

The history of W.R.Fleetwood Ltd & Breedon Road Cotteridge, straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak!

Family firms have a proud place in Birmingham's industrial history & those which are still under individual control continue to make important contribution to its future (Quote from *Birmingham Post & Mail* April 1974)

Service to industry is a field in which one such concern, W.R.Fleetwood Ltd, Pershore Rd, Cotteridge has distinguished itself in road haulage. It moved from the horse-&-cart era to motorised transport.

The business was founded in 1919 by Mr W. (Billy) R. Fleetwood who became Chairman of the Company, but his father, a farmer, had also engaged in haulage work in the Selly Park area. *Billy* was working for his father when the First World War started. He joined the Army, and became a lead driver of a gun battery within the Royal Horse Artillery.

After the war he felt the urge to establish his own business and saved 40 guineas to buy his first horse. With a second-hand set of harness he set himself up at **Hazelwell Farm, Kings Heath** and business soon gained a firm footing, his first large contract being the carrying of raw cocoa from the canal basin to the Cadbury Works at Bournville.

In 1924 he married Elsie May Taylor at Malpas Church, South Wales, and in 1926 moved to 1775 Pershore Road Cotteridge where their only son Clifford was born. The enterprise soon became, with the help of his wife, the centre of a well established business with the introduction of a motorised Ford Model T 30-cwt van.

[Initially, my parents rented 1775 Pershore Road & the stables in the yard at Breedon Road from Walter Carroll Blacksmith who lived in no 1777 Pershore Road.

The Blacksmith forge & wheelwrights premises belonged to Mr Carroll, & lay at the bottom of the yard adjacent to 1 & 3 Breedon Rd. These houses were occupied by Mr & Miss Millership & in later years Jack Wilmot, Master Blacksmith who worked for my father.

I must place on record the name of Fred Meredith, Wheelwright & Carpenter, who lived in Shirley Road. I recall he kept canaries & always chewed tobacco!! I have seen him build a huge cart wheel, from several pieces of wood & together with the blacksmiths fit an iron tyre, the result, a perfect circle. In his time he had been noted for making the "wooden swords" for Miss Powell at Cotteridge School for her class to perform the sword dance (with success) on two occasions.

*When Mr Carroll retired in the late 30's my parents acquired the yard/stables, the blacksmith & wheelwright business together with the properties 1771 to 1777 Pershore Rd & 1 & 3 Breedon Road. **Cliff**]*

The business went from strength to strength with further contracts from Cadburys hauling coal & coke. From these contracts he was able to make a long business association with **Birmingham Corporation**. He was largely engaged in work with the Public Works department & at that time had three men working for him.

In the years prior to the outbreak of the second world war the haulage business played an important part with the erection of the Austin "shadow" factory at Cofton Hacket. The factory was completed in 1939, the year in which the Fleetwood concern became a limited company.

Horses & carts continued to work alongside the motor lorry & during the war the Fleetwood's stables in **Breedon Road** also accommodated horses belonging to **Birmingham Corporation**. At any one time there could be as many as 70 horses working out of there.

Billy Fleetwood was proud of his love of horses, Shires, Clydesdales, Suffolk's, & Percherons, showing them, with great success, in the various show rings, e.g., Kings Heath, Smethwick, Brewood, & onetime Olympia, London.



Typical example of a Percheron horse.

Further extracts from the Post & Mail.

After undertaking a Motor Vehicle Engineering Apprenticeship at the Austin Works, Longbridge, Mr Fleetwood's son rejoined the family firm to keep the wheels turning with ever increasing shortages of skilled men, spare parts, and the tendency for the War Dept to commandeer some of the best vehicles.

The Company found itself increasingly engaged in war work – from emptying chemical lavatories to hauling munitions. *{My father was also responsible for the issuing of petrol coupons to the local traders e.g. Milkman, Coalman, and farmers. Ambler Bros, Funeral Directors, also set up an agency at 1775 Pershore Rd, Cotteridge until well after war ended}.*

The company tipper lorries were used in the construction of war time airfields in the Midlands, including Honeybourne & Snitterfield. Other types of vehicles were used to transport Tank Gear Boxes, from Morris Commercial Adderly Park, to Oxford, & windscreens for Army Lorries from Triplex/Percy Lane to destinations as far as Scotland and Brighton.

{I must also mention Herbert Wathen, who lived in Dell Road. From the first day of the war, to well after victory, he did the same job seven days a week! He picked up a gang of men in Rushall, Walsall, carrying them to the Morris Engine factory, in Coventry. His 1st lorry was one commandeered to serve with Air Defence Great Britain ADGB & sent to Shrewsbury Army HQ. But my father managed to hide a new Bedford Lorry in Heathcote Road, away from the Ministry man, and this vehicle spent its whole life under the control of Herbert.

