

**THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ABRAHAM WHITEHOUSE - BIRMINGHAM  
CAB AND OMNIBUS PROPRIETOR**

An abridged version of an account by Mrs. J.H. Pugh

Abraham WHITEHOUSE was baptised at St. Martin's Parish Church, Tipton, Staffordshire on 15th February 1818. The family lived at Great Bridge, nearby, where his father worked as a cordwainer<sup>1</sup> until the 1830s, when he brought his wife and children to Highgate (now in Birmingham) and took a job as a toll collector at the Balsall Heath Gate.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham started work as a "car man" - a driver of small carts. He bought a stable and yard at Camp Hill and rented a piece of land, presumably for his horses.<sup>3</sup> By 1845 he was advertising in the local directories as a "car proprietor"<sup>4</sup> and then, from 1860, as a "cab proprietor" - the equivalent of today's taxi owner.<sup>5</sup>

The various types of horse drawn taxis of the 19th Century were all called Hackney carriages; their owners and drivers had to be licensed and were subject to the local bye-laws. Abraham lived in the district of Aston where the bye-laws stated, for example, the amount to be charged in fares (based on the distance travelled) and the places or stands where the carriages should stand while waiting to be hired: drivers were not to stand or loiter on the streets with their carriages.<sup>6</sup>

The hansom cab, invented in 1834, became very popular as a hire vehicle. It accommodated two people sitting side by side and there were usually two half-doors of knee height which closed in front of them. The driver stood behind, controlling the horse with reins which passed through loops at the front of the roof.

In Aston, every cab had to have either a bell or a check string attached to the driver's arm which the passenger could use to get the driver's attention<sup>6</sup>. The hansom cabs had a small flap in the roof which passengers could raise if they wanted to talk to the driver, who would lean forward to listen.<sup>7</sup>

Commenting on the hard living conditions of many cabmen, the writer of a tract, in 1853, pointed out that some people looked down on them as "ill clad and in many instances ... ignorant and careless of their future." He went on to describe how he had regularly visited the sick wife of a Birmingham cabman. He found that her husband "generally left home about seven in the morning and not more than once in three months did he return home before midnight." Cabmen didn't even have Sundays off, because this was their busiest day - taking people to and from church.<sup>8</sup> There was little opportunity for improving their education.

The cab driver was exposed to all types of weather as well as receiving unwanted attention from the younger citizens. A.J. Eccleston, writing at the end of the century, remembered a cab stand in the centre of Warstone Lane, where the cabbies would sit in a glass shelter awaiting customers. "They usually sat dozing and a favourite prank of small boys was to wait until they saw the cabbies asleep and then yell "cab"! The cabbies would awaken with a start only to see a disappearing pair of heels round the corner of Frederick Street."<sup>7</sup>

More dangerous was the game of holding on to the back of the cabs and swinging. One lad, aged 9, got his name in the newspapers after one of his legs was broken when it became entangled in the cab wheel. The reporter hoped the accident would "serve as an object lesson to other lads addicted to a dangerous form of enjoyment."<sup>26</sup>

Abraham married in 1845, when he was 27 years old<sup>9</sup> and during the next ten years his wife had seven children. After her death, he married again in 1860<sup>10</sup> and had six more children by his second wife - all boys.<sup>2</sup>

Around the time of his second marriage, he became an "omnibus proprietor"<sup>2</sup> running horse-drawn buses. Behind his home on the corner of the Stratford Road and Henley Street in Bordesley were "stables, lofts, forge and premises"<sup>3</sup>, with two cab stands marked on the road outside.<sup>11</sup>

There were already several established omnibus routes starting from various inns and pubs in the centre of Birmingham but Abraham appears to have been the first person to run buses from Birmingham to Sparkbrook, starting from the Rose and Punch Bowl in Bull Street and terminating at the Mermaid, on the town side of the toll gate. This public house, standing at the junction of the Warwick and Stratford roads, had attractive pleasure gardens, known as the "Tivoli gardens", with trees and arbours.

To begin with, his buses made the return journey six times daily at roughly two hourly intervals.<sup>12</sup> Later, he ran an additional daily bus from Shirley to Birmingham, and two Sunday afternoon services, one to Knowle through Acocks Green and Solihull, and the other to Shirley.<sup>13</sup>

Travelling by bus in those days was much less comfortable than now. Inside, they accommodated seven people along each side, sitting on hard wooden benches with a thick layer of straw on the floor. The wheels had solid rubber tyres, so the travellers were jolted and pitched from side to side as they drove along the rough roads.<sup>7</sup>

For a slightly lower fare, passengers could travel on the roof, sitting along the centre on a row of back-to-back benches, called "knifeboard seats". In early years these were reached by means of step plates on the back of the bus, (later replaced by a ladder). There were no rails round the sides of the roof, except for those holding the destination board.

