

THE 'MYSTERY' DOUBLE DECKER RUNNING BETWEEN SPITTAL AND BERWICK IN JUNE 1922

In the course of updating research into bus services in Berwick and the Borders (12/20 and 1/21) using the BNA an interesting snippet – the first of several – appeared. Before noting this, it is necessary to go back to what had been established relating to bus services between Berwick and Spittal in the 1920s.

It was that Thompson Bros were the first to operate the service followed by Spowart Bros. Of the best sources available that prepared by the PSV Circle on the vehicle history of United Automobile Services was helpful.

United took over Thompson, Spowart and John Young with an actual operating date of March Hirings Saturday, 4th March 1934.

The PSV Circle listed the earliest known Thompson bus as Albion NL 4614, registered March 1923. The earliest Spowart bus recorded was GMC NL 4905 in May 1923.

Of the other possible sources, Berwick Town Council were (supposed to) issue licences to operate but the Council Minutes do not provide a complete record and, indeed, some services may never have been licensed.

In many cases vehicle registration documents pre-dating the 1930 Road Traffic Act were destroyed by the authorities, the only exception on both sides of the Border are those for Roxburgh (KS) which still exist and are held at Hawick.

Now return to the BNA findings. A small piece in the 'Berwick Advertiser' of 7/7/1922 reads, 'during the week the large double deck motor bus which was running between Spittal and Berwick was withdrawn'. It cites the reason as problems with horses taking fright on the Old Bridge and either sitting down or shieing on to the pavements. This was not surprising given the width of the bridge viz between 17' and 19' and, at the Berwick end where there are narrow pavements, the width is only 14'.

The article continues, 'Messrs Thompson Bros., we see, have started a new covered in bus which, in bad weather, should be a great advantage to people travelling between Berwick and Spittal.' Thus the original date of March 1923 for Thompson is incorrect.

Another two relevant items have been found. One is a notice in the 'Berwick Advertiser' of 30/6/1922 wherein a local solicitor gives notice that 'Spowart Bros. are not interested in EITHER of the motor bus services running between Spittal and Berwick'. Notice the word 'either' there. Not only was Thompson running but so was somebody else – but who?

This seems a strange thing to do. Spowart was the ferry operator with nothing to do with buses. Perhaps complaints about the double decker on the Old Bridge had caused 'blame' for running the bus to be attributed to Spowart.

Before trying to establish the identity of this 'third' operator I found the following in the 'Berwickshire News' of 7/11/1933. This was the time when United were negotiating the purchase of the three local operators, Thompson, Spowart and Young.

The 'Berwickshire News' article is a lengthier one, 'The pioneers of bus services in Berwick and district are Thompson Bros of Spittal and Scremerston who, in 1920, started their first bus. As a matter of fact, it was not really an omnibus but a charabanc. Those who remember it will marvel at the growth of passenger road transport'.

The article does not mention, specifically, that they operated a service from 1920 but, from the context, that may be implied.

Neither reference nor advert about Thompson's operation appears in either the 'Berwick Advertiser' or the 'Berwickshire News' between 1919 and 1923. The 'Berwick Journal' has not been seen as it is not on the BNA and the only known source is that on microfilm at Berwick Record Office/Library.

A more accurate date for Thompson to have commenced is 26/1/1922 and that may relate to the afore mentioned 'covered in' bus. The first licences issued to Thompson were on 2/3/1923 for two buses. Spowart was licensed for two buses on the same day as was S. E. Young, Tweedmouth for one bus. John Young (no connection) began in 1921 and his first known licence is dated 9/5/1923. This was the time when Berwick Town Council began to 'take an interest'.

Before trying to identify the 'third' operator it is necessary to record something of Harry Brook at Amble and the Amble & District Motor Services. Harry Brook came from Holmfirth, his first venture into bus operation, as far as we know, was at Amble, probably in 1921, or a little earlier. He sold the Amble business to Robert Knox, of Amble, in 1922 and moved to Selkirk where he started the first bus service between there and Galashiels on 18/6/1922. He went on to participate in Brook & Amos Co. Ltd and then on a long career which is not relevant to this particular subject.

