

MARKHAMS GARAGE 1924- 2024

Maurice Markham, founder of Markhams Garage Ltd., was born in Smethwick on October 1st 1900. His father, Lawrence, was born in Kingston-Upon-Hull in 1873 to parents Ebenezer and Mary Markham, and his mother, Marion, nee Evans, who were married on 11th September 1899 at Smethwick Old Church. Maurice was the eldest child of Lawrence and Marion and the family lived in Smethwick until 1921-1922. Having served an apprenticeship in Hull from 1890 to 1894, Lawrence's occupations were commercial traveller at the time of his marriage, later wholesale and retail tobacconist and hairdresser (the decorative till still being used by Markhams Garage office being a legacy of this time!), and later still a partner in the Victoria Hall Billiard Hall & Cafe. During the 1914 - 1918 war Lawrence and Marion were registered for home duties and Lawrence served in The Volunteer Force, gaining the rank of Sergeant. It seems that Maurice and his brother Percy were boy scouts at this time.



Lawrence in the salon.

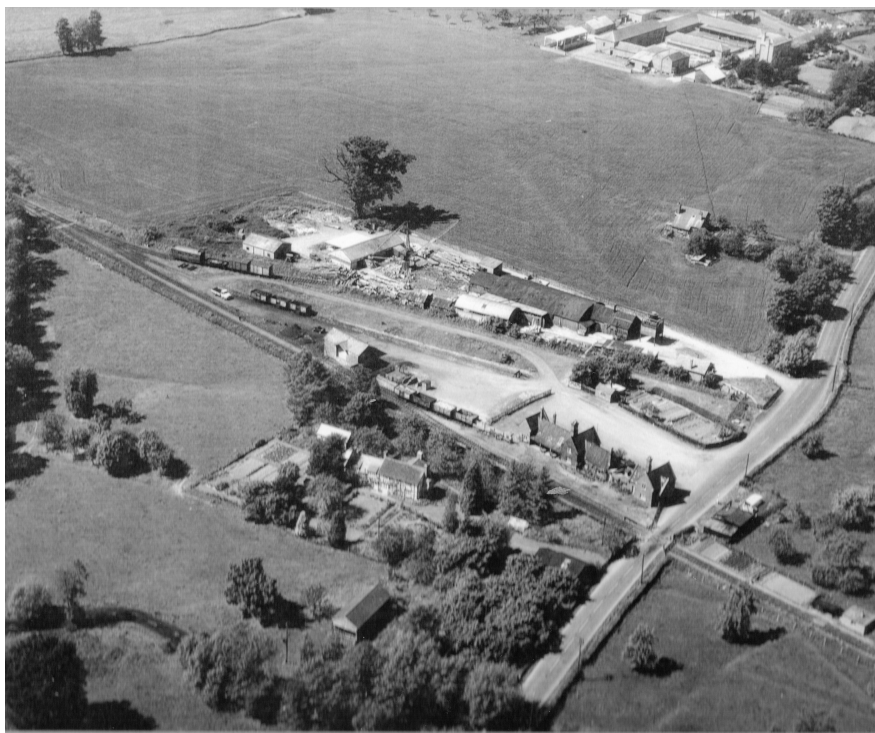


Maurice, Lawrence & Percy

On leaving school Maurice served in The Merchant Navy. We don't know for how long but an exercise club used for keeping fit while on board ship is still in the family's possession and lives in the office just in case!

In 1922 the Markham family made a complete change of lifestyle, selling up in Smethwick and purchasing Mortimer House, near Mortimers Cross on the edge of Kingsland. It is here that Maurice, now returned from sea, and his younger brother Percy began preparing bicycles and motor bikes making use of their father's outbuildings.

But in 1924 The family was off again selling Mortimer House to Mrs Hamlen-Williams and moving to Oakdene, a forty acre holding at Hope-Under-Dinmore. Here Lawrence ran a dairy and fruit farm and later advertised sites for camping. By 1937 Percival Markham and his wife Mary had opened a filling station of their own with a cafe on the side of Oakdene. They eventually moved across the A49 to the site where a much larger modern filling station stands today.



