

● Believed to be the earliest purpose-built leisure caravan, the 4-ton "Wanderer" was commissioned about 1884 by an eccentric retired naval surgeon Dr W. Gordon-Stables, pictured centre with his children.



● Mr Sam Alper

The king of the caravans

by Ed Steen

MILLIONAIRE Sam Alper has an understandable interest in caravans. They made the fortune over which he now presides as chairman of the largest caravan manufacturer in Europe.

During the last few years he has started a collection at his home at Chilford Hall, Linton, which now stands at about a dozen, and is quite unique in the area.

Already it reflects something of the history of this peculiarly British invention.

Like skiing, serious mountaineering, horse-racing, and sea-bathing we thought of caravans first.

Now Mr Alper has to go as far afield as Switzerland to recover the rare examples he wants.

Caravanning, like those other pastimes, started as an amusement for the rich, or at least better-heeled, among whom developed a vogue during the early years of the century for touring in horse-drawn gypsy caravans.

As early as 1915, Eccles, a Birmingham firm swallowed by Mr Alper's company in 1960, were making touring caravans, and soon after, motor caravans.

But it was not until after the Great War, when the car was all the rage, that caravanning really took off, gaining in popularity right up to the second war.

The trailers reflected the age-engined cars of the time, and were very heavy, owing much in design to gypsy caravans, railway carriages, and even the stockbroker Tudor archi-

ecture so modish during the inter-war.

The distinctive modern shape — at first exaggeratedly curved — gradually came into being during the thirties.

When the Second World War ended there was a fresh boom in caravan sales — as places to live.

Sam Alper, son of a hairdresser in Forest Gate, came on the scene just when the housing shortage and the boom were easing up.

"My brother started a caravan firm in London, but was only responsible for building about three," he recalls. "Then he asked me to take it over."

The first thing was to find suitable premises, and in 1948 the operation transferred to an old garage near Newmarket station.

"We ran out of capital before we really got going," says Mr Alper, who trained as an electrical engineer. "It was harder than we thought."

But somehow Alper's Products kept afloat, and after first making a heavy and expensive caravan called the Streamlite, made from "Hollowplast" they hit the jackpot with something completely new: a cheap, durable touring christened the Sprite.

It eventually gave its name to the company, and marked the beginning of an ever-increasing expansion on that almost wrecked the whole enterprise.

After taking over Eccles in 1960, Mr Alper decided the time was ripe for changing the one-man business into an organisation. And the too-fast upheaval drove the company to the wall.

It seems Mr Alper's charm, optimism, and decency as a boss saved the situation — his was the only caravan business to that date to survive a major crisis like the one that followed.

But the workers cooperated, dealers clubbed together to bail him out.

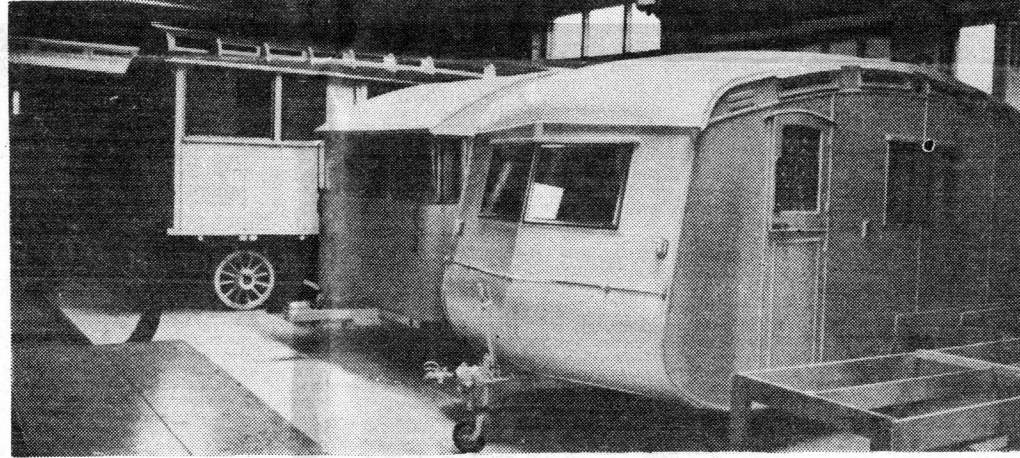
And three years and another merger on (with Bluebird, then larger UK manufacturer) he was a millionaire.

