

HISTORY OF THE CARAVAN AND MOTORHOME CLUB THE EARLY YEARS

Formed in 1907 as The Caravan Club of Great Britain and Ireland, the Caravan and Motorhome Club is the UK's largest touring organisation for caravan and motorhome owners. Here we take a look at the story of its early years.

The word caravan derives from the word Karwan which was given to groups of merchants which travelled across the desert trade routes of Persia, now called Iran. In England, the caravan appeared during the early 1800s, long before the motor vehicle was invented. Their use was functional rather than leisurely.



Figure 1: The world's first leisure touring caravan The Wanderer circa 1890s.

They were often used as shelter for agricultural workers or travelling coaches for circus and fairground showmen. An early reference of such a caravan appears in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* of 1840. The fictitious character Mrs Jarley travels the country with her waxworks show in a van that was: *'...not a shabby, dingy, dusty cart, but a smart little house upon wheels, with white dimity curtains festooning the windows, and window-shutters of green picked out with panels of a staring red.'*

Travelling communities of Romanies also began using horse-drawn caravans in the mid-19th century, previously using tents for shelter. It was these communities which provided the inspiration for the first horse-drawn leisure touring caravan The Wanderer.

The Birth of Leisure Touring Caravanning

Caravanning as a leisure pursuit began thanks to the vision of Scottish-born sailor, author and eccentric Dr William Gordon Stables. He was a great believer in the benefits of outdoor life on the health. Since childhood he had envied the lifestyle of the Romanies and, inspired by their traditional caravans, he designed his own Land Yacht named The Wanderer. Bristol Wagon Works Company was commissioned to manufacture the luxurious horse-drawn caravan which was made from mahogany lined with maple. In 1885 the caravan took its first trip of 1300 miles from Stables' home at Twyford in Berkshire to Inverness in Scotland.

Caravanning soon began to grow in popularity. Early leisure touring caravanners were mainly wealthy people who commissioned luxurious horse-drawn homes on wheels. Some of the vans included mod cons such as running water, libraries and even pianos, while sometimes serving staff accompanied the tours to tend to the tow-horses or cook dinner.

The pioneers of caravanning labelled themselves as Gentlemen Gypsies and enjoyed the freedom of the road at the leisurely pace of two miles per hour.

Unlike today, there were no caravan or camp sites to pitch. Instead, caravanners often applied to landowners for permission to stop on their land. Nearby farms were able to provide food and stabling for the tow-horses along with fresh milk for the caravanner.



Figure 2: A Club member's caravan drew quite a crowd at a New Forest Farm, 1908.

These early leisure caravanners were often seen as a novelty. However, some assumed that these Gentlemen Gypsies were travellers and treated them with some hostility. Gordon Stables even reported stones being thrown at himself and The Wanderer on his first trip.

In the years before the First World War a handful of motor caravans, as they were called by the Edwardians, were seen on the roads of Britain. These mechanically-propelled vehicles with a

self-contained living space were seen by the more traditional caravanner as contrary to the leisurely slow-paced ideals of the caravan holiday.

The Early Years of the Caravan and Motorhome Club

The Caravan Club of Great Britain and Ireland was formed in 1907 by a group of ten men and one woman at the London home of caravanner J. Harris Stone. The group aimed to bring together like-minded enthusiasts by developing camping grounds and publicising information for the use of members. These aims are still upheld by the Club today which is now known as the Caravan and Motorhome Club.

Every Club member proudly flew a pennant from their caravan: it of a logo of a V surrounded by two C shapes. Designed as part of a competition, the V was originally to be a horseshoe. This was changed due to the forward thinking that motor vehicles would someday replace the tow-horse.



Figure 3: The first Caravan Club pennant.

In 1908 The Club held its very first gathering of members. The Meet (today more commonly known as a Rally) was held in May in a meadow opposite the Hautboy Hotel in Ockham, Surrey, and included one motor caravan.

By 1909 membership numbers had grown rapidly to 157. This number had risen again in 1912, reaching 267. By 1912 The Caravan Club had organised 13 Meets of members and boasted a list of over 450 pitches in Great Britain and Ireland for their use.

During World War I, the Club provided many caravans to aid in the war effort. At the end of the war J. Harris Stone organised Club members to supply 50 caravans for Field Marshal Haig's mobile headquarters following the German retreat. Despite the initial success, the Club was in serious financial difficulty by the end of the war. At this point J. Harris Stone was personally owed in excess of £8.



By the early 1920s caravanning began to increase in popularity. Cheaper, mass-produced caravans which could be towed by the motor car were more readily available from companies such as Eccles. However, some more traditional horse-drawn caravan enthusiasts saw the mixture of motoring and caravanning as spoiling the true spirit of leisurely van life. Unfortunately, the increase in caravans and caravanners was not reflected in Club membership numbers which had dropped dramatically. By 1933 only 80 members remained. The future of The Caravan Club looked bleak.