The first garage, opposite Kingsland Station. Seen in the bottom right quarter of photograph.

Maurice however did not move with them but rented a piece of ground opposite Kingsland Railway Station from Captain Hamlen-Williams for £5.00 a year. Here he built a workshop and fore court, sank a petrol tank and installed a petrol pump. This site was right by the level crossing and a convenient place for cars to stop. It was also an excellent place to pick up passengers for his taxi service. By 1926 Maurice had a telephone: LEOMINSTER 84X7

Opposite the garage was Station Cottage where Tom Evans the signal man, his wife Sarah and their sons Bob and Philip (Taffy) lived. One of their tasks was to open and close the gates for the level crossing but Sarah also sold sweets and cigarettes etc, from the cottage, her chief customers being the men who worked at the saw mills and coal yard next door.

Maurice had no independent water supply at his garage, the only water supply for the immediate properties coming from the coal office pump, though the station waiting room had its own pump for visitors. Having spent some time at sea he rigged up a hammock in the workshop in which he slept. The Evans family soon took pity on him however and took him in as a lodger. In due course Sarah also took on the duty of serving petrol if Maurice was out, crossing the road each time to do so. In those early days petrol was pumped out of the tanks by turning a handle.

See Lewis Davies' and other oral histories on Kingslandlife website for anecdotes of Maurice in these early days and later.

Sarah died in 1972 and Tom, in his 80s, left Station Cottage in 1974. Philip helped Maurice as a taxi driver during the war and when he had time off from his work on the railways.

In 1928 Maurice expanded his business by purchasing Rosemaund Cottage, Longford from Mrs Annie Woodyatt. It was occupied by a tenant, Frank Summers. This is where the Garage is today. His first workshops here were old cattle sheds and for many years the brick pig sty housed a compressor.



Maurice outside Rosemaund before alterations were made for a car show room.

Maurice now had two garage sites and it is possible he continued to lodge with the Evans or might have rented rooms in the adjacent cottage to Rosemaund, Greycote. Either way Chris Lewis, his future father-in-law, became the owner of Greycote in 1935, family lore claiming the house was in lieu of a bad debt! and in 1940 Maurice is shown to be living at Greycote.

By 1929 Maurice was advertising two motor garages; car & motor cycle repairs & overhauls; cars for hire & dealer in new & used cars. Telephone number 8. With all the expansion of lines and development of numbers over the years Markhams Garage telephone number still ends in 8!

Rosemaund was a thatched, two storey timber framed building with two front doors, suggesting that at one time it had been two dwellings, and a plot of land stretching right back to the Glebe. in 1885 George Lewis of The Jubilee Wagon Works across the road rented the property for his wife to run as a laundry. Maurice dug out the floor of the Eastern most third of the ground floor and opened it up to the roadside to create a car showroom. Petrol pumps were installed and he provided a radio accumulator charging service.

In 1940 Maurice married Muriel Lewis the only child of Charles and Gladys Lewis who married in 1905. Muriel, a Kingsland girl, was born on the 29th December 1912 at Corner Cottages the home of Gladys's Simcoe relatives. Charles, known as Chris, was born in May 1872 at Bedstone, however his father Job, a master wheelwright, died when Chris was only five years old and he and his sister came to live with their uncle George Lewis at Jubilee House. Chris attended Lucton School riding there and back on a pony he then went on to serve an apprenticeship as a carpenter and wheelwright at the wagon works. When Muriel was a year old the family moved to Lilac Cottage in North Road where Chris started a business of his own as carpenter and wheelwright, banding the wheels in the middle of the road! His workshop, built on to the side of Lilac Cottage, is still there today. He also operated a business of coffin maker and undertaker. In 1933 Gladys died and Chris retired passing his undertaking business on to his apprentice Jack Preece. Muriel by now

had trained as a dressmaker, her treadle sewing machine being a feature of her home to the day she died, and she and Chris came to live at Vartry Cottage opposite The Garage. Chris was a prominent member of the community, sexton, bellringer and at one time a chorister at Kingsland Church, a member of the handbell ringers and for over thirty years vice-captain of Kingsland Fire Brigade. He died in 1957 aged 85.



