

Road Transport and Coach Building in Ireland 13th February 2019

Mark Kennedy Curator of Transport at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum was the speaker, his talk spanned coach building in Ireland, the evolution of road vehicles, improvements to roads, information about local specialist manufacturers, so much in fact that only a few selected snippets can be shared here.

Sedan chairs were rare and affordable only to the wealthy having been introduced around 1600 they later became quite common, by 1840 they were operating as taxis in Belfast and Pottingers Entry was where they lined up for hire, an advantage was that the passenger could be transported directly into his/her house. One of the earliest references to wheeled vehicles in Ireland was a fighting chariot used by the mythological Queen Medb (Maeve) of Connacht. Most ordinary folk had to walk everywhere and seldom travelled far from their homes, goods were carried by people or pack animals until the 1700s when wheel making became more common. Like coach building, the skills were closely guarded and it was common for builders to destroy their records and plans so as to prevent others from learning the trade. The earliest wheeled vehicles were block wheeled carts known as wheel cars, the shafts were at a steep angle that meant much of the load was carried by the horse, it was several decades before the introduction of the Scotch cart with bigger wheels that raised the height of the shafts so that the weight was placed directly above the axle thus taking the load and pressure off the horse. In common use was the slide car, essentially a triangular construction without wheels; variations were used around the world. Irish slide cars were different in that they were usually mounted on wooden blocks that could be replaced as they wore out, again the horse or donkey bore the full weight.

Until the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) donkeys were rare as the horse was the pack animal in Ireland, the army requisitioned most of the horses to take to war; donkeys were imported and quickly became common throughout the country.

Travelling by stage coach was costly, horses had to be changed every 7 or 8 miles at coaching inns, the early route used by the Royal Mail was from Donaghadee to Dublin which could be slow and arduous. Roads were improved, wherever possible long or steep inclines were avoided and an example of advances made in the early 1800s was the cut through the centre of Banbridge. Long journeys by stagecoach were phased out with the coming of the railways and by 1860 coaches were used as feeders taking passengers from outlying towns and villages to the railway stations. Travel by train was affordable and much of the population went further afield both for work and leisure.

Coach building covered a wide spectrum of needs; construction of basic agricultural carts would have been the role of the local blacksmith. Throughout the 19th century the majority of vehicles were built in Ireland most probably in towns such as Newtownards, the doctor for example would use a 2 wheeled cart produced locally. Coaches were status symbols to be shown off and the better off they may well have used a Belfast coachbuilder, the very wealthy might have gone to a Dublin builder whilst the fabulously rich would have gone to London, Bristol or Bath.

Established businesses in Newtownards were Barrs a cart and van builder working at Movilla Road, a ½ page advert records 'coach painting, rubber tyre executed at shortest notice, only the best quality rubber used, work of every description at the lowest prices possible'. 2 other builders were Morrisons and Thompsons. More recently the Nobel 200cc microcar was assembled at the Shorts (now Bombardier) factory from 1959- 62. The Clan 'Crusader' was a fibreglass bodied sports car assembled in the town (1982-87). Some bigger businesses operated their own construction units, notably the Inglis Bakery that built in excess of 300 delivery vans; UTA (Ulster Transport Authority) ran a factory at Dunmurry building coaches and buses. Mark ended his talk by highlighting Wrightbus

and the new Routemaster hybrid diesel-electric double-decker that traverses the streets of London and beyond.