It was not practical for ladies to ride on top as their long skirts made the climb very difficult. In 1869 a newspaper writer described his feelings of dismay when, having settled in the last seat inside the bus on a freezing winter's day, he saw a lady arrive shivering on the door step. "Will any gentleman oblige a lady?" asked the conductor, with the result that he reluctantly but gallantly climbed out to take a seat on top in the cold wind.<sup>14</sup>

The only protection against the weather for the driver, seated at the front of the roof, was a tarpaulin sheet over his knees.<sup>7</sup> In 1949 the Birmingham Weekly Post published a letter from a ninety year old man who could still remember sitting next to the driver on Abraham's buses: "In my early days I used to walk every day from Gladstone Rd. (Sparkbrook) to New Street to school (King Edward's). Occasionally I used to be allowed to have a ride on the bus but in those days it was rather expensive - 3d outside ... 4d inside. We boys used to delight in getting alongside the driver, one Sam MUCKLOW, who used to crack his jokes as we went along."<sup>15</sup> Although it was cheaper to travel by bus than by cab, the fares were still beyond the means of many ordinary people, who regularly walked long distances every day.

One of the most frequent complaints of passengers was about overcrowding. For example, in 1850 the Birmingham Journal received a letter stating that even though the law allowed a maximum of twenty-two passengers, the writer had travelled on a bus carrying "fourteen persons inside, fourteen outside, and four passengers on the steps, besides a large quantity of luggage piled on the roof."<sup>16</sup>

In June 1869 the local bus proprietors had to face competition when William and Daniel Busby arrived from Liverpool, where they were already running a successful bus company. They set up the Birmingham Omnibus Company and heralded their opening with a parade through the streets of ten, new, smart buses pulled by teams of horses. The conductors wore green uniforms with brass buttons

pulled by teams of horses. The conductors wore green uniforms with brass buttons and the buses, which were green with gilding, were claimed to give increased comfort and room to the passengers.<sup>17</sup> They opened one central booking office and promised a half-hourly service on all their routes.<sup>18</sup>

Abraham appears to have been fortunate because his route to Sparkbrook was unchallenged. Nevertheless, by 1872 he was providing a better service, running buses every half hour between 8.30 a.m. and 8.30 p.m.<sup>23</sup> To run this many buses, it must have been necessary to keep a large number of horses because teams of horses were changed at regular intervals. (When the new omnibus company opened, it bought some old brewery premises in Deritend and converted them into stables to accommodate nearly two hundred horses.<sup>23</sup>)

The 1871 Census shows several of Abraham's older sons following their father's trade. The oldest, Abraham, aged twenty-three, had become a cab proprietor. Daniel, aged nineteen, was an omnibus driver. Cornelius, aged fifteen, was an omnibus conductor. Abraham continued running omnibuses until about 1878. At this time "it was the aspiration of the working man to save up enough money to take a public house business."<sup>20</sup> This perhaps explains why, in 1876, Abraham started to be listed in the local directories first as a "beer retailer",<sup>21</sup> then as a "licensed victualler", and his home was converted into the Shakespeare Hotel.<sup>22</sup> or the Shakespeare Inn.

Still standing today, the inn is like many Victorian pubs in Birmingham. Some were purpose built, but others were converted from existing buildings, strengthening the upper floor with extra beams, before completely redesigning the ground floor and adding a line of large windows facing the street, separated by "pilasters", i.e. shallow rectangular columns attached to the face of the wall. The Shakespeare Inn has been cited as an example of "how decorative this formula could be."<sup>23</sup> When Abraham retired, in about 1890, to a house further along the Stratford Road at Sparkhill, he rented the Inn to a Mr. William WRIGHT.<sup>3</sup> His Sparkbrook bus service had been taken over by a Mr. LANE, who improved the frequency of the service to every twenty minutes.<sup>24</sup>

By this time the design of the buses had been improved. Referred to as "garden seat" omnibuses, the roof seats faced forward and were reached by a winding staircase, so ladies could now sit on top. All round the edge of the roof was a hand rail, the space below it being filled in with "decency boards" which protected the ladies from the view of passers-by should their skirts get blown about. However, the top deck was still open, so "in winter time it was more comfortable to stand clutching the iron rails than to sit on the wet or snow covered, slatted seats".<sup>7</sup>

Abraham died in June 1901, aged 83. He is buried in the churchyard of St. James the Great at Shirley, one of the districts served by his buses.<sup>25</sup>

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