The Garage yard in the early days.
(We think that the extension built along the back of Rosemaund might have been the laundry).

In 1931 Maurice took on a fourteen year old apprentice, George Griffiths. George left for a period of years during the second world war to join the Army where he enhanced his engineering skills and learned to make tools such as the open ended spanners used in his trade, afterwards he returned to Markhams as a mechanic and body worker, and remained with the firm until he retired aged 65. Amongst his many skills were those of repairing radios and later, televisions. If George wasn't able to adapt a tool or effect a repair the work was sent to the Blacksmith Shop at Cob-nash and the Davies and later George Mills helped out.

Another early and long-time employee was Reg Hamer who lived opposite The Garage in Rose Villa, now called Westmead. Reg drove busses but also did the book keeping and was to be seen hunched over his desk alongside the two large carboys full of bubbling sulphuric acid used for re-charging batteries for wireless sets. He retired in the late 1970s.



Two others were Bill Patchett and Walter Mitchell when he was home on leave and before he took over his father's butchers business

In the lead up to the second world war Muriel took in Mary Savage and her sister evacuees from Liverpool. They reported she was a wonderful cook and very good to them making them summer dresses. The girls became friendly with the couple who ran the Post Office and also came from Liverpool. But in 1939 Muriel and Maurice married, Chris gave them Greycote as a wedding present, the girls moved over the road to Ferney Cottage and Chris moved to Prospect Cottage.

1940 brought huge changes to the Markhams. Married life, their first son Bryan born later that year, working together in the garage business and the war!

Three more children, Janice, Roslyn and David had been born by 1946. Ever hospitable Muriel and Maurice took in many lodgers, some in Greycote and others above the Garage office at Rosemaund. Jock Anderson, Ruth from East Germany, an Indian family were just some of the many lodgers.

Markhams Garage was one of the few businesses to be allowed petrol during the war although it was strictly rationed. They were in great demand over the next six years running a 24 hour taxi service. Canadian, American and British forces camps had been built in the area and a large part of the work was catering to these. It was, as it is now, a family run business and anyone who was able mucked in. There were stories of aviation fuel being stashed in the ditches on the Greens! Journeys were not only local though and there is evidence of Maurice driving two American officers to Bromsgrove and back in 1944.

Life was so busy during these years that Bryan, when aged three and a half, was sent to weekly board at a school that had been evacuated from Bexhill on the South coast to Titley. And when the war ended he went back to Bexhill with them as a full boarder, making the journey by train often accompanied by a young girl from the village. In time he moved to a prep school in Gloucestershire and at eleven returned home full time to become a day boy at Lucton. His sisters however went first to Dutton House in Leominster, then to Kingsland and then to Hereford Technical College. His brother, David, following him to Lucton after Kingsland.



Muriel in her garden.

(Note the jacked-up left hand corner of the workshop, this was to accommodate the height of the busses when they needed to be over the pit for servicing. Later a larger pit was dug in the bus bay where they were garaged).

The two adjoining properties, Greycote and Rosemaund, provided ample space for the Garage, garden and a productive fruit and vegetable garden, the keeping of a pig and chickens and at the far end of both were two orchards where a number of old vehicles lay. This was know as 'The Top' and became a wonderful and unusual adventure play ground for the children and their friends.

For many years Markhams advertised 'Open day and night for repairs and service. Garage and filling station, Kingsland. Phone : Kingsland 8 for reliable car hire. Wireless sets and accessories. Motor repairs and Accessories'.

And day and night it was with the phone ringing in the house, no extension or portable hand set in those days; and the bell by the pumps ringing first in Greycote and later in Mount View where many a meal would be interrupted by a customer wanting petrol and who would be served by any one of a number of members of the family. Before the arrival of electricity the petrol was pumped from the underground tanks by turning a handle. A great many phone calls would be answered by Muriel in the kitchen who was blessed with a good strong voice and could be heard calling for Maurice, Bryan, George or Godfrey by anyone nearby.

