Bank on King Street, Brynmawr. The company T.J. Jones established was to be known as the Griffin

Motor Bus Company of Brynmawr, pioneering the development of bus transport in Brynmawr and the surrounding areas for many years to come. Under the astute leadership of T.J. Jones this company prospered.

“The Griffin” was not the only company operating locally. Others were Ralph’s Garages of Abertillery; Chivers of Brynmawr; W.H. Huggins of Blaina; Cox’s of Ebbw vale; Colliers’ Garages of Abertillery; Rees of Llanelli Hill, and Valley Motors of Tredegar, that later became the Red & White. Other services were operated by F. N. Morgan of Govilon; Moons’ Motor Services of Abergavenny; The Crimson Rambler of Ebbw Vale; Barrels of Abertillery; Jones of Aberbeeg; W. T. Blackmore of Six Bells; Williams of Beaufort; Williams of Blaina and Flights’ of Brynmawr

During the late 1920 and early 1930 these firms played a great role in local motor bus development. Several one man operations were already making a good living taking miners to and from work, plus occasional leisure trips at weekends. Due to the Sunday drinking law, many buses were used to take people over the border to England to drink. Very soon it was seen that a great deal of competition was taking place between the firms in the transport industry and they were not providing an efficient service to the travelling public. As an example, during this period it was impossible to get a through service to Newport or Cardiff from Brynmawr, except by rail. To reach other towns in Monmouthshire several changes had often to be made. The reason for this was the Local Urban District Councils, Towns and Cities had the powers of issuing hackney licences for bus firms, taxis or hire cars to operate within their area of administration. The Government of the day soon became aware that no integrated road transport system existed and that action was needed.

Local authorities were given two options, either to take-over transport routes in their area and provide a municipal transport service, or give the licence to a reputable firm that could. To assist councils the Government appointed a number of Transport Commissioners who would have the right to give licences to, or remove them from, companies. Cities and towns that decided they would run a municipal service were allowed to do so, reason why Newport, Cardiff, Pontypridd, Merthyr, West Mon. and Caerphilly developed their own transport undertakings, while many Urban District Councils e.g. Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale, Tredegar and Abertillery opted to give licences to private companies to provide this.

Between 1920 and 1930 small firms running a few buses were either bought out, or driven out of business, by larger companies. The larger firms were not averse to squeezing out smaller ones and many unofficial agreements were used to bring this about. During this period the Great Western Railway, that operated many buses in the area to take people to the railways stations, came under scrutiny by the Government who feared a monopoly growing. The GWR had the South Wales

railway system well and truly sown up, being the largest company operating, and were also expanding their bus services by buying out small firms. The government ruled that to prevent a monopoly, a new company had to be set up, one distinct from the GWR in all respects but, in fact its board of directors included several from the GWR. The new company was called "Western Welsh" and operated across south and mid Wales for many years.

The Griffin Bus Company, under the astute management of T.J. Jones also started buying-up many of its competitors. Having bought Cox's of Cwm, the Griffin also had the running right from Cwm to Ebbw Vale. By acquiring Williams of Beaufort with their routes from Beaufort to Ebbw Vale the Griffin was then able to operate services from Cwm to Brynmawr via Ebbw Vale: Moons' Motor Bus Service of Abergavenny with the running right to Brynmawr, Blaina and Abertillery was also bought enabling a very lucrative direct route from Cwm via Ebbw Vale to Brynmawr and Abergavenny. However the Western Welsh ran a service direct from Brecon through Crickhowell to Abergavenny on the northern side of the Usk Valley with no competition to worry-about, although some smaller firms ran buses from outlying parts of Brecknockshire to Abergavenny on Market days

T.J. Jones must have realised that the Western Welsh would become a competitor if they were able to gain running rights to the Cwm Abergavenny route at Gilwern via the road from Crickhowell. It is believed that F.N. Morgan of Govilon had running rights from Gilwern to Abergavenny and by acquiring this company the Griffin barred Western Welsh access to this lucrative route. Now the Griffin was able to inaugurate a half hourly service from Cwm directly to Abergavenny.

As T.J. Jones was well and truly expanding the Griffin company he looked at the Western Valley route from Brynmawr to Newport. The Griffin had the running rights from Brynmawr via Blaina to Abertillery having carried miners to Rose Hayworth colliery for many years. Two bus companies were operating between Aberbeeg and Newport, one being the Dan-y-Graig Omnibus Services which the Western Welsh then bought. Later they bought the Lewis & James Company, and also the Western Valley omnibus company of Newbridge that, in 1929, became part of the Western Welsh operation. This blocked any desire of the Griffin to get into Newport at that time.

Lewis & James operated Leyland SG 9 models but also a number of ex-WD Leyland lorry chassis to which bus bodies were fitted. (An interesting point was that mid-1920 a firm called Blue Fleet Omnibus Service which had been taken over by Lewis and James had a wireless receiver installed in one of their buses. This must have been one of the first to have had this fitted in Wales).

