Carlight

Carlight 1930-1980

It is far from easy to prepare a brief history of a company whose origins lie as far back as the nineteen-twenties, but it is hoped that this short account will be of interest to all Carlight customers, both old and new.

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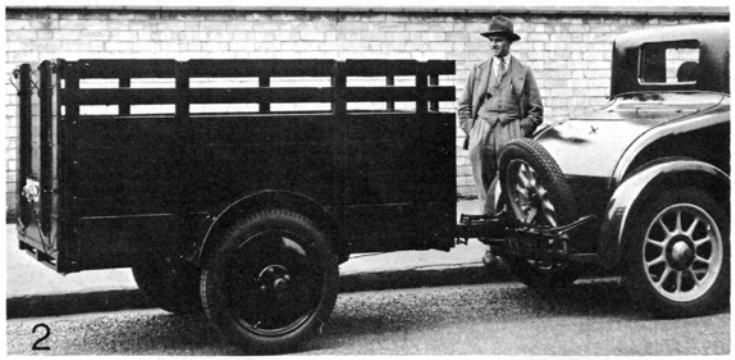
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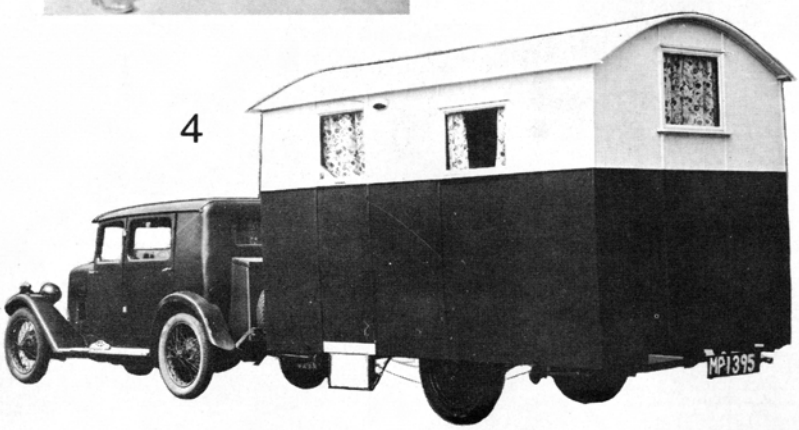

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1. Carlight Luggage Trailer, 1928.
2. A Carlight Trailer for livestock, 1927/8.
3. The Carlight Camping Trailer, 1928.
4. A 1930 Lincoln Imp, the very first Carlight caravan.
5. Imps undergoing work in the paint shop, 1930.
6. The first of the 'streamline' Carlights, the Model V, 1932/3.
7. The interior of a 1935 Light Four showing the Carlight Compact Kitchen. All the cooking equipment, cutlery, crockery and even the tin opener were provided as standard equipment.
8. The 1935 Carlight Light Four on the road.
9. The Cosmopolitan of 1936. The Continental of that year was a similar shape, but longer.

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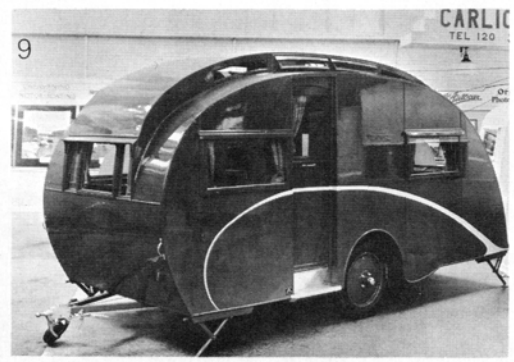

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The birth of Carlight Caravans was brought about by the fact that the late Mr. W. R. (Bob) Earl, auctioneer and estate agent, liked a change of surroundings during the weekend, and became an enthusiastic camper. Then came the day when he realised that a canvas holiday did not offer what, in his capacity as an estate agent he was accustomed to describing as "every mod con", so he built himself a caravan. This caravan created tremendous interest amongst his fellow campers and within a few weeks Mr. Earl found he had orders for quite a number of caravans. He had of course no facilities for fulfilling these orders, but he had been brought up on the motto "never turn business away". Out came pen and paper, instructions went off to various suppliers in the neighbourhood and a few weeks later a rather bewildered wheelwright discovered himself putting caravans together. That was the start of the Carlight Caravan business in 1930.

Vehicle manufacture was not an entirely new medium to Mr. Earl, as since 1927 he had been engaged in making small load-carrying trailers, (nowadays known as 'load-luggers'), and luggage and small general trailers for farm and estate use, utilising old car wheels, mud-guards, and the like. Mr. Earl and his parents regularly used a Carlight luggage trailer during their extensive camping trips abroad in the late 1920's. This led to the development of the Carlight Camping Trailer, adapted from a luggage trailer body with collapsible canvas sides and roof, and equipped with beds etc.. However, the design did not prove entirely satisfactory in practice and this was when the idea of a caravan came to fruition. Another development which didn't prove entirely successful was an excursion into aircraft manufacture with the formation of The Carlight Aircraft Company. A number of Flying Flea aircraft were made but production did not continue for very long.

