

Notes based on an interview on 1 April 1998 with
Dr H. Nesbitt Heffernan, MBE, proprietor of
Thames Weald Ltd, West Kingsdown, Kent

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Nesbitt Heffernan's early life was spent in India, where his father was in the Indian Army. (I am not sure whether he was actually born in India). In due course he was sent to boarding school in England, and during the holidays he stayed with a maiden aunt who lived at Canford Cliffs, near Bournemouth. It was here that his interest in the motor bus was first awoken.

The maiden aunt was evidently something of a notable local personage, for in the summer, chara-a-bancs would pause briefly outside her house, whilst the driver or guide would announce through a megaphone "this is the residence of Miss -----," followed by a brief account of her good works in the town. The many chara-a-bancs in their varied colours fascinated the young Heffernan, as he watched from his bedroom window, and he took to going down to the town to observe their comings and goings and those of the local buses too. The only ones he could recall were Royal Blue (Elliott Bros) and Hants & Dorset. He soon resolved that the omnibus business was to be his chosen career and with school days soon to end, wrote to various firms seeking employment. He thought Hants & Dorset was too small, but its larger neighbour to the east, Southdown, seemed an attractive proposition, and there were others, including companies in the north-east, (names he could not recall).

The letters brought encouraging replies. However all this was to no avail, as news of his aspirations had meanwhile filtered back to India. His parents, like Queen Victoria, were far from amused. They had already decided that he was suited to a medical career, on the somewhat unscientific premise that he had "delicate hands". So, rather than the hurly-burly of pre-Road Traffic Act bus operation, his future was destined to be Cambridge, medical school and the routine life of a GP. There was no question of debating the issue. As he wistfully told me, "In those days, one obeyed one's parents' wishes".

Came the Second World War, during which Dr H served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and was posted, perhaps not entirely by accident, to India. In his RAMC service, he encountered many cases of shell-shock, a condition then little better understood than it had been in the First World War. The diagnosis and treatment of this became his specialisation.

The end of the war, demobilisation and the later formation of the National Health Service, saw Dr H move from general practice to hospital consultancy. His interest and expertise in treating shell-shock and related mental illnesses were rare ones. These were days of unenlightened attitudes, typified by the 'asylum' system, with the mentally ill locked away, out of sight. Psychiatry was an unfashionable medical backwater. He obtained a post at Darenth Park Hospital in Dartford, (South East Thames Regional Health Authority), and progressed to become consultant psychiatrist there.

By the late 1950s/early 1960s however, the demands of the job were such that he was in a position, where, as he rather cautiously put it "one had the opportunity to pursue other interests". Gradual cutbacks in local bus services and their consequent effect on the mobility of those in the locality without cars, led him to recall his youthful ambition. Hence, the Thames Weald Travel Society (later to become Thames Weald Ltd) was born, initially to run a Sevenoaks-Gravesend route.

The development of the company and its routes are probably well-covered elsewhere, (there are many references in the [Transport Ticket Society Journal](#), also [Omnibus Magazine](#) 164 and 324, [London Bus Magazine](#) 47), and Dr H did not recount the details, but there are some other points of interest from what he said:

- The Dartford Tunnel was of course the catalyst, along with the unsuccessful attempts by London Transport to run bus services through it. When the tunnel opened on 18 November 1963, LT put on the 300 (later 399) route, linking Dartford with Grays. They were soon disappointed to find that Dartford folk had no pressing desire to visit Grays and neither were Grays folk clamouring to visit Dartford. It was hardly surprising. The two communities, hitherto completely isolated from one another by the Thames, might just as well have been a thousand miles apart. The 399 limped on until 1967. The Green Line 722 route from Dartford, though the Tunnel and up the A13 to Aldgate was equally fruitless. Then there was the peculiar Tunnel cycle bus run by LT (on behalf of the Dartford Tunnel Joint Committee) which patiently awaited the squadrons of cyclists who mysteriously never materialised. However, Dr. H knew that what local villagers most wanted was access to good shopping facilities. One day, he drove to Essex to have a look

around and decided that Romford with its extensive shops and large open-air market fitted the bill. He then applied for a licence for a route carefully designed to avoid treading on LT or Eastern National's toes.

- The livery (lilac or lavender blue) was chosen because it was the colour used by the Royal Blue char-a-bancs.
- The last set of tickets went up to £6 in value. The higher values were all ordered for the post-deregulation service to Crawley. This route required a driver to be employed at the Crawley end, where one of the buses was out-stationed. On one occasion, when the bus returned to West Kingsdown for servicing, Dr H noticed a "Chessington World of Adventures" sticker in the windscreen. He then came to the conclusion, (later proven) that the driver was using the bus for unauthorised private hires. That led to the end of the Crawley service. The tickets came in useful on the other services, as inflation gradually pushed fares up. However, at the end, the maximum fare, £7, just exceeded the highest value.
- Dr H claimed that he had to close down as he could no longer afford to run. The Council was in effect, unfairly competing with him by using Social Services minibuses to ferry people to and from the towns. They had poached his customers. He never believed in, nor had ever sought, subsidies. There certainly was Council competition, although whether this was the main reason for the decline in patronage can be questioned. As the main route involved negotiating the maelstrom of traffic on the M25, some anxiety on the part of passengers over being piloted by an 80-plus year-old driver was probably justified. It is suspected that the first announcement (in 1997) that services would cease may have been because Dr H had then had difficulties renewing his annual driving licence. Perhaps that convinced him that renewing it in 1998 would be even more difficult and therefore that 1998 had to be the final year. He employed just one other driver (other than the Crawley fellow) for many years, a younger lady. All maintenance work on the minibuses was done by a local garage.
- Thames Weald always used punch tickets; the first set were geographical, and had more than a passing resemblance to Hants & Dorset's first type. Whether Dr H actually remembered these is a matter for conjecture. Numerical-stage tickets had come in on H&D from 1924, but the geographicals may have lingered on beyond that as stocks were used up.
- The bus services ceased on 28 March 1998, without replacement. The Solefield School service passed as a contract to nearby West Kingsdown Coaches.
- His death on 6 November 2000 was announced in the *Sevenoaks Chronicle* (9 November). His age was not recorded, but he must have been about 88 or so. (He received his MA from Cambridge in 1936 according to the FT Medical Directory; thus I would estimate that he was born about 1912).
- Having lived in Brentwood/Shenfield and subsequently near the other end(s) of the route, I knew the Thames Weald service quite well and travelled on it several times. I often saw Dr H wearing his trademark beret, parked in the lay-by at Romford Market Place, quietly eating his sandwiches, or steering the little Transit sedately along the M25 at 40mph, with other traffic hurtling by in the fast lanes. Although he had a reputation for being brusque, I always found him courteous, albeit somewhat reserved. If you, as I routinely did, asked him for a set of tickets, he would carefully tear off one of each value from the rack and pass them over with barely a word. He was a busman, but not by any stretch of the imagination, a bus enthusiast. Thames Weald was a business (and one he increasingly had to subsidise) and when I saw him just after the final day, he was not in the slightest bit sentimental about it ceasing. He had immediately sent off the tax discs to obtain a refund. The destination blinds and DART-tags had been removed from the minibuses. The buses had already been sold (to T J Walsh of Halifax). He was busy clearing up the paperwork. I think he had a son, but it was his daughter of whom he was especially proud. She was a senior diplomat at the British Embassy in Beijing and he was looking forward to having the time, at long last, to go to China to see her.

One cannot help wondering whether he might have become one of the great bus pioneers if only he had disobeyed his parents' wishes.

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