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## **Introduction**

Reginald Albert Carding (1905-72) married my great aunt, Winifred Emma Duckett, in 1936. Although they lived close to my family we saw little of each other and I have only dim memories of “Auntie Winnie and Uncle Reg” in person. On Winnie’s death in 1985, leaving no children, many of their papers and photographs passed to another relative, and recently came into my hands when they were rescued from a house clearance.

I had a vague memory of being told that Reg Carding had run a bus company before World War II. However, until I started sorting through the papers, including a large scrapbook of his bus company memorabilia<sup>1</sup>, I had no idea what a varied and at times colourful life he had led, and how much cutthroat competition his company had faced. This article shares a few of my discoveries.

## **Origins**

Reg was born on 8 August 1905 in Luton, the son of Albert Charles Carding and Minnie, nee Lowe. They had married in 1903 in Bedford. Minnie had then been a domestic servant in the town, born in Darley Abbey, Derbyshire, and Albert had been born in 1882 in South India, where his own father, William, was in the Army. By 1911, Albert, Minnie and young Reg had moved to Kempston where on the Census return<sup>2</sup>, Albert described himself as a “shopkeeper, living chiefly hawking” at 29 Park Road. In 1913 another son, Percy, was born, and in 1917 Albert was called up, serving in the Yorks and Lancs Regiment and then the Labour Corps in France and Italy until 1919<sup>3</sup>.



Albert Carding in the Great War, with Minnie, Reg (standing) and his younger son Percy

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<sup>1</sup>These papers are the source for this article except where other sources are cited. Some of this material has now been deposited in the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives.

<sup>2</sup> 1911 Census, RG14, Piece 8858, Schedule 107, Bedford and Kempston District.

<sup>3</sup> *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, on Ancestry.co.uk, from the Burnt Documents files in the National Archives, WO363.

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### On the Buses....

His military papers describe his civilian occupation as “grocer”, but by the mid-20s, although still described in local directories as a “shopkeeper”<sup>4</sup>, Albert had clearly also moved into motor vehicles and bus transport. By 1927 he had taken Reg into partnership trading as “The Wonder Bus Company”. By the end of the 1920s it seems to have been Reg who was in charge. By the early 30s, Albert was also involved in the Ideal Garage business in Elstow, a partnership with his younger son, Percy.

The Wonder Bus Company's business seems to have been running regular service buses (“stage carriage” services as they were known legally), excursion and private hire services, and taxi services, whereas the Ideal Garage seems mainly to have been a normal motor repair and sales business, with a bus service from Elstow to Bedford tacked on. Wonder Bus traded from a rented depot on the western corner of Park Road and Bedford Road.



One of the Wonder Company's early vehicles, a Wolseley Siddeley dating from about 1905-9, seen outside 29 Park Road-note the advertisements for Albert's grocery business

### Big boys and independents

In the 1920s, stage carriage bus services were dominated by several large companies, notably the National Omnibus and Transport Company (“National”) and the Tilling Group. Trying to compete with them were many small, locally based operators with a few vehicles each, some of whom had learned driving and mechanics' skills in the Army, as Albert Carding may have done. These players also competed for the growing market in excursions and private hire. Before 1930, bus regulation was haphazard and largely in the hands of local authorities, who were responsible for licensing vehicles and drivers, and the local police forces who could object to services which caused traffic congestion<sup>5</sup>; thus the scene was set for some battles on the roads in which Reg's business soon became involved. In the Bedford area, the National had been on the scene since 1919<sup>6</sup> and ran most of the stage carriage services from their depot in St John's Street, but among the independents were Reg's Wonder Bus Company, the Dreadnought Company, The

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<sup>4</sup> Kelly's Directories for 1920, 1924, 1928, 1931 and 1936 all repeat the description “shopkeeper” at the same address.

<sup>5</sup> See K Hey, “The Initial Crisis of Bus Service Licensing”, in *Journal of Transport History*, (2004) Vol 25 p 46-107.