Amble Town Council Minutes provide little information about bus services and contain no operators' names.

As part of the necessary research, not only into Berwick-related matters, but into some aspects of the Borders as Brook & Amos eventually operated into Berwick, enquiries had to be made into Harry Brook's activities. One of those who would be helpful then was Robert Grieves, Paisley.

The author has a note of a phone conversation with Robert on 31/10/1999. RG thought that Amble & District had a double deck open top which was later transferred to Brook's Selkirk operation (c.1922/1923) after which it was fitted with covered top by Andrew Amos at Selkirk, the latter being part of the Amos half of Brook & Amos. He thought that this double decker had operated between Berwick and Spittal 'before Spowart'. At the time there was no evidence from anyone in Berwick about this bus and no further enquiries were made.

Another source indicated that Knox had had a Thornycroft open top double decker converted from a WW1 chassis in 1922.

Some other notes, unfortunately the source of which is unknown, list vehicles owned by Amble & District. Two buses in this list are of interest, the remainder staying with Knox after acquiring the operations.

They are: —

NL 3150, Thornycroft J, reg. 24/3/1922, no name, but an address at 78, Sunderland Terrace, Morpeth.

NL 3700, AEC, normal control, reg. 12/6/1922, no name but an address at 78½, Red Row. This bus (a 26 seater) was owned by Harry Brook and moved with him to Selkirk and later to Brook & Amos, SMT and, later, to Robertson, Dundee in 5/1929.

The addresses are 'odd' but they can be identified as 78, Swarland Terrace, Red Row, and that for 'Red Row' is likely to be the same address. Swarland Terrace is a row of miners' cottages one of which (46) was occupied by John Mack (and family), who worked for Harry Brook from leaving school, and who went with him to Brook & Amos and SMT.

NL 3700 is confirmed as having gone to Selkirk and that leaves Thornycroft NL 3150. There is no record on PSV Circle documents indicating that the Thornycroft had gone to Selkirk.

There was another source that being by D L G Hunter in his book, 'SMT to Eastern Scottish'. He noted that an open top AEC double decker had been operated by Brook & Amos on the Selkirk-Gala service. He

quotes it as having 52 seats. The 'Southern Reporter' of 21/2/1924 clarifies, 'Messrs Brook & Amos, motor bus proprietors, have put a new omnibus on the road. The new bus, painted red, is of the same type as the L.G.O buses in London, having a double decked body, with solid tyres. It has a 45hp AEC engine, and accommodation is found for 52 passengers. The bus, which is made by Messrs Strachan & Brown, London, will run regularly on the Selkirk-Gala route.' This bus would have been one of L. G. Os 'S' type. AEC had made the 'S' type chassis available to operators outside London from March 1922 as their 403 model and buyers would be free to choose their own body maker. B&A were known to trade with Strachan & Brown (see McQueen memories). From local newspapers we know that the double decker had been very successful and had carried 'good loads'.

However, the explanation given by Robert Grieves (above) that a double decker went to Selkirk and was fitted with a covered top is possible. Andrew Amos, as well as being one of the Amos brothers of Brook & Amos was also, for a period, a director of the company. He was also a joiner by trade and Amos advertised coach building work at their Raycot Garage. Since DLGH suggests that the AEC bought by B&A was an open topper then the Thornycroft could have gone to Selkirk and was sold before the SMT takeover.

After all the foregoing, what has come out?

Thompson was running Spittal-Berwick from 26/1/1922 – if not earlier.

It does not matter whether the double decker running between Selkirk and Gala was an AEC or a Thornycroft. That post-dates operation at Berwick.

The mystery bus operating between Spittal and Berwick in June/July 1922 was most likely to be NL 3150, the Thornycroft. To whom did it belong? Amble & District Company. The owners of Amble & District? Harry Brook initially, and Robert Knox. Harry Brook had moved to Selkirk and set up his service there on 18/6/1922. He would have had to concentrate on that operation well before that June date.

That leads to the conclusion that the operator of the Spittal service was Robert Knox.

Fred Kennington, Lancaster.
January 2021.