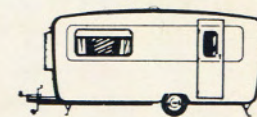
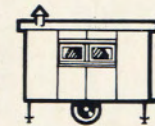




ECCLES

History of

ECCLES



FIRST NAME — AND LAST WORD — IN CARAVANS

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The merger between the two companies has been a happy one, for Sprite was and is the largest manufacturer of touring caravans. Sprite models are inexpensive and hold a very large share of the touring caravan market, primarily through good design and excellent towing characteristics.

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So the two companies were complementary, each holding a pre-eminent position in their particular section of the caravan business.

Under the new arrangement Eccles continued to set the trend in high quality caravans with the introduction in 1961 of entirely new 13 ft. and 16 ft. tourers—the 'Moonstone' and 'Sapphire' 4-berth models.

With exciting contemporary body shapes and re-designed interiors, which nonetheless carried on the Eccles tradition for really functional planning, the new models were an immediate success. They have continued in production with minor changes which included, in 1963, the introduction of a new chassis with independent suspension which improved on their already impressive towing qualities.

As the accolade of good design the 'Sapphire' was awarded in 1963 the coveted Caravan Rally Concours d'Elegance Award (Class B Trade £400-£800).

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a brief history of

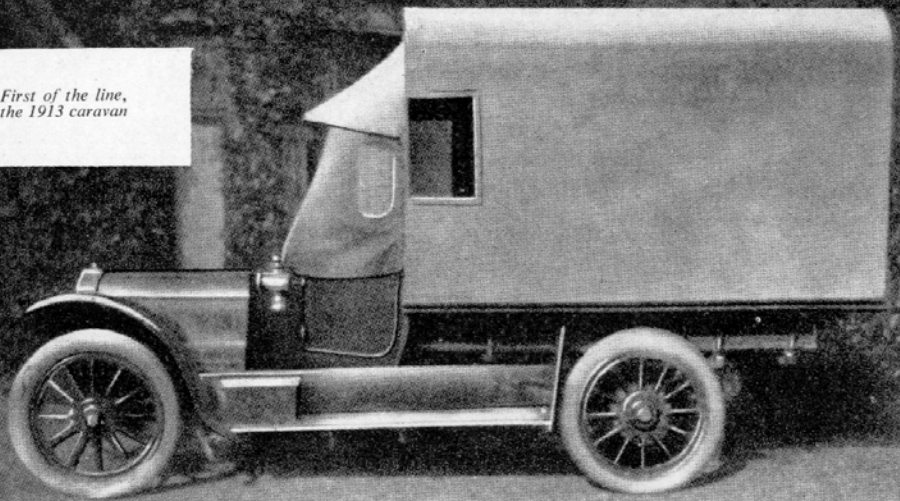
ECCLES