Last year Caravans International, with factories in eight countries, turned over more than £60m, over 70 per cent of it outside the UK, with a profit after tax of almost £2½m.

The caravan millionaire, now 53, enjoys his wealth in a way that should be a lesson to all would-be tycoons.

He is supremely relaxed, hospitable, unassuming, and surrounds himself with people and objects he likes, finding time to cultivate other talents, such as stone-carving, and other interests such as wine-growing.

Busy people always seem to have spare time. "They're just better organised," he says.



● Gradually accumulating, the collection at Chilford Hall. The one in the centre is the Steamlite the first model produced by Alper's Products.

A collection builds into a museum

AT 69 craftsman Herbert Morley has embarked on the lifetime's task of restoring Mr Alper's personal collection of caravans.

They go back to the 1850's from a showman's caravan full of cut-glass mirrors and fine carving and gilt, to the hardboard, streamline-obsessed trailer designs of the 1930s.

About half are already in good order, housed in a barn along with two traction engines and, rather incongruously, a 1930 Rolls and a 1927 open two-seater Bentley.

Eventually it is planned to put up a special building for a proper museum.

Meanwhile Mr Morley works on, with occasional diversions like helping to build what he describes as a "palace"—a new holiday home for Mr Alper near Cherbourg.

He and a team of local carpenters made the roof, staircase and other fittings in England, then went over to France last summer with a lorry carrying 22 tons of timber.

The next big task back at Chilford Hall is replacing cut glass windows, and—far more difficult—making new cut glass ceiling mirrors, in a 19th century showman's caravan.

The metal-wheeled van is so heavy it had to be pulled by traction engine.

Other jobs: repairing a folding caravan circa 1928, stripping down and rebuilding a pre-war hardboard caravan with a broken chassis, elaborate paintwork on a 1920's circus van. Plus continuing work on Mr Alper's huge collection of old farm implements.

Mr Morley is quite undaunted, but admits: "I'm nearly 70—I've got to have a rest sometimes."

He is fascinated above all by the workmanship he has found even in fairly recent, cheaper trailers.

Workmanship is a subject he knows plenty about. He started life as a clock-maker's apprentice at 13—on no pay. "My father said 'don't be daft' and apprenticed me to a bricklayer."

Since then he has, it seems, acquired almost every skill going, from joinery to stonemasonry to engineering.

"During the depression I was three months on the dole," he said. "I got a job as a millwright."

When he left after a year the boss gave him five gold sovereigns and said he'd never had anyone so expert.

"I said—I'll tell you something now—I've never been a bloody flourman before in my life."

The hint of immodesty seems quite excusable in the circumstances.



● Herbert Morley at work on some ornate carving on one of the older showmen's caravans. 897827

(HCC)
Incorrect note -
Not a "Streamlite" but a mid 50s Sprite 14



● *Mr Sam Alper*

MCL/ss

8 November 1978

The Chief Executive
Macclesfield Borough Council
Macclesfield
Cheshire

Dear Sir

ROMANY'S CARAVAN

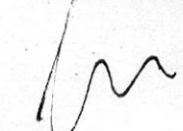
I have read the sympathetic piece in today's Guardian about the horse-drawn caravan standing on what is now development land at Wilmslow. If the writer is correct, you are looking for a suitable home for this caravan.

I wonder whether we could be of any help?

My Chairman, Mr Sam Alper OBE, has been steadily building up a museum of horse- and car-drawn caravans stretching from the last century up to the 1950's. The collection is housed, partly in a heated barn, at his farm outside Cambridge. At present it comprises a dozen or so different caravans and will certainly grow. The important point is that it is in no way a commercial venture and, in fact, Mr Alper is planning to set up a trust to administer it.

East Anglia is a long way from Macclesfield but we would be delighted to talk if the idea is of interest to you.

Yours faithfully


Martin Lumby
Group Publicity Manager

Bee. SA

MACCLESFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

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| OUR REFERENCE | PHONE EXTENSION | YOUR REFERENCE | DATE |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------|
| A/TWB/KG/804/8 | 163 | | 10th November, 1978 |

Dear Mr. Lumby,

I am responding to your letter about Romany's Caravan at Wilmslow. The Council are in the position of considering schemes and the related financial offers for the development of part of what is known as the Green Hall site at Wilmslow, and a final decision will be taken at a Council Meeting on the 7th December.