The Griffin then bought out Coombes and Price of Oakdale with its running rights from Aberbeeg to Blackwood. A half-hourly service from Brynmawr to Abertillery already existed so this service then continued from Aberbeeg through Crumlin, Pontllanfraith and into Blackwood. The Western Welsh were now running from

Newport to Ebbw Vale via Aberbeeg and trying to get into the more densely populated parts of the upper areas of the Western Valley. The Griffin and Ralphs boards must have decided to fight off the competition of the Western Welsh which they did successfully, the area remaining in the hands of the Griffin, Ralphs and the Red & White until all three amalgamated into one company. In the Ebbw Vale area the Griffin bought out the Blue Ensign Company and the Leyland buses they used were taken into the Griffin fleet. Ebbw Vale town services were left in the hands of Edmunds Services who continued operating in the area for many years.

My father, in his recollections of the growth of the Griffin, remembers being taken to the garages of the Langstone Bus Company, a village between Chepstow and Newport. T.J. Jones had bought the company and he had to repair three inoperative Daimler buses owned by them. The company had running rights from Langston to Chepstow and Newport. The Red and White wanted this route which would have opened a through route from Newport to Gloucester. However he refused to sell to the Red & White but only to T.J. Jones. The buses came for a very short stay and were sold on. T.J. Jones then sold the company to the Red and White giving them the through route they wanted. It was a similar situation with the Hereford Traction Company of Monmouth who had the running rights from Monmouth to Hereford. Also bought by T.J. Jones, my father was sent to Monmouth to repair their Thornycroft vehicles and learned that the owner did not want to sell to the Red and White who wanted a through route from the Forest of Dean to Hereford. Once more these buses joined the Griffin fleet only to be sold on; the route itself was sold to the Red and White of which T.J. Jones was a Director. By now Ralphs' routes were as follows:

Brynmawr to Newport via Blaina and Abertillery; Brynmawr via Blaenavon to Pontypool and Newport; Blaenavon to Abergavenny via Pwll Du on Market days and Saturdays; Abertillery through Sofrydd to Pontypool and Newport; Abertillery to Blackpool during the Blackpool lights, a route reputed to have been the longest fare staging route in the UK during pre-war years.

It must also be remembered that all these routes were half hourly services which started at 5-30 am in the morning to take people to work and finished at 12-0 midnight. But Ralphs' had a problem with the service from Brynmawr via Blaenavon to Newport. The running rights from Brynmawr to Waunavon were owned by Rees of Llanelly Hill so Ralphs were allowed only to drop off passengers but not pick them up between Brynmawr and Blaenavon in accordance with Transport Commissioner rules.

As Ralphs' and Griffin were competitors during pre-war years, the staff at Brynmawr were surprised to see Ralphs' buses being re-fuelled at Griffin Brynmawr garages at in the late 1930s. It appeared that the company was having financial problems and Western Welsh were ready to step in and buy out the company to

gain routes to the top end of the valley. It was common knowledge that the Griffin were underpinning the fuel bill for many months to prevent the Western Welsh acquiring the company until it became solvent again. The two boards of directors amalgamated, providing total control of the services in the area and preventing Western Welsh inroad into the area. The Reliance Bus Company of Barry, Glamorgan was also represented, being a subsidiary of Ralphy's that operated a service from Barry to Cardiff.

The late 1920 and early 1930 saw development in the type of buses being used, as many were unsuitable for the new routes. It was reported that Griffin's Dennis bus nearly ruined the company, being underpowered and having only 22 seats. However, at this time most local buses had solid tyres, the Dennis being first in the area with pneumatic tyres, allowing them greater speed, but bringing problems. On Saturday nights many people from Blaina went to Abertillery which possessed four cinemas and, to return them home the companies put on relief buses that ran as soon as they were loaded. There was an unofficial agreement between the companies that when a Griffin bus left loaded a Ralphy's would take its place. This worked well until the faster Dennis began to take more than their fair share of passengers causing, on one occasion, company inspectors to come to blows and creating much rivalry between the two companies and their employees:

Ralphy's decided they would standardise buses using AEC, ADC, and in later years, Albions, that were also used by the Red & White. Albion was a Scots firm whose buses were widely used in that country and in Wales by Ralphy's, Red & White and its subsidiary United Welsh at Swansea. Griffin decided to standardize on petrol-powered Leyland buses all fitted with pneumatic tyres giving passengers a much softer ride.