<sup>6</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern\\_National\\_Omnibus\\_Company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_National_Omnibus_Company)

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Union Jack Company of Dunstable, owned by Arthur Frederick England, Litchfield's of Carlton and the Malebird Company of Wootton, run by Jack Dawson

### **Fair play on the buses?**

"New motor bus services in and around Bedford are springing up like mushrooms in the night", complained a local newspaper in 1927<sup>7</sup>, adding that services all ran at same time, causing traffic jams. The writer went on: "The conductor of a bus belonging to one of the smaller firms was asked the other day for a timetable and his reply was "our times are as near as possible to those of the ----buses" mentioning the name of a rival service". Papers and timetables in Reg's collection confirm that by 1927 the Wonder Company was running a service from George Street, Bedford, to the King William pub in Kempston, with the National running over the same route at (supposedly) different times.

The following week the paper<sup>8</sup> carried a letter claiming: "I was prepared to run a bus midway between the buses running from Bedford to Kempston and back. These buses were not sufficient for the public, and many people had to walk to and from town. These people would have been sufficient to fill my two little buses without interfering with the other service [from the context this is clearly the National]... But, in spite of an offer I made, the buses of that service started to chase and follow my buses about to try to prevent me getting any custom and thus run me off the road. Having fought for my country and being British, I intend to fight for my rights. I only ask for fair play, and if this is a free country I hope to get it".

This letter is signed "A C Carding", co-proprietor of the Wonder Bus Company, though in Reg's scrapbook, he has altered the name at the bottom of the cutting to his own, suggesting that he drafted it for his father to sign; perhaps Albert added the patriotic reference to his war service.

### **The battle of Bedford Road- "boring", "squeezing" and "nursing"**

Let us now eavesdrop on the Bedford Borough Magistrates' Court on 11 February 1928. In the dock is Edward Rainbow, a 31-year old driver for the National. He pleads not guilty to driving his bus in a dangerous manner in Kempston on 16 January.

The prosecutor says that Rainbow was driving eastwards towards Bedford at 6pm, following the Cardings' Wonder bus, driven by Reg. Rainbow tried to overtake Reg as they were approaching a stop at the junction of Spring Road and Bedford Road: "obviously the bus which got to the stopping place first picked up the waiting passengers". Rainbow failed to give the Wonder bus much room, "squeezing" or "boring" it, which the prosecutor claimed were busmen's terms. The Wonder bus was forced on to the footpath to avoid an accident.

PC Jeffs then gives evidence. He had asked Rainbow why he had not pulled further out, and Rainbow replied "He should have given way to me when I tried to pass him". The prosecutor adds that the Wonder bus was "exercising a lawful function" and should not have to give way, "and if the case as he

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<sup>7</sup> Editorial in the *Bedford Record*, 18 October 1927.

<sup>8</sup> *Bedford Record*, 25 October 1927.

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had outlined it were true it was a reprehensible practice for which the penalty should be such as would have the desired effect”.

He then calls Reg, who says that he had noticed the National bus a few minutes earlier at Margetts Road and Littledale Street when picking up passengers, and when they approached Spring Road Rainbow's bus tried to “bore” him, by cutting in sharply in front. However, he admits under cross-examination that he had been travelling towards the King William a few minutes earlier on his westbound run, but because his bus was empty, he turned round at Farrer Street and headed back towards Bedford, picking up passengers at several stops between there and Spring Road ahead of Rainbow's bus.