In inviting offers from would-be developers, the Council were concerned to ensure that provision would be made for the continuance of Romany's Caravan on the site and there is a reasonable prospect that some of the schemes will not affect it, whilst others make provision on adjoining open space for the caravan to remain. Because of the associations of Romany with Wilmslow, I think the feeling would be that if at all possible the caravan should remain on the site adjoining his last permanent residence. At the end of the day it will be a matter for his sole surviving relative - his daughter - to give her approval to any resiting proposal. If she were to feel that the alternative site was unsuitable, I will most certainly bear in mind the possibility of coming to some arrangement with your Chairman.

Yours sincerely,

Borough Secretary
and Deputy Clerk.

MCL/ss

16 November 1978

T W Briggs Esq
Borough Secretary and Deputy Clerk
Macclesfield Borough Council
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Dear Mr Briggs

YOUR REFERENCE A/TWB/KG/804/8

Thank you for your very kind response to my enquiry about Romany's Caravan.

The idea of keeping the caravan close to its original base is of course quite right and I fully understand. I merely wanted you to know that a sympathetic home was offered if the matter became a problem.

The main aim is that an interesting old vehicle such as this should not be in danger of deteriorating or being forgotten.

Yours sincerely

Martin Lumby
Group Publicity Manager

Threat to Romany's resting place



The Gypsy caravan which forms a shrine to a figure from broadcasting's innocence faces an uncertain future, reports Michael Morris

ROMANY'S caravan, the focus of the nature rambles of a Methodist minister in the innocent days of the BBC Children's Hour, is having to move on.

Those in or past middle-age will know of Romany: to know of him or not represents a great age divide. But few will be aware that the naturalist and broadcaster's caravan and the garden planted with trees in his memory at Wilmslow, Cheshire, are threatened by a proposed building development.

He was top of the pops in Children's Hour on the radio—or the wireless, as it was known when he made his broadcasts between 1928 and his death in 1943—gentle talks long before the days of zap, pow, and the Daleks.

They were all aunts and uncles in those days—like Uncle Eric trying to catch his deaf carwig, Aunt Muriel and Aunt Doris. But a Methodist minister, the Reverend G. Bramwell Evens, chose to be called Romany for his nature rambles with Muriel, Doris, his cocker spaniel Raq, and his caravan-pulling horse, Comma, so called because "it never came to a full stop." Romany's mother was a Gypsy and her brother a famous Gypsy evangelist.

During his walks, he would stop to listen to birds whistling (sound effects), hide with Raq in a corn stook, or plunge through a river to rescue an otter. At intervals would be heard the clip-clop of Comma's hoofs.

By calling attention to the swaying of crops in the wind or a fluttering butterfly he gave the town-bred young their first feeling for the countryside. It has survived in today's environment movement, alert to any spoliation

● LEFT: NO RESTING PLACE—Romany's caravan in its threatened woodland glade. Photo: Denis Thorpe

He grew up with a Gypsy's affinity with nature. When he went to school he let his parents know that he had arrived safely by releasing a homing pigeon. One day he shot a hare and its screams haunted him so much that he used his gun less and less. He even had qualms towards the end about fishing.

When Romany died the caravan—or *var do*, the Romany word he used on the programme—finally came to a full stop next to the Wilmslow local council offices, opposite his retirement home. His wife, Eunice, gave it to the council, along with some of his books, his fishing rod, and other items.