*makers of quality
caravans for over
forty-five years*

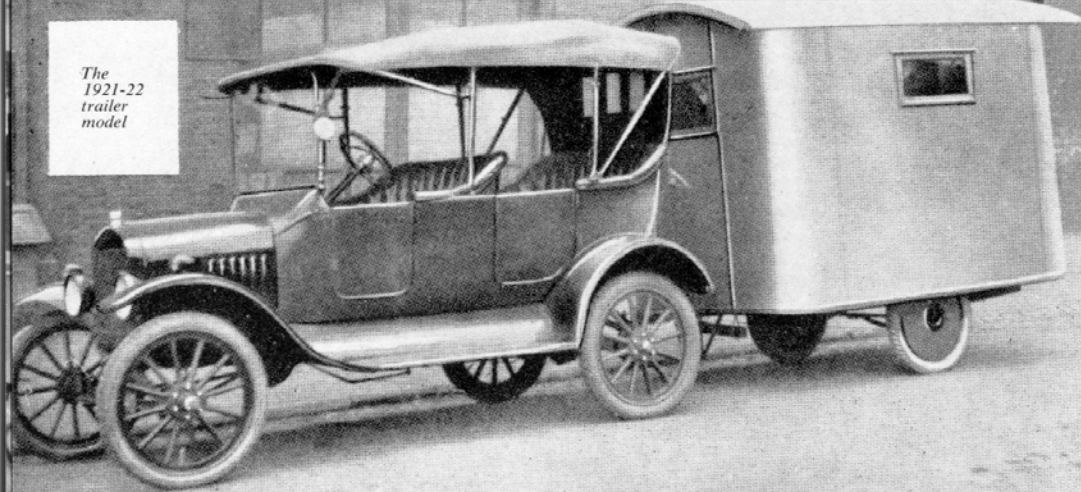
ECCLES CARAVANS LTD

**PINES FACTORY, FORDHAM RD., EXNING
NEWMARKET, SUFFOLK**
Telephone : Fordham (Cams.) 364
Telegrams : Ecclevans, Newmarket

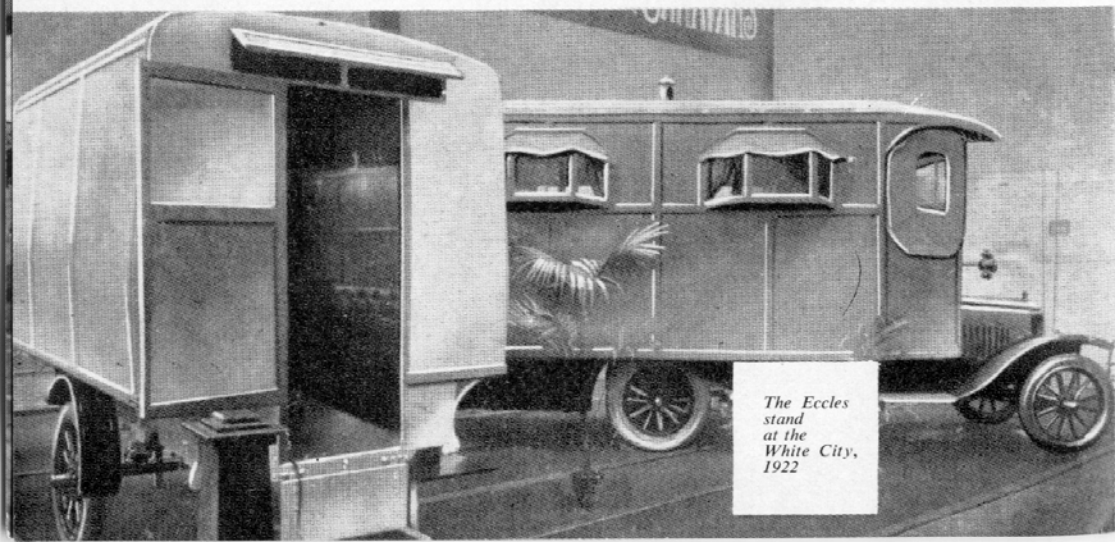
First of the line,
the 1913 caravan



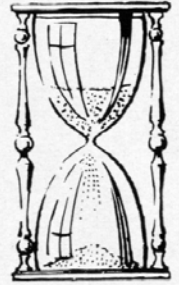
The
1921-22
trailer
model



The Eccles
stand
at the
White City,
1922



How it all began



For the very beginnings of the Eccles caravans dynasty one has to look back to 1915, when Mr. W. A. J. Riley built a caravan body on to a Talbot car chassis, assisted by his son, Mr. W. J. Riley. Undoubtedly one of the first motor caravans ever to be built, this demonstrated tangibly that the basic idea had possibilities.

In 1914 after a descriptive article appeared in *The Autocar*, a Birmingham coachbuilder offered to buy patent rights. Permission was given for development of the design. Shortly afterwards, pressure from Government war work brought caravan projects to an end.

After service with R.F.C. Mr. Riley Junior sought a suitable civilian venture. He and his father decided to provide the capital for expanding a haulage business owned by a Mr. Eccles. 1919 saw the registration of the new concern, Eccles Motor Transport Ltd. The premises, a derelict house and cottages in Gosta Green, Birmingham, were far from substantial. Nor was the fleet of three old Mass tractors in good condition. Somehow the vehicles were kept running and the firm remained in business.