A Lifeline for The Club

In 1935 a lifeline came at the last minute from the owners of *The Caravan & Trailer* magazine, Mit Harris and Bernard Dolman. J. Harris Stone, now in his eighties, handed over the running of the Club and in turn was made Vice President. The Club was formed as a company with limited shares and Harris and Dolman were the Directors of it. *The Caravan and Trailer* magazine provided an excellent marketing tool and mouthpiece for the Club. In December 1935 members were invited to form local Centres if there were more than 12 people in a region who wished to be involved. These Centres organised their own rallies and events and are still a popular part of Club life today.

At this time the logo of the Club was changed to a horseshoe surrounding two C's (standing for Caravan Club), held in a circular motif. This was a testament to the horse-drawn origins of caravanning. Soon after, Club products and memorabilia such as car badges, plastic rally plaques and Sites Directories were introduced.

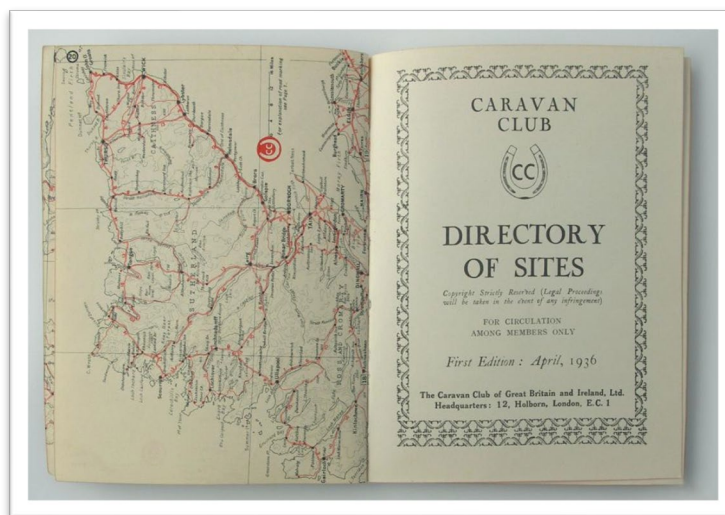


Figure 4: The first Sites Directory, an early example of the new Club branding, 1936.

By mid-1937 membership numbers had risen to 1300 but this number soon decreased after a divide grew between the Club's owners Mit Harris and Bernard Dolman. This split led to *The Caravan and Trailer* magazine and Caravan Club shares being bought by the Link House group in 1938.

To attract members a Rally was quickly organised in the grounds of Warwick Castle. Attended by 181 caravans, it was the largest Rally of its kind held in Britain at that time.

By the end of the 1930s more and more caravan manufacturers appeared on the market, producing competitively priced stylish streamlined caravans. The popularity of caravanning was booming, and membership numbers of the organisation were at an all-time high.

World War II

In September 1939 Britain entered the conflict of the Second World War. Almost immediately petrol was rationed so that each car could only travel 200 miles per month; as the war raged on this quantity continued to decrease, curtailing leisure motoring. Some caravanners travelled closer to home but The Caravan Club soon suspended all rallies *'in view of the petrol rationing and the undesirability of gathering members together in crowds.'*



Figure 5: Caravanners avoid petrol rationing by making their van fit for a tow-horse, 1940s.

Despite the loss of a rally programme, membership of The Caravan Club continued to grow throughout the war years. In early 1940 it was noted at a meeting of The Club's Executive Committee that *'in spite of the war ... new members were being enrolled at a rate of almost one a day.'*

The decision was made to move The Club's offices to Purley in Surrey from their central London location at Grays Inn Road. This proved to be a sensible move as the Grays Inn building was later destroyed by a bomb.

As the threat of German bombing in towns and cities grew, the caravan took on a new role as a makeshift home. Many caravanners evacuated to the safety of the countryside. Caravans were in high demand for shelter as homes were destroyed and The Club offered support and advice to these caravanning newcomers.

The Caravan magazine remained in production, but at a smaller size due to paper rationing. It made frequent reports of Club members who had been called up for military service, along with the sad news of fatalities and the wounded. The Club also set up a Comforts Committee to gather and distribute 'slab chocolate, boiled sweets ... cards, darts and dartboards, dominos, soap, notepaper, razor blades and handkerchiefs' to members serving away at war.

Caravan manufacturers reduced the production of leisure touring caravans and turned to trailer ambulances, and other caravans to aid the war effort. Even Field Marshal Montgomery, one of Britain's most famous commanders during the war, used three caravans to aid mobile command in North West Europe.

By the time the war had ended, many caravan manufacturers had folded. Labour and raw materials to build caravans were in short supply. Caravans became synonymous with lower quality vans built to house those that had lost their homes. Coupled with the continuation of petrol rationing, it took a few years for the industry and the leisure pursuit to bounce back.

Further Reading:

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Last reviewed: 21 October 2024.