



LEFT
From l-r Neil, James, Trevor and Russell with the two Van Hool club class coaches

CENTRE TOP
Double-deckers in the workshop

CENTRE BOTTOM
The reception area at the new depot

RIGHT
'Lulu' the firm's London Transport double-decker outside Belvoir Castle



NOTTINGHAM OPERATOR KEEPING IT 'SHARPE'

Authenticity is key to family business Sharpes of Nottingham. The firm's friendship with clients has played a part in its meteoric 15-year rise to success



Sally Walker
/ Senior Journalist

Sharpes of Nottingham was born in 2004 when the family sat down one evening, instigated by now Managing Director, Neil Sharpe and asked themselves the question: "why are we working for someone else when we could be doing the same thing for ourselves?"

Director Russell Sharpe explains: "Sharpes was basically started from that conversation,

and the company initially operated from mum and dad's dining room table.

"We put our money into a pot and went and bought three coaches, all being ex-Shearings Volvo B10M Van Hool Alizee's."

Trevor's career in coaching began in the sixties when he moved to Radcliffe Upon Trent. He had a job at the Rank Organisation, working at the Odeon Nottingham, but also undertaking part time work as a driver for Lamcote Motors.

He eventually left his position with Rank in 1985 to become Traffic Manager

at Lamcote Motors. In 1996, following a brief period with Silverdale of Nottingham, he joined Eddie Brown of York to start a new depot in Nottingham with two coaches. One of those is still in the ownership of the Sharpes family today and takes pride of place in the heritage fleet.

Starting the business

Shortly after the incorporation of Sharpes of Nottingham, the family negotiated the purchase of Eddie Brown's Nottingham Depot assets, which increased the fleet to 13.

The daily operations at the time were managed by Operations Manager, James Sharpe and Trevor Sharpe as Managing Director, with the new company beginning to generate work for their own coaches using Trevor's knowledge and business contacts.

Russell says: "We've grown so much in 15 years, but it has been sustained growth with careful consideration given to the direction in which we wanted to grow the business,

and the purchases we've made. Initially we purchased good quality used coaches, and the idea of buying a new coach was a very distant prospect."

"For Christmas one year, our father got us a tour of the Van Hool factory and we thought we would never be able to buy one of these.

"And now we have just taken delivery of our 10th new coach, of which nine have been from Van Hool."

// They were considering four other operators - we were the underdog - and yet they chose us because we are a family business //

The fleet grows

In 2007 the fleet had increased to 27 vehicles with the addition of the first new vehicle. A Bova Synergy 75-seat executive double-decker coach. This was a milestone in the firm's history with the family recognising that there was a gap in the market for quality, high-capacity vehicles.

The fleet today consists of 53 vehicles, ranging from 17 seats to 83-seat executive double-deckers. It includes Platinum Class, which is the standard touring coach, Club Class which has a full-leather interior and tables, and team coaches that do corporate events with full catering facilities.

Russell says: "The market has changed, so when we started off in 2004 it would be a 49-seater executive coach with air-conditioning, toilet and DVD player. Today our standard executive coach has an increased seating capacity of 57 with all the usual refinements that you would come to expect in a modern-day coach.

"Then of course we have our high-capacity Van Hool Altanos and Astromegas.

These are a big investment. Apart from one, all have been built to our bespoke specifications."

Vintage vehicles

In 2012 the heritage collection was started with the purchase of a 1971 Ford R192 Duple Viceroy 45-seat coach. The coach has never been registered and remained in storage for 40 years.


Now the company boasts a fleet of 16 vintage vehicles in various states of repair, from concourse to awaiting restoration.

The matriarch of the fleet is 'Lulu' a 1950 AEC Regent III/RT Park Royal London Transport RT 3902 double-decker, which was lovingly restored by its previous owner.


Russell says: "The older generation will often sit reminiscing about their years gone by and the journeys they have taken in these iconic buses. They also start conversations with people whom ordinarily our paths may never have crossed."

The latest restored vehicle is a Volvo B58



 Coaches lined up on the forecourt of the depot at Langar



 Two vehicles from Sharpes heritage fleet

Plaxton Supreme IV, which on its first outing to the UK Coach Rally 2019 won 'Best Coach over 25 years' and more recently was the winner of 'Best in Class 1980-1991' at the Plaxton Rally in Scarborough.

A new depot

By 2016 Sharpes had outgrown its existing depot at Cropwell Bishop, and the search for new premises became a priority. Neil found the new premises at Langar after years of searching for a suitable place.