Mr. Riley Senior now declared his intention of building another caravan vehicle like the original. His son, however, supported the trailer type. Trailer ambulances used during the war had convinced him that trailer accommodation held possibilities in civilian motoring.

It was agreed that building should proceed on both types and the back kitchen of the old Gosta Green house was set up as the caravan shop.

The two caravans were completed and since the necessary space was not available at the Motor Show, a nearby garage was rented to exhibit them. They aroused a great deal of interest amongst the public, without bringing the host of orders which had been hoped for. The only firm order was placed by a lady. In response to enquiry she gave her name as "Sybil". When Mr. Riley enquired her surname the lady replied "You put down what I tell you". Hence, the first entry in the order book read: "Sybil, Dowager Viscountess Rhondda."

The enquiries received were the basis of a decision to go ahead with production of 50 trailer caravans. In those uncertain times, a very courageous resolve.

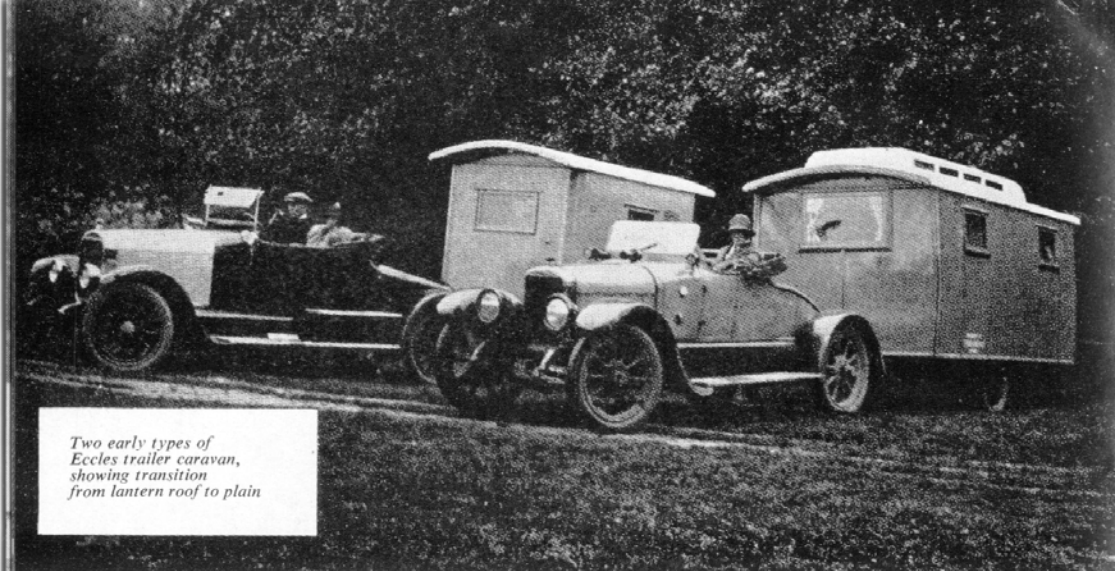
A booklet "The Holiday Problem Solved" was produced, outlining the advantages which the Eccles caravan brought to the motorist. The original price was £300 but eventually this needed to be increased to 300 guineas. The next problem was to sell the output of caravans. For this, Riley Junior was equipped with a 1910 Rover in which he set out to obtain orders.

The sales policy allowed for the appointment of retail distributors. Accordingly, Riley Junior visited garages in every part of the country. He found a great deal of interest, but little business resulted. The sales tours were, however, invaluable in one respect. Living most of his time in the caravans, he gathered unique practical experience which contributed greatly to the eventual reputation which Eccles caravans were to win.

1922 saw Eccles at the Motor Show via the White City overflow. They were at every Motor Show after that, and have exhibited at every Caravan Show since the first one in 1960.

The going was hard in 1922, for Eccles were pioneering the job of making motorists caravan-conscious. Production costs were going up but sales were holding back. Agents who agreed to take caravans on a speculative basis often proved reluctant or unable to accept delivery.

1924 seemed to mark a turning point, for about this time some of the more enterprising agents began exploring the idea of hiring out caravans, eventually a profitable activity for the trade.