In 1931 Mr. Earl opened a small workshop with the notice "Carlight Caravans" proudly displayed outside. Then followed a period when the new and enthusiastic caravan builder had the time of his life, putting into practice all the ideas which had been buzzing about in his head for years; admittedly he found some of them would not work, but the majority did. Perhaps the biggest exception was a 10'6" all-steel lantern roof caravan which the designer eventually admitted turned out to be one of the worst vehicles imaginable to tow on the road. Mr. Earl was one of the first to build a caravan with a 6" crank in the axle and having an overall width of 6ft. He was also one of the pioneers of streamlining. The 'streamline' bug hit him after a visit to R.A.F. Cranwell, where he was agreeably surprised by the considerable amount of room inside the wings of a troop carrier, and in 1932 he set about designing a caravan, the Model V, shaped on the lines of an aeroplane wing. It instantly made its name as one of the best looking and finest towing caravans on the market. It was decided that a study of aircraft construction methods could prove of value in caravan design and Mr. Earl discovered that a structure can be made strong without being unduly heavy if it is scientifically braced. So the caravan shells were made much lighter than before using less cross-bracing and ordinary butt joints in place of the more expensive mortice and tenon joints. Once the furniture was in position this new type shell was much stronger that its predecessor, for every fitting was designed to serve as a strengthening gusset.

1934/5 saw the advent of the New Light Four, a 13ft., 11½ cwt 4 berth, suitable for the 9 h.p. car, selling at £149.10s.0d. This model embodied the special Carlight Compact Cooking Locker, a miracle of compactness. Having successfully developed a highly satisfactory method of construction, Mr. Earl was able to give more consideration to one of his main ambitions, the design and building of a well finished, full sized, 4 berth caravan, to sell for £100. At the time he was told it was impossible, but it was developed and produced in considerable numbers under the name 'Century'. Then along came the Challenger, a 15 ft. double-panelled lantern roof model, built on similar lines, which sold for £189 in 1937. Both these models were an object lesson in intelligent design, and it is interesting to note that in the Century model, in the entire panelling there were only four joints, both the roof and walls being single sheets of hardboard. The structure was light but surprisingly strong. Luxurious versions of these two models were produced under the names 'Continental' and 'Cosmopolitan' and in 1938 the first of the famous 'Colonial' models appeared having a length of 18'11". The Colonial was a most luxurious caravan having two separate living areas, a self-contained spacious kitchen, gas cooking and lighting, 12v and 240v electricity, built-in radio and hot and cold water supply to three wash basins, and a kitchen sink with hot water supplied by gas water heater. Five models were offered for 1938 ranging in price from the Colonial at £385 to the Coronet at £119.

In 1938 the first Commander model appeared, this being a flat fronted, 10-lantern roof vent model, complete with vacuum brakes, 2½" thick insulated walls and 4" insulated floor. Features were a special 'wet coat' cupboard in the kitchen, a boot locker running across the rear end, built-in radio aerial in the roof, gas, 12v and 240v electricity supply, all for a price of £395. During the war years 1939/45 caravan building at Sleaford was virtually dormant, apart from some production late in 1939/1940 when such models as the Cadet 11ft., Captain 13'9", and Conqueror 16ft. were offered, and a strong selling point was that caravans were an excellent form of air raid protection offering the means of a fully equipped home, away from areas likely to be under enemy attack. From 1939/45 Carlight was engaged in the production of ambulances and other vehicles for the Government.

Having perceived a probable housing shortage after the war, two new models were introduced in 1946. The Colonial 21 ft. Mk II, and the Carholme 18 ft.; both were essentially 'living vans', offering all modern conveniences in a well constructed and insulated body making them suitable for continuous occupation all year round. The advent of the Colonial Mk II introduced the first of the Carlight models having the well known vee-shaped front; it was a tremendous success and was improved and lengthened to 22 ft. and was very popular with business executives, entertainers and service personnel, who travelled about the country and required a model home with top class comfort and convenience, but with an impeccable towing performance. During 1950 a model was introduced known as the "Type X". This was specially developed for use in tropical countries and under-developed areas where strength, insulation and resistance to insect attack were of paramount importance. For many years the Type X was supplied in considerable quantities to overseas Governments and international organisations such as World Health Organisation, U.N.I.C.E.F. and international oil companies, for use in remote areas of Malaya, East & West Africa, The Sudan, Iraq, Aden and various middle eastern countries where roads, if they existed at all, were of the corrugated type. The Type X was supplied in many forms: mobile living accommodation, laboratories, mobile clinics, for use in epidemic control in tropical areas. They were mounted on either single or twin axles.