Rainbow's solicitor accuses him of doing this as a regular practice, and Reg admits he may do so when his bus is empty. Rev Paul Wyatt, JP, then intervenes waspishly: “Surely if there is a timetable you should run accordingly and not turn round?”, but Reg replies by echoing the letter quoted earlier: “When we first came out [ie when starting business on the route] we agreed to make a timetable to cut between the [National] buses, but the National manager would not look at that and tried to run us off the road”. Another magistrate says: “But a heavy bus is not allowed to go more than 12 mph, the sooner something is done to limit the speed of these buses in Bedford the better”. Ever keen to market his buses, Reg replies that unlike the National's, they run on pneumatic tyres and therefore are allowed by law to do up to 20 mph. Rainbow's lawyer counters by saying that Reg clearly saw the National as “enemies who were trying to prevent him earning a living”, yet the National were there first, and on this occasion “Carding had tried by fair means or foul to keep in front of the National bus”: he had a financial incentive to do so [as proprietor] whereas Rainbow [as a mere employee] had none.



Reg documented his complaints to the authorities with many photographs. This one is dated 6 May 1931, and was taken in Bedford Road, Kempston, apparently showing an Eastern National Bus “cutting up” his own vehicle

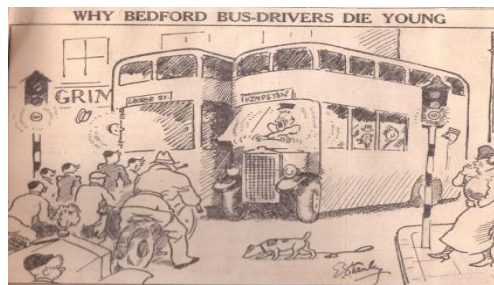
Edward Rainbow then takes the stand and claims that Reg “suddenly appeared in front of him as he approached Farrer Street”, and that when Reg stopped ahead of him at the pick-ups between there and

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Spring Road, he waited until the National bus was almost on his tail before “shooting away”-a practice known as “nursing”. Near Spring Road Rainbow overtook, thinking he had allowed two feet between the vehicles, only to look in his mirror and see Reg’s bus trying to “undertake” by running along the footpath in an effort to get to the next stop first. “Wonder buses try to make it as unpleasant as possible for National Drivers and make a practice of switching their headlights on when approaching from the opposite direction”, he adds.

The magistrates “after a fairly long retirement”, find Rainbow guilty and fine him £5 with 15 shillings (£0.75) costs.<sup>9</sup> Today we might think that since there seems to have been no collision and nobody was injured, it was a case of six of one and half a dozen of the other, and clearly Reg and his drivers aimed to give as good as they got.



How the local paper’s cartoonist saw the Bus Wars



Also taken on 6 May 1931 in Bedford Road, this photograph shows Reg’s Vulcan 26 seater bus (right) being passed by an Eastern National vehicle. One hopes nobody was coming the other way....

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<sup>9</sup> *Bedford Record*, 14 February 1928. The cutting of the report occupies pride of place in Reg’s scrapbook.

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### A short-lived truce

Perhaps it isn't a coincidence that only a few days after this case came to Court, on 22 February 1928, Reg and Albert met National's Divisional Superintendent, Harry Kishere, and his Chief Inspector, H Sexton, and signed a memorandum agreeing that the George Street to Kempston route would be shared between them with buses running at ten minute intervals, the National running four buses an hour and the Wonder Bus Company two. Both would charge the same fares.

As can be seen from the timetable reproduced here, there were actually two slightly different routes, one terminating at the northern end of George Street near the Fox and Hounds pub (in Goldington Road), and the other at the southern end near Kingsley Road; this would then have been approximately the eastern limit of the built-up part of the town<sup>10</sup>. Reg's buses would leave the northern terminus on the half-hour and the southern one at ten minutes to the hour. However, the National clearly had the lion's share of the traffic: Reg's first bus did not start until 10 am (9 am on Saturdays), leaving the National to take most people to their work, and all his buses were sandwiched between at least two of the rival company's.