Two early types of Eccles trailer caravan, showing transition from lantern roof to plain

The overall situation improved so much that the company purchased four acres of land at Stinchley, Birmingham, and on this a modern single-storey building with a north light roof was erected. The area was 15,000 sq. feet, a considerable advance on the 3,000 sq. ft. of the original Gosta Green premises, which were now sold.

Production continued with the types most in demand. Trailer caravans termed "listed models" were built in series; models were modified to special requirements and caravan bodies were also constructed to fit on to commercial vehicle chassis. Other special caravans were built for fairground and circus clientele.

On all types of trailer caravan there had been up to this time a complication concerning brakes. In the early days a simple solution to braking had been the provision of a motor cycle type, with cable control to allow driver operation. To be legal, however, the braking had to be contrived so as to come into operation simultaneously with the brakes of the towing car. Accordingly, Eccles trailer caravans were equipped with over-run type brakes which seemingly complied with legal requirements.

A contrary opinion was expressed by the police, and it became clear that a test case was in the offing. In 1927 the Honiton police charged a number of Eccles users for having only "over-run" brakes. On October 6th Riley Junior was in the West Country town, faced with the job of supporting his customers' interests as caravan users.

He discovered that the solicitors acting for the defendants were intending to adopt a "sob story" approach, being convinced that their clients were in the wrong. Fortunately, he was able to find a local solicitor who had not so pre-judged the cases. This solicitor, Mr. C. N. Tweed, agreed that the Eccles braking system was not illegal and he made an extremely able presentation of the matter to the Bench. Following a lengthy hearing – and a trial run with a caravan that Mr. Riley had thoughtfully made available – all of the cases were dismissed.

In such manner did Eccles become the major influence in the legalisation of over-run brakes. This type of braking was finally given legal approval nearly ten years later, on March 14th, 1937, the approval extending to a trailer of unladen weight not exceeding one ton.

1928 brought a great increase in business. Demand went up in gratifying degree and a 50 ft. run was added to the factory.

Three years later Eccles entered into another "campaign" on behalf of the caravanners. The Road Traffic Act of 1930 limited caravans to 20 m.p.h. even in unrestricted areas.



History-making picture. The Eccles caravan towed behind a Hillman car in the 1932 Monte Carlo Rally

This old speed limit had long been lifted from private cars and it was of serious concern that the caravan outfit should remain affected.

Under the Act, the Minister of Transport had power to authorise revision. On March 17th, 1931 the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders met Ministry Officials to try and bring about revision of the Act as it affected caravans. Riley Junior, representing Eccles, was perturbed by discovering the deputation was pessimistic about the concession. At a preliminary meeting he told them:

"I have brought with me more than a hundred letters from responsible people, people who drive large cars for towing caravans; directors of well-known firms, titled people and the like, who all write to say that a 20 m.p.h. speed limit is ridiculous. They consider 30 m.p.h. reasonable. Let us, therefore, when we go into see the Ministry Officials, go in knowing what we want, and make a determined effort to get it."

The deputation agreed to this, but the discussion did not follow anticipated lines. Fortunately Mr. Riley knew that one of the principal officials was a keen caravan enthusiast. The letters were given to him and the meeting ended with an assurance of sympathetic consideration.

All caravanners know the result. The legal limit was raised to 30 m.p.h.

In 1932 two major things occurred. The first, an occasion for sadness, was the death of Mr. Riley Senior, after a prolonged illness. Mr. W. J. Riley now became Chairman and Managing Director, and Mr. H. A. Riley, his brother, who was a chartered accountant, joined the Board.

After extensive discussion with Eccles distributors it was decided that some aspects of Eccles production methods could be profitably modified. Result of this was a doubling up of sales over an eighteen month period.

The other event of 1932 was the entry of a Hillman car towing an Eccles caravan in the Monte Carlo Rally. The starting point chosen by the entrants was Glasgow. There were in all 35 British entrants in the "Monte" of that year and conditions were so extreme that only 19 of them completed the Rally to arrive at Monte Carlo. A comparatively high place was obtained in the final results. In the Concours de Confort the outfit gained further merit. Specific praise was given to the appearance and to the construction of the caravan.

