

WALKER. Roland Douglas **t/a ALMA COACHES** **Alma Street,** **WELLINGBOROUGH**

Rollie Walker, who was born at Wellingborough on 15th December 1921, had two ambitions when he left school in 1935; he wished to enter either the printing trade or the motor trade. Printing won the day and he joined Perkins Printing Works at Wellingborough but he soon found that the indoor life didn't suit him and he went to work briefly for Joseph Payne's confectionary business prior to joining the London, Midland & Scottish Railway Company, in 1938, as an engine cleaner at Kettering. Rollie Walker was quickly moved to Wellingborough Depot and immediately he was eighteen years old he became a fireman on the L.M.S. As this was a reserved occupation, Rollie remained at Wellingborough until the end of the War.

During the War, Rollie Walker married and moved into a property in the nearby village of Wilby, where, in the early post-War years Rollie achieved his earlier ambition of working in the motor trade, as he set up his own business in premises behind "The George" PH at Wilby. Here he ran taxis, undertook vehicle repairs and also repaired pretty well anything else he could persuade people to entrust to him. In effect he became the village handyman, mending clocks, cycles and everything mechanical.

In August 1952 Rollie Walker bought some property in Alma Street, Wellingborough which comprised a house and out buildings that had previously been Jeacock's Dairy. Moving from Wilby to his new premises, Rollie continued to operate taxis and converted the former dairy into a workshop where vehicle repairs were undertaken. Additionally petrol pumps were installed in the yard adjoining the buildings and Rollie Walker's business took off from this point. Particularly successful was the taxi business which was significantly boosted when Chelveston Air Base was re-opened after having been closed in the post-War period. Before long the taxi operations led to a requirement for a larger vehicle and it seemed a good idea to obtain a 25-seater Bedford WTB coach from Billy Eales of Wellingborough, when this operator bought a replacement coach. The vehicle in question was purchased in July 1954 and it was registered NV 7612, having been new to

Bygone Buses

of
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

NN-WA2

Page 2

WALKER. R. D. - WELLINGBOROUGH

Buckby's coaches of Rothwell. It was still painted in Buckby's red and maroon livery at the time Rollie Walker bought it and it remained so painted during Alma Coaches' ownership. It cost Rollie £135 and although acquired to supplement the taxis it was soon being booked for trips to Southend Illuminations, throughout September 1954.



Alma Street garage in the early 1950s. The house in Alma Street, officially known as 14 Park Road because of its rear access to that thoroughfare, still stands. The buildings to the rear, which were earlier Jeacock's dairy, formed the workshop. Petrol pumps are just visible over the wall and in front of Mundin's Closing factory.



Rollie Walker's first coach was this Bedford WTB registered NV 7612 which he acquired from Billy Eales of Wellingborough in July 1954. It has a Willowbrook body and started life with Buckby's Coaches of Rothwell, in whose livery of maroon and red it was painted when this photograph was taken. A front view of NV 7612 can be seen in paper NN-BU1 concerning Buckby's operations.

WALKER. R. D. - WELLINGBOROUGH

Rollie Walker worried a great deal over running an eighteen year old Bedford on longer distance journeys and decided to purchase a newer coach. He approached Fred York of the well-known Northampton coach firm of York Bros. to see if he had any vehicles for disposal. Fred York replied that he would be able to release a 1948 Bedford OB at the end of September 1954 and accordingly EBD 900 passed to Alma Coaches in October 1954, where it worked alongside NV 7612. The paintwork of EBD 900, a 29-seat Duple Vista bodied model, was in such good condition that Rollie Walker kept it in its existing dark and light blue livery throughout the time he owned it.



This picture depicts the former York Brothers' Bedford OB registered EBD 900 which Alma Coaches operated for six years. (Photo courtesy D M Bailey)

By May 1955, Ted Abbott (brother of Fred Abbott, the Gt. Doddington coach operator) came to work for Alma Coaches as a driver and, as he had been used to driving his brother's somewhat larger vehicles, Rollie Walker bought a Maudslay Marathon III with a thirty-three seat Whitson body. The vehicle in question, ERP 393, was bought in May 1955 from T G Dilks of Desborough who, in addition to operating his own coaches, was a vehicle dealer. By coincidence, ERP 393 had earlier been operated by Fred Abbott and was therefore well known to both Ted Abbott and Rollie Walker. From this time the fleet comprised three coaches.

Business picked up during 1955 and at the end of the summer season Rollie Walker decided to buy another twenty-nine seater Bedford. The chosen vehicle was bought from dealer Dick Palmer of Luton in the latter months of the year and it turned out to be a

WALKER. R. D. - WELLINGBOROUGH



Maudslay Marathon ERP393 was a superb machine which sported an A.E.C. engine and Whitson coachwork. It was photographed at the Commonwealth Exhibition at South Kensington, London and was accompanied by Bedford OB - EBD900.