### War breaks out again

It did not take long, in Reg's view at least, for this agreement to break down. His papers from this point are full of complaints that the National were deliberately running their buses late, so that they "squeezed" his own buses by arriving at stops shortly before his own were due and scooping up "his" passengers. As early as 28 August 1928, Reg posted a notice to his drivers saying: "If a National Bus which runs in front of you is late please state number, time, place, date and sign your own name". The drivers seem to have responded enthusiastically, and soon Reg was writing to Kishere enclosing many sheets of alleged late sightings of National buses on the Kempston-George Street route: he claimed there were 22 separate instances between 17 and 22 August, and later another 77 between 4 September and 17 October. He claimed that the National were running all their buses on time *except* the two which ran immediately ahead of his own. "This has been going on ever since we came to terms", he complained.



Reg in his busman's uniform, 1930s

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<sup>10</sup> See my article "Safe as Houses" in the Journal of the Bedfordshire Family History Society for December 2013, p18 ff, which discusses the development of the eastern end of Bedford from the 1890s.

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Later in 1928 and into 1929, Reg also complained to the Town Clerk and the Chief Constable of the Borough Police in much the same vein. Again he attached copious lists of allegedly late National buses. "We are sorry to say he [Mr Kishere of the National] is continually encroaching on our times endeavouring to push us off the road", he wrote to the Town Clerk on 29 November 1929. "We are prepared to come before yourself and other members of the Watch Committee to prove that What we say is the Truth" (he was rather fond of liberally sprinkled capital letters).

He also accused the National of even more blatant piracy by positioning a bus outside the Empire Cinema in Midland Road just as the film was ending on Saturday nights to steal passengers whose Wonder Bus was not due for another ten minutes: and (in a letter of January 1930 to the Chief Constable) of using what was supposed to be a school bus, for children from the outlying "ends" of Kempston, to Hoover up adult passengers along the way. The chairman of the Watch Committee, Colonel Hancox, was appealed to as "as an ex-service man and British Subject for Fair Treatment". His reply is not known.

WONDER BUS COMPANY.													
Kempston and George Street via Midland Road.													
<b>Service No. 1 (FOX AND HOUNDS).</b>													
Kempston King Wm. dep.	10.25	11.0	12.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0	7.0	8.0	9.0	10.0
Bedford Arms	10.35	11.5	12.5	1.5	2.5	3.5	4.5	5.5	6.5	7.5	8.5	9.5	10.5
Spring Road	10.10	11.30	12.10	1.10	2.10	3.10	4.10	5.10	6.10	7.10	8.10	9.10	10.10
Black Diamond	10.15	11.15	12.15	1.15	2.15	3.15	4.15	5.15	6.15	7.15	8.15	9.15	10.15
Silver Street	10.20	11.20	12.20	1.20	2.20	3.20	4.20	5.20	6.20	7.20	8.20	9.20	10.20
Bower Street	10.25	11.25	12.25	1.25	2.25	3.25	4.25	5.25	6.25	7.25	8.25	9.25	10.25
George St. Pa & Halls, arr.	10.30	11.30	12.30	1.30	2.30	3.30	4.30	5.30	6.30	7.30	8.30	9.30	10.30
George St. Pa & Halls, dep.	10.35	11.35	12.35	1.35	2.35	3.35	4.35	5.35	6.35	7.35	8.35	9.35	10.35
Bower Street	10.35	11.35	12.35	1.35	2.35	3.35	4.35	5.35	6.35	7.35	8.35	9.35	10.35
Silver Street	10.40	11.40	12.40	1.40	2.40	3.40	4.40	5.40	6.40	7.40	8.40	9.40	10.40
Black Diamond	10.45	11.45	12.45	1.45	2.45	3.45	4.45	5.45	6.45	7.45	8.45	9.45	10.45
Spring Road	10.50	11.50	12.50	1.50	2.50	3.50	4.50	5.50	6.50	7.50	8.50	9.50	10.50
Bedford Arms	10.55	11.55	12.55	1.55	2.55	3.55	4.55	5.55	6.55	7.55	8.55	9.55	10.55
Kempston King Wm. arr.	11.0	12.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0	7.0	8.0	9.0	10.0	11.0
<b>Service No. 2 (KINGSLEY ROAD).</b>													
Kempston King Wm. dep.	10.30	11.30	12.30	1.30	2.30	3.30	4.30	5.30	6.30	7.30	8.30	9.30	10.30
Bedford Arms	10.35	11.35	12.35	1.35	2.35	3.35	4.35	5.35	6.35	7.35	8.35	9.35	10.35
Spring Road	10.30	11.30	12.30	1.30	2.30	3.30	4.30	5.30	6.30	7.30	8.30	9.30	10.30
Black Diamond	10.35	11.35	12.35	1.35	2.35	3.35	4.35	5.35	6.35	7.35	8.35	9.35	10.35
Silver Street	10.40	11.40	12.40	1.40	2.40	3.40	4.40	5.40	6.40	7.40	8.40	9.40	10.40
Bower Street	10.45	11.45	12.45	1.45	2.45	3.45	4.45	5.45	6.45	7.45	8.45	9.45	10.45
Kingsley Road, arr.	10.50	11.50	12.50	1.50	2.50	3.50	4.50	5.50	6.50	7.50	8.50	9.50	10.50
Kingsley Road, dep.	10.50	11.50	12.50	1.50	2.50	3.50	4.50	5.50	6.50	7.50	8.50	9.50	10.50
Bower Street	10.55	11.55	12.55	1.55	2.55	3.55	4.55	5.55	6.55	7.55	8.55	9.55	10.55
Silver Street	11.0	12.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0	7.0	8.0	9.0	10.0	11.0
Black Diamond	11.5	12.5	1.5	2.5	3.5	4.5	5.5	6.5	7.5	8.5	9.5	10.5	11.5
Spring Road	11.10	12.10	1.10	2.10	3.10	4.10	5.10	6.10	7.10	8.10	9.10	10.10	11.10
Bedford Arms	11.15	12.15	1.15	2.15	3.15	4.15	5.15	6.15	7.15	8.15	9.15	10.15	11.15
Kempston King Wm. arr.	11.20	12.20	1.20	2.20	3.20	4.20	5.20	6.20	7.20	8.20	9.20	10.20	11.20