"We could see the potential in the site," says Neil. "But it required extensive work and further complications came in the fact that we could not break ground until a family of common pipistrelle bats had been rehomed, which put everything on hold for six months."

Neil and Russell project-managed the construction phase of the works and the transition over to the new premises. Russell says: "We are very proud of the fact that we completed this project on time and on budget."

The purpose-built depot has plenty of room for the current fleet, plus state-of-

the-art offices, a reception area, a four-lane garage, drivers' canteen and restroom, toilet and shower facilities plus a 2,500m sq concrete forecourt.

Business booms

Today the company has more work offered to them than they can accept. "Some would say we are a victim of our own success," says Russell. "We could easily purchase more coaches, and employ additional drivers, but logistically that would bring us further challenges."

Sharpes transports tens of thousands of people for Nottingham University on its open days throughout the year.

It also has a key client which provides school trips in the UK and France. James says: "I came back from holiday back in 2010 to a message to ring this client. I rang back and they wanted coaches to do 250 tours a year."

"They were considering four other operators. We were the underdog, and yet they chose us because we are a family business. They really liked that I would be personally overseeing all the operations

from start to finish."

The company is the official supplier for Notts County FC and Mansfield Town FC, Nottinghamshire Cricket Club, Basford United FC, and Nottingham Rugby Club.

The diary is divided roughly into thirds. One third being school contracts, one third being key account clients, and the other being private hire, holidays and day excursions.

Trevor Sharpe, now Chairman and Joy Sharpe, Tour Director are still very much actively involved in the business. Along with the daily quotes for the private hire work, Joy and Trevor manage and run the holiday and day excursion programme.

Industry challenges

Like most operators in the industry Sharpes has issues with finding good quality drivers. "It's the biggest challenge to our company," says Russell. "We're on a recruitment exercise now, which also includes encouraging the younger generation into our industry. We are very proud of the fact that we have just had our first new young driver, Dylan Hassell, pass

his test with flying colours.

"For today's drivers it is not sufficient just to hold a licence, they must be dressed in a smart uniform, they must be polite and be able to converse with our client, be able to plan ahead, have a good knowledge of the itinerary, and as an ambassador represent our business to the best of their ability."

"It's a whole new skill set compared to just pulling up at a bus stop and giving them a ticket. It's trying to find somebody with that skill set. They are out there - it's just harder to find them."

Sharpes is also facing the same

environmental and legislation challenges as everyone else. "Take school contracts as an example," says Russell. "Firstly, the requirement to operate vehicles that were DDA compliant and now, from the new year we must be PSVAR compliant, there's always going to be something.

"From an operators perspective we can see it as hurdles being put in our way, and to a degree it will weed out some of the less favourable operators that cut corners, but it is making things harder for the people that do try their best to do it to the best of their ability and meet all the requirements."

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Supplier products

When the vehicles are on the move, Russell says a key tool in its arsenal is the ability to track vehicle movements with the Webfleet Solutions system supplied by FMC Fleetrak.

"It's not only a tracking device, it also reports driver style indicating speed, braking and steering. All vehicles are fitted with a small tablet device that can be used as a sat nav, but we can also send orders, send our drivers a new route, and we can message the vehicle and it reads the message to the driver. We also have the ability to monitor ETAs and send documents should the need arise."

Sharpes also uses TruTac CPT daily walk-round app on the tablet device, which reports any defects identified, automatically informing the engineering staff of the problem. This is a key factor in Sharpes reducing time for a vehicle awaiting potential replacement parts.

The Roeville management system has been used from the start of Sharpes, with the T28 system managing the tours and excursions and the PH28 System managing the private hires diary.

In 2018 Sharpes became a member of the Pride Approved Driver CPC Consortium, which enabled it to provide in house training to its drivers.

The secret of success

"It's about our relationships with clients," says James. "They're almost like friends, and they know they can pick the phone up at any point and someone here will answer. Nine times out of 10 if there is a problem, we will probably already know about it and be sorting it."

"As we are a family business, it is important we lead by example. So, when business dictates, you will see the directors cleaning, washing, fuelling, and driving. It keeps us grounded, and shows we are prepared to roll our sleeves up and get involved. We would not ask any member of our staff to do something that we would not be prepared to do ourselves."

Russell adds: "We have worked extremely hard to get where we are today. When we see our coaches on the road and showcase our latest brand-new Van Hool Altano with Arriva at Coach & Bus UK, it makes us feel immensely proud."