Placing among the 35 British competitors was 6th, and in the whole Rally – 35th. This



The 'Nomad Arms' approaching Ghardaia, one of the seven cities of the M'zabs in the Sahara Desert

was the first and only time that a trailer caravan had participated in the Monte Carlo Rally. Mr. Riley was one of the crew in this history-making achievement. He had always believed in the value of demonstrating a caravan's quality in a practical way. In this belief he supported the entry of Eccles caravans in events which tested both the undergear and the coachwork.

The "Monte" was one. Another was a land cruise into the heart of the Sahara Desert. Primary purpose of the test was to judge the performance of a new type of transmission which the Humber Company was thinking of introducing. An Eccles caravan provided comfort during the run and added weight to make the testing more severe.

Christened the "Nomad Arms" this three-berth model was virtually a travelling hotel in miniature. Thousands of miles were covered and the journey lasted several weeks. The tracks followed were either sandy, rutty, stony or potholed. This and the intense heat tested car, crew and caravan alike.

In all the time, the crew found that the caravan met their every need, and not once did attention have to be given to the undergear.

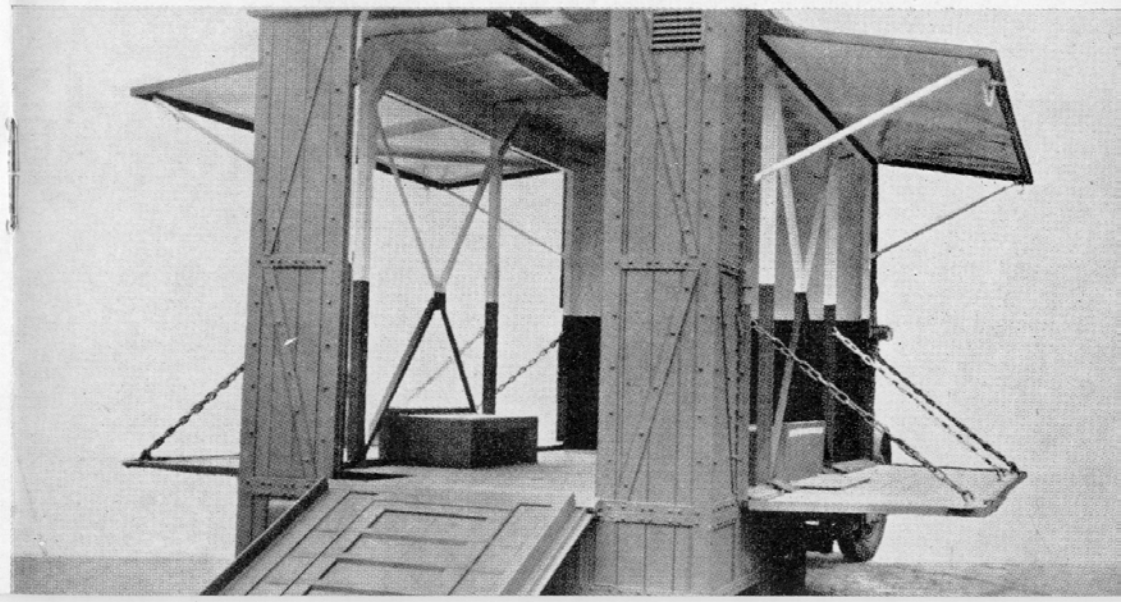
Such publicity and a continually growing reputation had contributed to the steady increase in business that Eccles now enjoyed.

In those years, immediately prior to the outbreak of World War II, there was growing competition in the caravan market. Under such conditions, the Eccles name for excellence in design and workmanship stood the company in good stead. To keep up sales of series-produced models, Eccles opened a showroom at Hendon. Simultaneously a new, popular-priced model was put into production. This, the Eccles 'National' was the first attempt to bring caravanning within reach of average motorists.



Shown above is a special purpose caravan submitted to the War Office in 1937. This was designed to provide working and sleeping accommodation for Staff Officers in the field. An order was eventually placed for caravans of this type

Below . . . a body built specially for testing of jet engines, at a time when the existence of such power units was still highly secret



A fine achievement in design and construction, the 'National' increased Eccles sales by 20 per cent during 1939. Distribution was through both caravan and motor traders, on a sliding scale of discounts.