First Bus on Saturday one hour earlier from Kempston and George Street  
 First Bus on Sunday leaves King William at 2 p.m.  
 First Bus on Sunday leaves George Street Fox & Hounds at 2.30 p.m. Services then as usual.

THESE BUSES RUN VIA BUNYAN ROAD, KEMPSTON.

Timetable for the Wonder Bus's route between George Street, Bedford, and Kempston

None of these letters seems to have produced any improvement in Reg's sufferings. His papers contain scores of sheets scribbled with times of "late" National buses and the names of their drivers: so many that one wonders if he employed people to stand about with stopwatches to record the times.

**Back in Court....**

In 1929 the National restructured its business in Bedfordshire and adjacent counties into a new company called Eastern National (EN), a joint venture with the London Midland and Scottish and London and North Eastern Railways. On the streets of Bedford and Kempston, things were more basic. On 10 May 1930, Albert Carding appeared before the Magistrates' Court charged with assaulting William George Dennis, not only a EN driver but a neighbour, in Park Road on 30 April. Albert was alleged to have pinioned Dennis, who was on his way to work, against a wall, shaken his fist in Dennis's face and shouted, "Now, you -----, I've got you!" Several witnesses confirmed that Albert was "in a fighting attitude" and had started the trouble. Albert admitted "shouldering" Dennis but said "that there had been

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friction between himself and [Dennis] over the running of a National bus which was alleged to have been always late... he had been pestered to death [by Dennis] from morning till night". Finding Albert guilty, fining him £3 and binding him over for a year, the Bench chairman said: "I want you seriously to make up your mind that although this is a competitive business, you will keep the peace... Give up this spirit of animosity which ...has animated you for a long time".<sup>11</sup>

### Enter the Traffic Commissioners

Now, the Government attempted to bring order to the chaos on the buses by taking over their regulation from local authorities. The Road Traffic Act of 1930<sup>12</sup> set up a quasi-judicial body, the Traffic Commissioners, charged with licensing vehicles and crews on stage carriage services and, crucially, the licencing of routes: unlicensed routes now became illegal.