In 1953 it was considered that the time was right for the introduction of a smaller model than the 22 ft. Colonial, based on the robust construction of the Type X, but offering every comfort to the fastidious caravanner who required all the domestic comforts but in a smaller and lighter caravan. So the 17 ft. 4 berth Continental came into being. Incidentally the exceptionally robust construction of the Continental has enabled it to be exported in standard form to many parts of the world, including Nigeria and Dahomey for use by World Health Organisation personnel. To Libya for post and telecommunications work in the North African desert and to various middle eastern countries for use by middle eastern royalty as hunting lodges etc.. The success of the Continental led to the introduction of the Caribbean (1955), Cosmopolitan (1957) and Caspian (1960). Experimental work with glassfibre had been carried out over some years and in 1960 the glassfibre roof was introduced to all models to replace the canvas roof (specially treated with varnish drainings), which although extremely robust and long lasting had the disadvantage of having to be painted each year. In 1963 the 14ft. 2 berth Casetta was introduced; this model embraced the most sophisticated and advanced use of plastics and this method of construction was entirely new for production caravans. The sides were a bonded sandwich of three types of plastic and the roof and ends polyester/glass. In 1969 the 12 ft. 13½ cwt Casalette first made its appearance, offering the luxury and equipment to be found in other Carlight models, in a smaller and lighter caravan.

In 1975 the company again became involved in the manufacture of special mobile vehicles. Perhaps the most ambitious project undertaken was the building and fitting out of a 45 ft. mobile operating theatre which was fully equipped with all necessary medical systems to undertake major heart, surgical and dental operations. This vehicle was fully self-contained including its own generating system; this particular vehicle was exported to Saudi Arabia. A second similar vehicle was built for the Ghana Cocoa Marketing Board, together with a number of 20 ft. self-contained clinics, plus special clinics for Nigeria. Carlight have designed a complete range of trailer modules for medical, technical and scientific applications, and another special vehicle has been developed for police and security forces; one of these command/communications vehicles is currently in use with The South Yorkshire Police.

In 1978 consideration was given to the introduction of a new range and shape of caravan to meet the leisure needs of the 1980's and after a considerable period of design and development work, the result was the introduction of the new Commander series. It will be seen from the foregoing that the policy of the company has always been one of progression and introduction of new ideas, but only after extensive testing in the field, and this policy will be continued in the future.

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Carlight and quality

It has always been the policy of Carlight to retain a design and avoid drastic changes. This policy proved its worth with our well known and traditional vee-front lantern roof design which has stood the test of hard consistent usage over a period of more than 35 years since it was first introduced with the famous Colonial model.

After much consideration and detailed designing and planning based on our unequalled and unrivalled experience of caravan and special vehicle manufacture, it was decided that a completely new and even finer caravan should be introduced to meet the leisure needs of the 1980's.

It will be appreciated, therefore, that the introduction of a new Carlight design is a rare occasion indeed and in the new Commander models will be found the quality, fine workmanship and attention to detail which has made Carlight the ultimate in world-wide caravanning for over 50 years. The elegant wedge-shaped exterior design combined with the use of modern materials, advanced technical innovations and the satisfying standard of well known Carlight luxury has culminated in the exciting new Commander series.

Commander 132 (13 ft. 2 berth)

Commander 152 (15 ft. 2 berth)

Commander 154 (15 ft. 4 berth)

Commander 174 (17 ft. 4 berth)
Now in the design stage; to be introduced early 1981.

Top of the page and above:
The old and the new. The first Commander, introduced in 1938 was a trend-setter in its day, but the shape contrasts strongly with the modern lines of its present-day namesake, the 1980 Commander.

Data relating to all models

Detail	Commander 132		Commander 152		Commander 154	
Number of berths	2		2		4	
Length of body	13'2"	4.01m	15'0"	4.57m	15'0"	4.57m
Length interior	12'11"	3.94m	14'9"	4.50m	14'9"	4.50m
Length overall including drawbar	16'9"	5.10m	18'7"	5.66m	18'7"	5.66m
Width interior	6'7⅝"	2.02m	6'7⅝"	2.02m	6'7⅝"	2.02m
Width overall	7'1½"	2.16m	7'1½"	2.16m	7'1½"	2.16m
Height (headroom inside)	6'3½"	1.92m	6'3½"	1.92m	6'3½"	1.92m
Height overall *	8'2½"	2.50m	8'2½"	2.50m	8'2½"	2.50m
Weight ex works approx. *	16.5 cwt	833 kg.	17.5 cwt	889 kg.	17.5 cwt	889 kg.
Gross laden weight *	19.75 cwt	1003 kg.	21.6 cwt	1100 kg.	21.6 cwt	1100 kg.
Towing height to bolt * holes of hitch	13"	33.02 cms.	13"	33.02 cms.	13"	33.02 cms.
Tyre size	175 SR 13 radial		175 SR 13 radial		175 SR 13 radial	
Tyre pressure	35 psi	2.4 bar	35 psi	2.4 bar	35 psi	2.4 bar
Brake size	8"	20 cms.	8"	20 cms.	8"	20 cms.
Corner legs	Brace operated		Brace operated		Brace operated	
Water tank	7½ gals.	34 litres	7½ gals.	34 litres	7½ gals.	34 litres
Gas cylinder capacity	2 x 10 lb.	2 x 4.54 kg.	2 x 10 lb.	2 x 4.54 kg.	2 x 10 lb.	2 x 4.54 kg.
Nose weights	110 lbs.	50 kg.	110 lbs.	50 kg.	110 lbs.	50 kg.

*** These are average figures and can vary slightly between one caravan and another.**