Bedford OWB that had been rebodied with Duple V coachwork in about 1948. Unfortunately the registration number has not been identified. However, it was in need of a coat of paint and the colours of orange and cream were chosen for it and the work carried out by Messrs York, Ward & Rowlatt of Wellingborough during the course of the 1955/6 winter months.

In 1957 Rollie Walker found he could do with a slightly larger coach and again visited Gerry Dilks of Desborough and bought an A.E.C. Regal with fully fronted Duple coachwork and registered BGV 222. For a short period Rollie operated five vehicles but he soon decided to part with NV 7612 and the Bedford OWB acquired from Dick Palmer. Bedford WTB - NV 7612 - was sold to Messrs Dickinson's of Wellingborough for staff transport whilst the Bedford OWB was sold to Peter Chapman of Heeps Garages of Guilsborough. Sadly the A.E.C. proved to be a troublesome vehicle and eventually a con rod came through the side of the engine whilst operating a hire on August Monday 1958, and this event ended the life of BGV 222 with Alma Coaches. Immediately, another Bedford OB with Duple Vista coachwork was acquired from Icknield Coaches of Tring to replace the A.E.C., which was taken in part exchange by this Tring firm who proceeded to repair it. The OB carried the registration mark FFH 551.

WALKER. R. D. - WELLINGBOROUGH



The A.E.C. Regal - BGV222 - was a fine looking machine even if it did prove to be a little troublesome to Rollie Walker. (Photo courtesy D M Bailey).

At about this time it became apparent to Rollie Walker that whilst he was replacing his fleet with second-hand coaches, firms such as Abbott's and York's were buying new stock. The result was that these operators were attracting the more profitable longer distance hires whilst Alma Coaches was performing the shorter distance and less profitable work. Rollie therefore decided that he would have to buy a brand new motor and a petrol engine Bedford SB3 was ordered through Errington's of Evington. This was delivered on 14th January 1959 with a Duple Vega body seating forty-one passengers. It was painted cream and orange and was registered SNV 888, when it became the Alma Coaches flagship. The Maudslay ERP 393 and Bedford FFH 551 were taken by Errington's in part exchange for SNV 888.

Parking space at Alma Street was at a premium and Rollie parked coaches at both White Horse Yard off Market Street, Wellingborough and at Leighton Place off High Street, where he rented a brick built building in which one coach could be garaged.

Meanwhile, back at base, Rollie Walker was busy purchasing what had been Muddin's Closing Factory and house at 38 Alma Street, Wellingborough and this acquisition was completed in 1959. Rollie had plans to demolish this newly acquired property so that he could erect a car showroom and servicing bay, which he did in 1960/1, adding a further showroom to the right of the site in 1964.

Bygone Buses

of
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

NN-WA2

Page 6

WALKER. R. D. - WELLINGBOROUGH



The petrol engined Bedford SB3 - SNV 888 - with Duple Vega coachwork was photographed when new in January 1959, its orange and cream paintwork gleaming in the winter sunshine. Rollie Walker entered SNV 888 in the 1959 Brighton Coach Rally.



Rollie Walker inspecting the interior of the bright and airy SNV 888.