The Commissioners could attach conditions to route licences, taking into account matters such as -

- the suitability of the routes
- whether there was already an adequate service
- whether the proposed service was in the public interest, and
- the needs of the area as a whole.

They also had the right to fix minimum or maximum fares, having regard to the need to eliminate "wasteful competition" with alternative methods of transport. In June 1932, they fixed fares on the Kempston route at 4d from George Street to Kempston, down to 1d from George Street to High Street, Bedford, or between the King William and the Bedford Arms in Kempston.

From this point, most of Reg's complaints about EN were made to the Commissioners, and they feature regularly in his scrapbook. On 26 March 1931, he wrote to them with the new allegation that EN were not only running their two buses which preceded his own late, but also the following one early, and claimed that on 1 February 1931 EN ran six or seven minutes late in front of Wonder's bus "with a conductor named Lewis who boasts of how he has caned the Wonder when he gets in at nights, shaking his bag as proof of what he has been doing". He also accused EN of taking unauthorised short cuts through Kempston to "head us off and pick up in front of our timetable".



Reg with his 1929 Dennis G-Type 20 seater bus, ready to operate the Midland Road Station to Stanley Street service

<sup>11</sup> *Bedford Record*, 13 May 1930. This report is not included in Reg's scrapbook, although it does contain the summons.

<sup>12</sup> 20 and 21 Geo V ch 43. The Traffic Commissioners survive to this day, along with other features introduced by the same Act such as compulsory driving tests and third party insurance.



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However, he seems to have extracted as little sympathy from the Commissioners as from the Council. In July 1931 they turned down his application to run his own Cranfield to Bedford service on the grounds that EN and Malebird already ran an adequate service, and the following year they also blocked his attempts to expand a further Bedford town service that he had apparently been operating for several years: this ran from Midland Road Station to Stanley Street in the north of the town. Despite handing in a document labelled "Petition from the Public which use this Bus" [sic], bearing about 570 signatures and addresses mostly in the area served by this route, he was not allowed to increase its frequency from half-hourly to quarter-hourly, or to extend it into Queen's Park. EN objected on the grounds of "wasteful competition", and they also claimed that it would cause "very undue traffic congestion".

### Wonder gives way to Swallow

One commercial effect of the 1930 Act was to give route licences a monetary value so that they could be traded between operators. Now Reg finally caved in and sold his two town routes to Union Jack of Dunstable for £2,100<sup>13</sup>. This seems to have taken effect early in 1933. In September 1932 he had acquired for £200 the business of Litchfield's of Carlton, and their licence to run a Bedford to Harrold stage carriage service. On 2 December 1932 he appeared before the Commissioners to have his application for this route approved, and said that he would be using a new business name, "The Swallow". The chairman of the Tribunal said "So far as you are concerned the Wonder Bus Company is disappearing?" to which he replied "Quite".<sup>14</sup>



This 1930 Maudslay ML7A 30 seater was the pride of Reg's "Swallow" fleet and was one of the vehicles sold to Birch Brothers in 1938

By the time he sold his remaining business in 1938, as we will see later, the only stage carriage service remaining was the Harrold route; by now, the town routes seem to have been wholly run by EN, who appears to have bought them from Union Jack.<sup>15</sup> The big boys had won in the end.

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<sup>13</sup> *Bedfordshire Times*, 2 December 1932. A draft sale contract dated 22 October 1932 is in his papers-this also included three vehicles. The exact date of the takeover is unclear.

<sup>14</sup> *Bedford Record*, 6 December 1932.