It is not certain just when Maurice acquired his first bus, but bus rides to and from school, sporting fixtures and mystery tours were all part of the service for many years. Maurice as driver wearing spectacles without lenses!

Bryan left Lucton School in 1957 and had no intention of joining the family business but instead went to Harrods in London as an apprentice furniture buyer. However in 1963 he returned to the family home and took a job with Battery Electrics in Hereford in order learn as much as he could about the motor trade. At this time all four Markham children were travelling to Hereford each day for work or college and so all were driven to and fro by Bryan.

In 1965 though tragedy struck the family when 18 year old David was killed in a car accident, he had been training to be a carpenter.

Not long after this Roslyn married Peter Atkinson and they emigrated to Canada.

In 1960 the Government introduced the M.O.T. test, obligatory only for vehicles of 10 years and over. It was very basic, a check on brakes, lights and steering every year. In 1967 the test was extended to vehicles 3 years old and over. It is not known if Maurice joined the scheme straight away but it is likely he did as he was ever enterprising. The test could easily be carried out from a pit and Markhams tested this way until the early 1990s when a purpose built testing bay was constructed. This facility has been upgraded and extended several times over the years with the testing mechanics required to undergo a refresher course every twelve months.

1966 Janice married Godfrey Jones, a Kingsland boy who had joined the RAF, and they moved to Kenfig Hill.

In 1969 the Jones returned to Kingsland with their daughter Nicola soon to be joined by her brother Darren. Maurice gave them a piece of ground at the top of Rosemaund's garden where they built a bungalow. The old vehicles finally met their end and 'The Top' became a home and productive vegetable garden.

Just one vintage vehicle was spared, a Crosley which had lived in its own shed. At some time in the 1980s it was beautifully restored by Mike Ward and for several years Bryan chauffeured brides to and from their weddings.

Godfrey joined the business bringing his invaluable newly acquired electrical skills and becoming a much respected member of the Company, even winning a 'Garage Hero' award in 2008! Janice resumed her job of taxi driving and serving petrol.



Anne, Janice, Maurice Muriel and Bryan

In 1966 Bryan joined Maurice to work at the Garage and in 1967 married Anne Yerbury who joined the family firm in serving petrol and driving taxis etc. They lived in the very basic flat above the garage office. In 1969 Bryan bought the neighbouring house Mount View, Lisa was born in the same year and Nic two years later. This was their family home until 1980. In these early days Bryan relied heavily on neighbours such as Arthur Morgan, the Bengry family and George Mills. In 1973 permission was granted for part of the Mount View garden to be excavated to create a splay forecourt. Larger more modern petrol pumps were installed, old steel tanks being filled in

and new ones sunk. If there was no one around to serve the petrol and you were a known customer with an account you could serve the petrol yourself and then enter the details on a sheet in the office. The account would be sent to you at the end of each month! At much the same time a modern work shop was built at the end of the yard.

In 1977 Bryan bought the premises from Maurice and the business effectively became his own.

In 1980 Markhams Garage briefly lost its identity and joined North Herefordshire Garages, sited at Mortimers Cross. The pumps were removed and all petrol was sold at the much larger premises two miles up the road. All school buss and taxi contracts continued with Godfrey and Bryan being the chief drivers with George, Godfrey and Julian Gore in the workshops.

Maurice died in 1981 but Muriel continued to drive taxis and to answer the phone for sometime. However in 1986 Bryan returned full time to Kingsland and a new venture, Kingsland Tools run by Pat and Barry Hurst was installed in the ground floor of the office and office space up stairs was created for Swan and Partners Re-builders. At this time the Garage advertisement boasted Service, Taxi, MOT, Auto Electrical. Tel: Kingsland 208.

In the late 1980s Markhams began driving contracts for the Education Authority and for many years almost every member of the family and many others were involved in ferrying school children and adults still in education to and fro morning and evening, this was in addition to the regular school bus service which finished in the late 1990s.