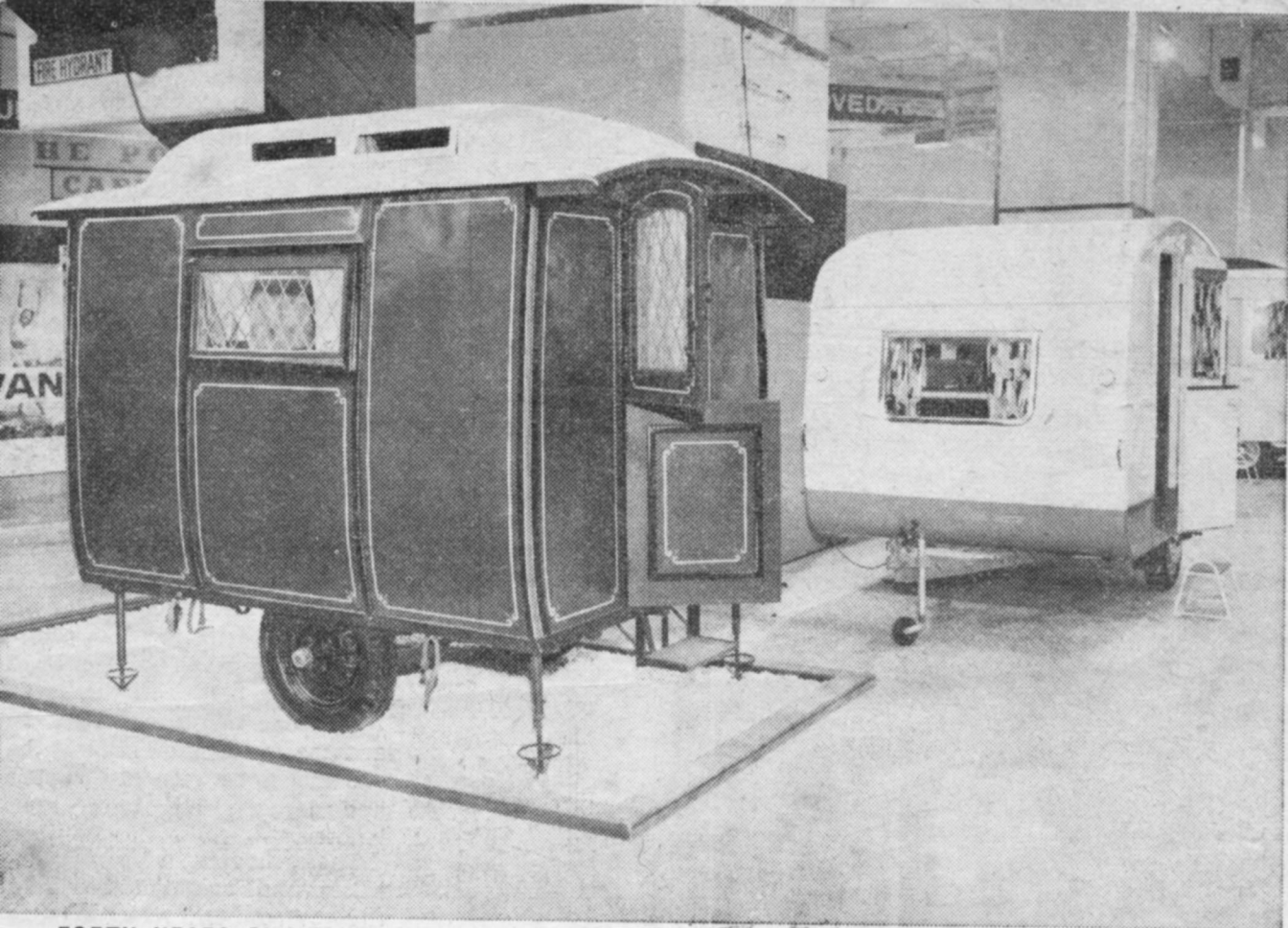
The local authority, now Macclesfield Borough Council, still has a pile of his books, of which he wrote a dozen,

Romany bought the caravan from some Gypsies in 1921 for £75. It is complete with a hurricane lamp, shelf of plates, mugs and a teapot, and the inside walls are still hung with his drawings, water colours, and photographs of wildlife.

There are verses by some of the 2,000 annual visitors who came from all over the UK to visit the caravan. Raq is buried next to the caravan. But now the garden is attached to what remains of the council offices, which were recently wrecked by fire.

Now, the caravan, Raq's grave, and most of the trees are proposed for development. Planning guidelines for town houses or flats on a two acre site make no provision for the garden.

The borough council's brief does require a developer to provide a place for the caravan. But as there is no specific call for Romany's garden to be where it is now, it seems certain that the trees planted for him will be cut down and his caravan moved on.



FORTY YEARS ON ! The Eccles Jacobean of 1923, side-by-side with the 10ft. 6in. Eccles G.T. 305 of 1963.