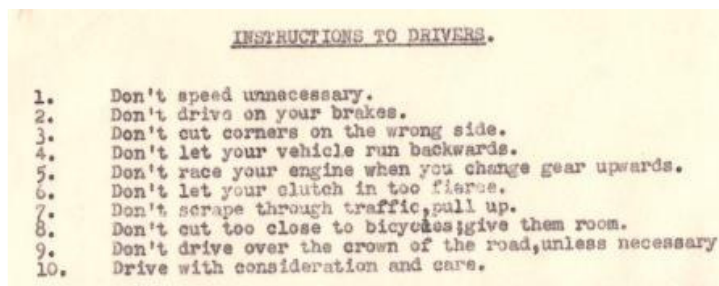
<sup>15</sup> See V L Lee, "The Omnibus Business" in *Bedfordshire Magazine*, vol 9 (1965) pp16-17.

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### .Excursions of delight

The Swallow name was used to run a growing number of excursions and private hire services. In May 1932 the Commissioners approved Reg's regular summer excursions to Clacton (fare eight shillings or £0.40), Great Yarmouth, Skegness and Hunstanton,. These trips featured heavily in his business for the rest of its life. Relatives of mine recalled many years later his trips to Skegness, memorable for its bracing beach and winds blowing sand into your sandwiches; his applications show that the bus left Kempston at 6.30 am and returned at midnight, having stopped in Boston for refreshments. Shorter journeys later in the 30s were approved to Whipsnade Zoo, Woburn Abbey and Wicksteed Park (fare three shillings or £0.15), and there were also Sunday afternoon round trips to the north and south of the county. The Traffic Commissioners overruled EN's objections, and in some cases those of their partners the railway companies, that these trips represented wasteful competition.

The private hire trade was obviously more irregular, but Reg kept correspondence with some customers, which shows that they included the Police Social Club and the Royal Airship Works Social Club at Shortstown, and regulars at the Wellington pub in Kempston. The Airship Works' trip to Skegness<sup>16</sup> cost them £4 10s for a 14-seater bus. More bizarre, which is perhaps why the papers have survived, were two hires by the Governor of Bedford Prison. In 1935, Reg supplied a coach to travel from Bedford to Wormwood Scrubs and then Pentonville and back, and the following year, to Leicester Prison, with a job ticket marked "Bodies of 12 men as named"; presumably prisoners accompanied by warders. Clearly neither EN nor the railways were interested in that kind of passenger.



Reg's instructions to drivers-but were they observed?



Swallow excursion, date and place unknown-probably at a welcome refreshment stop

<sup>16</sup> The year is unclear but may have been 1931.

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In Reg's scrapbook is an undated cutting from the *Bedfordshire Times* revealing how in 1933 he was fined ten shillings (£0.50) for leaving his car unattended without lights at 11.45pm in Grafton Road, Bedford. Reg cross-examined the PC who "booked" him, claiming that he had seen the officer going into the nearby Assembly Rooms, implying that he had dropped in for a nightcap. The officer rather huffily told the magistrates that he had entered the premises solely to search for the owners of vehicles left illegally parked. Reg then explained that he had been visiting his fiancée, and although this did not impress the Court, it told me that he was by now engaged to Winnie Duckett, who lived at 4 Grafton Road with her mother and sisters. She was my paternal grandmother's younger sister, a member of a large family that had migrated gradually from the borders of Northamptonshire and Warwickshire to Bedford between the 1890s and 1914. They were married at Holy Trinity Church on Boxing Day, 1936. Winnie clearly helped Reg considerably in his business but she seems to have had no career of her own.