In the Tredegar area the Valleys Motor Bus Services operated under John Watts and Guy Bowns, eventually becoming the Red & White Bus Company whose head office was at Chepstow. A service was established from Tredegar to Newport via Blackwood and Nine Mile Point, eventually in collaboration with Lewis and James and becoming the first valley companies to pool route revenue on a mileage basis, allowing passengers to use return tickets with both companies. The Red & White expanded their services towards Merthyr, Bargoed and Aberdare, with, the construction of garages at Tredegar, Aberdare, Blackwood, Abergavenny, Monmouth, Cinderford, Ross and Hereford. However all major bus overhaul was carried out at the central repair shops at the Bulwark in Chepstow.

Local bus companies operated a variety of vehicles, many second hand from large city undertakings, but also new. Diesel engines were also considered as they gave much higher mileage per gallon than petrol engine and so made higher profits. Many buses were owned by their drivers and varied in make; before company standardization types included Leyland, Thorneycroft, AEC, ADC, Morris. Tillings, Stevens, Bedford, Daimler, Dennis, Austin, Bean, Bristol, Guy,

Albion, AJS, Star Flyers, Vulcan, Garford, Gardener, Gloucester Gardeners, Tilling Stevens, Morris Commercials, Crossley, Maudslay and Giffords, and from all of which Thorneycroft is the only British company still manufacturing commercial vehicles. Because of the local terrain some companies bought continental buses such as Lancia, Latil, Saurers, RSJ, Straker and Clough, W & G Du Cros, and from the USA Speed Reos, Chevrolets, Maxwells, GMC and Dodge.

In this area the Griffin were first to introduce one penny fare stages. The stage began where the bus was boarded and the routes to which it applied to were, Brynmawr to Newport; Brynmawr to Blackwood; Cwm to Abergavenny; Brynmawr via Gilwern to Crickhowell. The price increased by 1p for every stage travelled on the bus making the fare from Brynmawr to Newport 1s 3d. (6P) for a child return, and 1/9d.(8P) return for an adult. These fares remained in operation until the mid-1940's. However to make the public become more dependable on the bus service the company also introduced weekly tickets as most people worked six days, thus providing six days travel for the price of five.

A workman's ticket was cheaper than that for the general public. A season ticket was usable for one month and on the route specified for as many journeys as were required. I attended school at Abertillery, the then Monmouthshire Education committee providing a bus season ticket and, if having to use it after detention or on a Saturday morning, a covering letter from the Headmaster was necessary. Anyone forgetting their season ticket was thrown off the bus thus arriving late for school that, in turn, brought detention and having to walk home afterwards. We all become very efficient in passing our season ticket after the conductor had seen it, to someone who had forgotten his. On one such occasion the conductor threw us all off the bus and a letter was sent to the Headmaster. We had detention for a week and a double maths lesson on games day as punishment. Happy school Days!

Again to encourage bus-usage the Red & White, and then the Griffin, operated a system that for 4 shillings (20P) allowed one week's travel on their combined routes between Monday to Friday, it being clipped on each journey by the conductor.

There was also established a system of through booking enabling longer distance travel with tickets issued at a given price that allowed passengers to travel with several different companies to reach their destination. This caused concern for railway companies who took out an injunction out against bus companies arguing that the ticket's total cost should be similar to that of booking each return stage separately.

Conflict arose between railway companies and the Associated Motor Ways (AMW) over an agreement between the major bus companies such as Red & White, Griffin and Ralphs'. With daily bus services operating between South Wales and London, AMW guaranteed delivery of parcels within three miles of the London coach station by the following day. Locally Argus and Echo nightly

newspapers printed at Newport were delivered to paper boys and newsagents waiting at bus stops on route from Newport to Brynmawr.

In the Sirhowy Valley the Red & White firmly established itself with routes from Tredegar, Ebbw Vale Tredegar, Brynmawr, Abergavenny to Hereford Tredegar, Blackwood, Ynysddu to Newport, Tredegar to Rhymney Bridge and Merthyr, as well as to Pontlottyn, Rhymney Bridge and Bargoed. Hills Company of Tredegar ran a service to Rhymney and Abertwsyg. In Tredegar two other private companies also operated, namely "Red Stephens" and "Blue Stephens". It must also be noted that these small companies also carried colliers to pits, and employees to Ebbw Vale Steel works, matching the three shift system. Also operating were the Western Welsh, Cardiff Corporation, West Mon, Bedwas, Machen and Caerphilly running services down the Sirhowy Valley to Newport and Cardiff.

The Red & White, together with Lewis and James (later bought out by the Western Welsh), were the first companies to pool the revenue each made on the Tredegar to Blackwood service, allowing a return ticket bought with one company to be used on the other.

In the mid 1930s the transport Commission became concerned at the lack of coordinated bus services resulting in passengers having to wait long periods at intermediate stops when a straight-through service did not exist. Time tables were introduced giving times of departure and arrival at stage stops that would coincide with the arrival of the bus required to continue the journey. Without doubt the small operators found it difficult to maintain a strict time table with old buses that were unreliable. Many sold out to the larger companies and thereafter concentrated on taking employees to their place of work and offering private hire.

Norman Griffiths.