Bygone Buses

of
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

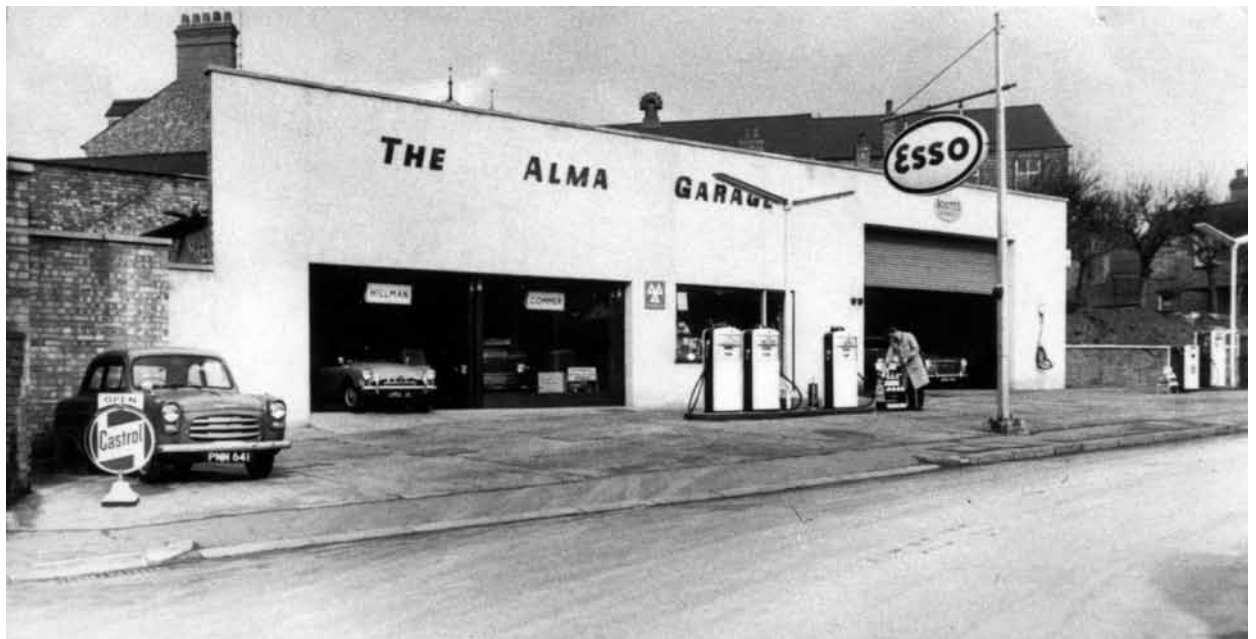
NN-WA2

Page 7

WALKER. R. D. - WELLINGBOROUGH



A view of the former "Progressive Works" which were Muddin's boot and shoe Closing Works, which Rollie Walker acquired for the expansion of his garage.



Alma Street garage redevelopment of 1960/1 following the demolition of Muddin's factory and 38 Alma Street. The high roller doors at the right of the building were designed to allow access for SNV 888 and EBD 900.

WALKER. R. D. - WELLINGBOROUGH

The next development on the coaching front came towards the end of 1960 when Billy Johnson of Johnson's Motors, Rushden expressed interest in buying Rollie Walker's Bedford SB registered SNV 888 and the goodwill of Rollie's customer base. In the event Rollie Walker decided he had enough on which to concentrate with the garage and taxi aspects of his business and he proceeded to sell his coaching interests to Johnson's Motors on 22nd November 1960. Johnson's didn't want the Bedford OB - EBD 900 - and Rollie sold this to Peter Chapman of Heeps Garages of Guilsborough. Billy Johnson so liked the cream and orange livery of SNV 888 that he adopted it as his fleet standard from this time.

In this way Rollie Walker's six year involvement in the coaching scene ended. His business had been founded almost entirely on private hire and only rarely was contract work undertaken. Whilst the coaches were never the most profitable part of his business, Rollie Walker very much enjoyed the time he spent operating them and gained a lot of experience from so doing.

To complete the story, Rollie Walker's newly developed garage went from strength to strength and in 1966 he leased another garage and filling station at Mears Ashby Turn, Earls Barton, eventually purchasing the property outright. By the time he was about sixty, Rollie Walker decided to sell his Alma Street garage and the sale was effected in 1980 when Bob Summerfield acquired the site. Business continued at Earls Barton until 1984 when Rollie sold this garage to the Bell's Motor Group of Northampton, whereupon he started to enjoy a well-earned retirement.

Thanks are due to Rollie Walker for his kindness and enthusiasm in describing the events surrounding his foray into coach operating during the 1950s.

Rolling Stock:

| REGN. NO. | CHASSIS | | | BODY | | | DATES | | | PREVIOUS OWNER | INITIAL DISPOSAL | NOTES |
|-----------|----------|--------------|---------|-------------|-------------|----------|-------|-------|--------|--|---|-------|
| | MAKE | TYPE | NO. | MAKE | TYPE/ SEATS | NO. | NEW | S/H | W/D | | | |
| NV 7612 | Bedford | WTB | 110701 | Willowbrook | C25F | 2882 | 7/36 | 7/54 | c10/57 | W G Eales, W'boro. | Dickinson, W'boro. | |
| EBD 900 | Bedford | OB | 74909 | Duple Vista | C29F | 46572 | 5/48 | 10/54 | 11/60 | York Bros., N'pton. | Heeps Garages, Guilsborough | |
| ERP 393 | Maudslay | Marathon III | 70371 | Whitson | C33F | - | 3/49 | 5/55 | 1/59 | T G Dilks, D'boro. | Errington, Evington | |
| ? | Bedford | OWB | ? | Duple V | C29F | ? | c-143 | 10/55 | c10/57 | /Seamarks, Rushden R Palmer, Luton | /H D Tapping, T'wick Heeps Garages, Guilsborough | 1 |
| BGV 222 | A.E.C. | Regal | 0662157 | Duple | FC35F | 51459 | -/36 | c3/57 | 8/58 | T G Dilks, D'boro. /Taylor, Meppershall | Icknield Chs., Tring | 2 |
| FFH 551 | Bedford | OB | 71036 | Duple Vista | C29F | 49515 | 2/48 | 8/58 | 1/59 | Icknield Chs., Tring | Errington, Evington | |
| SNV 888 | Bedford | SB3 | 66756 | Duple Vega | C41F | 1105/234 | 1/59 | - | 11/60 | Errington, Evington | /A J Smith, Pott'pury Johnson's Motors, Rushden | |

Notes: 1 - Body new c-48.

2 - This vehicle was new in 1936 as PG 7840. It was rebodied and re-registered BGV 222 in 1949.