In 1946/47, during that terrible winter & tea was still on ration, two lorries driven by Tommie Batchelor, (Midland Road) & Jimmy Rowe, (Winnie Rd Selly Oak) were sent to London under sealed orders to collect 12 tons of tea from the CWS, Commercial Road, East London, destined for Ten Acres & Stirchley Co-op.

TAaSCo were about to run out of tea supplies & the reason for the secrecy was that the CWS was on strike & surrounded by pickets. The lorries and drivers set off at 5.00am and were met with a police escort in the East End of London. Managers, and the drivers loaded the vehicles, and again with police escort through the East End set off for Birmingham. The weather was atrocious with deep snow & ice. They arrived back in Stirchley at 6.00am the next day. Both drivers received thanks from the Directors of Ten Acres & Stirchley Co-op.

The years immediately after the war saw the firm embark on a policy of diversification which has brought substantial rewards. General haulage over longer distances became an important part of its activities.

Horses & lorries were also involved with Wates Civil Engineers & the development & construction of the flats and houses on the Wychall Park, Longfellow, & Walkers Heath estates. Waste disposal was beginning to come to the attention of the authorities & in which the firm had realised their facilities *{large open quarry at Romsley, Worcs.}* were of great advantage. Contracts were made with British Leyland, Cadburys, Tesco, British Pens, & the M5 Granada Service Area at Frankley.

Specialist vehicles were being introduced and the Fleetwood firm began with the introduction of "ground level demountables". In 1968 a Fleetwood vehicle was displayed at the Three Counties Show, Malvern.



In 1961/62 a planning application was made to demolish the old stables and construct a vehicle workshop. Despite the previous working relationship with Birmingham Corporation, the Authority made an objection. The matter went to appeal and the City Planning Authority lost, one reason being that the Public Works Dept had a similar large depot in Dell Road.

{At the corner of Breedon Rd & Pershore Rd there was a small lean-to building, in which a solitary craftsman worked throughout the 60/70s producing imitation marble grave ornaments. There was little or no Health & Safety in those days, & the man worked all day in an atmosphere of cellulose paint. He paid his rent to my father and little else was known of the man. I wish I could recall his name.}Cliff.

The Fleetwood Company had grown & now employed some 40 to 50 drivers & skilled HGV mechanics. Now with better working facilities the rewards were contracts to repair & service, the then, Ministry of Transport bulk gritters & snow ploughs, FINA petroleum tankers, & other local traders vehicles.

In March 1968 the firm suffered its first industrial dispute. This dispute was what was known as the "Birmingham Differential" demanded by the local District Officer of the Transport & General Workers Union. The payment was for an extra 34s & 6pence & was outside the Government Policy, at that time. Several other hauliers were targeted at the time, W.R.Ingram Ltd, Rawlins Bros, Drews Lane, & Robertson Buckley of Erdington. The dispute caused wide spread concern within the business community.

The tactics of the Trade Union official was brought to the attention of the Minister of Labour, Ray Gunter, who summoned the Directors (Mr & Mrs C.R.Fleetwood) to London for talks about the relationship between hauliers and the TGWU. The dispute lasted all of two days!

The Company continued to expand, and with specialist operations was able to offer employment to more personnel. However, once again the firm, as well as many others, was targeted in 1971 by the union, which was demanding "special Payments" for drivers of HGVs. The dispute lasted 13 weeks and several firms in the East of Birmingham & the Black Country folded.

Due to the fact that not all drivers supported the strike it became, at times violent, causing concern for the children at Cotteridge School.

The number of people employed by this firm was reduced by 30%, and more attention was paid to developing alternative means of handling the carriage of waste material.

During the miners' strike of 1973, & the 3 day week, the firm and its remaining employees were working almost 20 hours per day, responding to requests by local and national government. Regrettably, cash was almost nonexistent.

In 1974 the Company was taken over by Leigh Interests, who were very big into the disposal of hazardous waste. It was very difficult for the family firm to adapt to the big company philosophy and early in 1976 Mr William (Billy) R. Fleetwood died. The lease to the yard, and the private properties fell to the beneficiaries named in his will.

Leigh Interests Ltd was not able to agree terms for a new lease and closed the operation in Breedon Road.

So in the end Birmingham Corporation or its successors were able to achieve its goal by developing the site for housing. This with the "police flats" & the demolition of the police station made something of a mini estate.

{Francess Barrack asks about the names of houses in Watford Road? The name over 1775 Pershore Road was "Roseville", but I am not sure of the name over 1777!}

I do recall that a onetime tenant of 1777 was Billy Forest who you would now describe as an "entrepreneur" within the entertainment industry, an early Simon Cowell maybe?}Cliff.