Muriel died in 1990. These contracts came to an end in the early 2000s and since then the focus has been solely on servicing, tyre fitting and MOTs with several fleet contracts as well as many private customers from a thirty mile radius of Kingsland. The bus bay was converted into a workshop and the existing workshop into a bespoke M.O.T. bay.

Markhams continued to encourage youngsters, hosting several children from local schools for a weeks work experience. Three of these returned once they had left school aged 16 to serve apprenticeships run by Hereford Technical College. Alan Lewis in 1990, Simon Powney in 1993 and Chris Moore in 1995. Alan left to run his own workshop in 2000 and Chris, having been awarded 'trainee mechanic of the year', to join his family firm, P.T. Moore, car breakers and Simon is still with Markhams becoming a director. Nic Markham served as an apprentice for a short time but his ambition had always been to join the Army and when he was 18 he signed up with the Paras. He now lives in Australia. In 1993 Bryan married Jackie Cameron-Swan who also drove the taxis and helped out in the office.

In 1996 Lisa joined Bryan in the increasingly busy office, sometimes with baby Steve in a carrycot on the floor!

When North Hereford Garages closed Mike Powney joined Markhams Garage and a body shop was created for him in one of the outbuildings.

During the second half of 1998 the space above the office was used as an information room for the Millennium Green project.

In 2002 Tavey joined the garage having done his apprenticeship with several local garages and then worked as a cruise ship photographer until a vacancy became available.

In 2004 the top of Rosemaund was properly converted into a flat and in 2005 Markhams Garage Ltd was formed. At the same time the end of Greycote garden was added to the Garage premises. For a few years the flat housed R & O Cameron-Swan Photographers but in 2016 returned use as flat.

In 2005 Bryan ceased to be a sole trader and Markhams Garage Ltd was formed, the directors being Bryan Markham, Jackie Markham, Lisa Juson, Simon Powney and Tavey Cameron-Swan. This brought a new energy to the business and In 2007 a strip Mount View's land was purchased and a new much larger workshop was built. The MOT bay was extended and later a tyre bay added. While the workshop was being re-built the majority of the work was carried out in a workshop rented from Dave Barrington at Longmore with vehicles and mechanics going back and forth all day.

In 2015 a land swap provided further space to build a store at the back of this workshop.

Sadly Janice died in 2016.

In 2020 when Covid struck the majority of the staff were furloughed, only Lisa and Tavey remained but with cones and tapes to restrict access to the property. Vehicles were disinfected as far as possible and life remained very busy. Gradually the staff returned and over time things got back to normal.

In 2022 the MOT bay was enlarged though we can still only test Class 4 vehicles. Class 5 & 7 vehicles requiring a test are taken a few miles down the road to Rob Speakman. Our body work is now taken to Tom Stephens at Shirlheath.

In 2023 the Limited Company purchased the site which now has 10 bays with 8 ramps.

Very sadly, after a short illness, Bryan died in March 2024 and a few days later, Godfrey, who had been ill for some years also passed away. And so the two brothers-in-law who had worked together for so many years left us in our centenary year.

Over the years Markhams has employed many mechanics and other members of staff but today we are proud of our team of Darren Poole, Dave Hare, Jake Jackson, Mark Powell, Joe Paget, April Pearson and Helen Flook who work alongside Simon Powney, Tavey Cameron-Swan and Lisa Juson.

J.M.

26th October 2024

In 1922 Kellys Postal Directory for Herefordshire lists 22 Motor Engineers including James Fryer Ltd and Watson Motor Works Ltd in Leominster, 2 Motor Car Body Builders, 5 Motor Car Builders & Agents, 11 Motor Car Garages (Petrol stations?) including 3 in Leominster and 3 Motor Omnibus Proprietors including Alfred Bird in Wigmore. By 1926 Kellys lists 34 Motor Engineers in the county, 5 Motor Car Agents and Dealers, 5 Motor Car builders & Agents and 45 Motor Car Garages including Maurice Markham of Kingsland.