Reg and Winnie on their wedding day in 1936

### All change on the buses

With his Bedford town routes now long gone, in 1937 Reg quitted buses completely. By an agreement dated 6 October of that year he sold the Harrold route, the excursion licences, the "Swallow" name and his remaining vehicles for £2,600 to Birch Brothers Ltd<sup>17</sup>. The sale was completed in April 1938. In a rather nice irony, early in 1938 he received a letter from EN's manager, referring to discussions late in 1937 in which EN had clearly been trying to buy the business themselves and had offered £2,500. The writer mentioned trying to telephone Reg several times since then, only to be told by Winnie that he would not make a decision until the new year; he would now particularly like to speak to Reg with a view to increasing his offer. Little did he know that Reg had already sold, for £100 more than EN's offer: one can imagine Reg having a last laugh at the expense of his old enemy<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Birch ran the Harrold route until 1969 when they sold it to United Counties: see <http://www.countrybus.co.uk/independent/birch.htm>

<sup>18</sup> We don't know if any of Reg's drivers and conductors moved to Birch Brothers. The following are known, from the PSV licences preserved in his papers, to have worked for him: Harry John Mason of 68 Spring Road, Leslie Victor Edmonds of 8 Denmark Street, Ernest Whitworth of 39 Thornton Street, Clifford Charles Dynes of 53 Margetts Road, Eric Frederick Buckle of 6 Kings Place, James Course of 4 Bedesmans Place, Frederick William Wright of 117 Marlborough Road, John Henry Inwood of High Street, Wootton, Arthur Reginald Goate of 20 Castle Lane, Stanley William Clark of 32 Park Road, and Alexander Charles Salter of Horgrove, Bromham.

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By late 1939, Reg had bought the site of his garage in Park Road from his landlord, and a builder had erected four new houses, numbers 46 to 52 Bedford Road, on the site for a total cost of just under £2,000. Into number 46 Reg and Winnie soon moved and it was to be their home for the rest of their lives<sup>19</sup>.

### Later life

As a young man Reg appears to have dabbled in conjuring, ventriloquism, poetry and short stories, and his papers also include a fascinating set of letters from assorted lady friends, written, I hasten to add, before Winnie came on the scene. He seems to have met one of these girls, who lived in Clacton, while working on one of the Swallow Company's excursions, but perhaps such a long-distance romance was doomed from the start. Another girl, from Bedford but in service in London, apologised in one of her letters for breaking off a phone call to Reg because her mistress had returned unexpectedly; another returned, torn into small pieces, a letter in which Reg had complained that she hadn't helped his mother with the washing up when invited to tea.

Winnie seems to have provided Reg with stability after these excitements, and with the worries of the business gone, he settled down to a rather dull-sounding job as a civil service storekeeper, which no doubt supplemented his income from several properties in the Kempston area, including the rent of the old bus garage site. In 1947 he became a member of Kempston Urban District Council, serving until 1964: in 1956/57 he was its chairman, and also served as a Bedford magistrate (perhaps his earlier appearances stood in good stead there). He was also prominent in Freemasonry.



As a Kempston councillor, Reg was also involved with the Kempston Show and is seen here, extreme left, at the 1958 Show, with Winnie fourth from left, and the Duke of Bedford, the guest of honour, far right in glasses

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Messrs Buckle and Inwood may have been "poached" from EN, as these names also appear as EN drivers in Reg's lists of late-running EN buses in the late 20s.

<sup>19</sup> There is still a commercial site behind these houses, on part of the Wonder Bus depot site.

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He and Winnie never had children, but as a councillor Reg became deeply involved in road safety, especially for children. He chaired Kempston UDC's road safety committee for many years and headed regular safety campaigns in schools. One sad document in his collection may perhaps hint at how this interest began. On 30 August 1932, in Bedford Road, Kempston, a three year old boy ran into the road in front of one of Reg's buses and was killed instantly. The inquest exonerated the driver, who was only doing 10 mph<sup>20</sup>. Perhaps the memory of that tragedy stayed with Reg in his later life.



Reg and Winnie on holiday, 1950s

On 5 February 1972, Reg died suddenly at his home from a coronary thrombosis, aged only 67. Winnie died thirteen years later, aged 80. A man of character and ability, his life, like some of his buses, had not always followed a conventional route but it seems to have been a worthwhile and fulfilled one.

**David Williams**  
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<sup>20</sup> Confirmed by report in *Bedfordshire Times*, 2 September 1932.