For Eccles, the situation was bright. But war clouds were gathering and Eccles had already completed War Office orders for trailer bodies, as well as for radio vans and machinery and workshop bodies.

Eccles had also submitted, as an original idea, a trailer providing sleeping and working accommodation for staff officers, to serve as mobile field headquarters. A batch of 40 such caravans was ultimately ordered.

When war broke out, further extensions were under way at the Stirchley factory. These were quickly completed and Eccles began their part in the British war effort.

An early order was for 50 dental clinic vans. Another order was for 200 searchlight bodies. As the pace of the war quickened there came a flood of orders for work, not only in timber but in steel as well. More medical van bodies, searchlight bodies, bodies for Post Office vans and lorries, office vans, N.F.S. towing vehicles, Army fire tenders . . . these were but a few of the things that flowed from the Eccles factory. In addition, many thousands of steel trucks and stillages were made.

With the termination of Government contracts at the end of the war, the immediate problem was how to utilise the increased capacity. Caravans were the obvious thought and authorisation was obtained for the manufacture of 300, to be of one design, suited to post-war conditions.

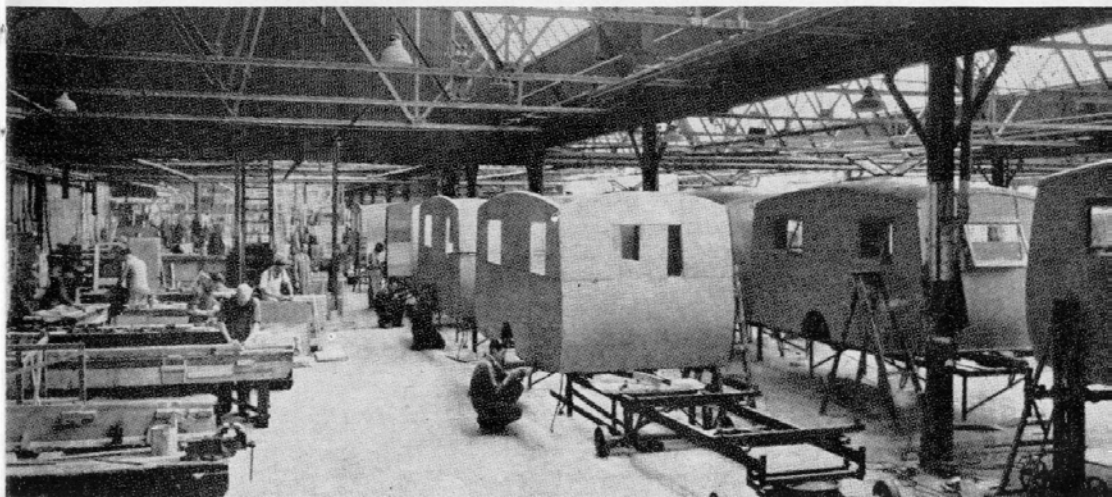
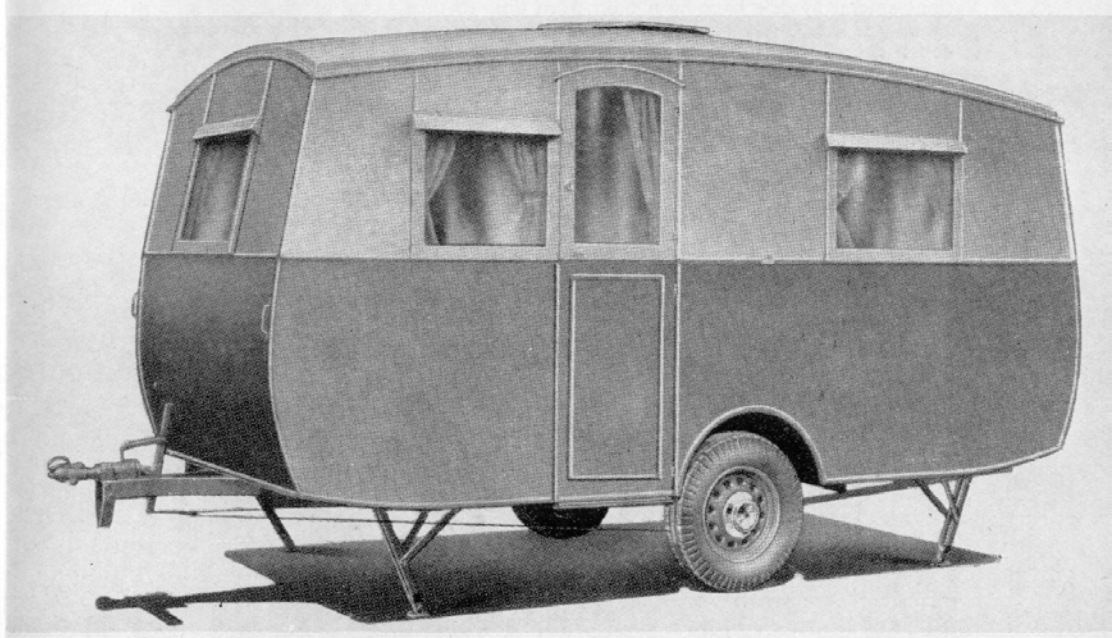
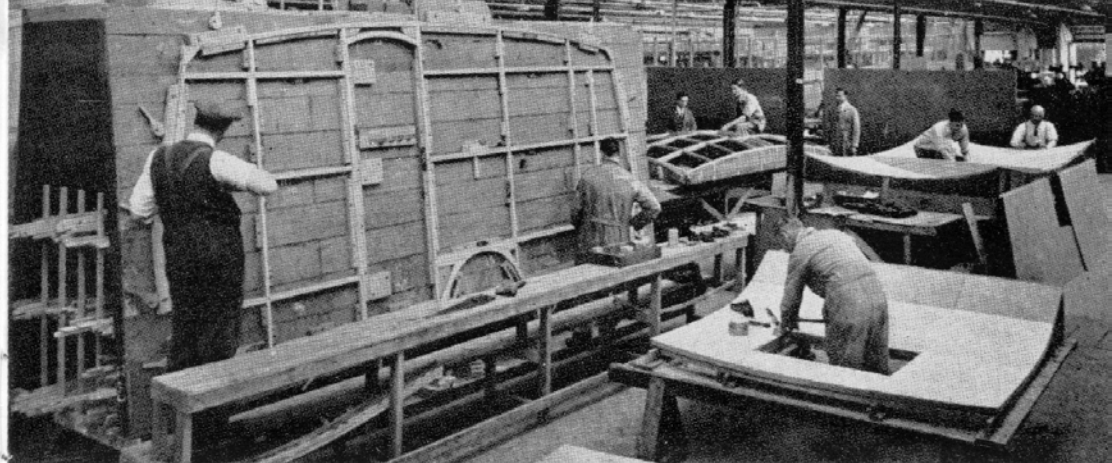
The company's experience of stillage and truck manufacture led naturally to the selection of such products as means of absorbing the remainder of Eccles capacity.

Private exhibitions were held of typical items in this line, meeting with great success. This was the beginning of Eccles entry into mechanical handling, a development which ultimately resulted in the establishment of a separate division to concentrate on this market.

Production of the selected caravan model was meanwhile going forward. Called the 'Enterprise' this proved a ready seller. Spacious, with full headroom, it provided great comfort without frills and luxuries. The policy of concentrating on one type enabled Eccles to give the public high value for money, and helped the company to regain the firm position in the market which it had held prior to the war.

At this time Eccles again entered into "battle" on behalf of caravanners. The matter of liability for purchase tax was unsettled and Eccles took the view that tax on trailer caravans was unjustified, since in their opinion a caravan was not "a vehicle designed for the conveyance of passengers". Eccles therefore evolved a scheme, in conjunction with their legal and financial advisers, in which a caravan purchaser deposited a possible liability for tax, with the understanding that Eccles would refute the contention of the commissioners. This lead was followed by the caravan trade and the procedure was maintained until the anti-tax dispute was finally settled in December, 1946.

1948 saw the introduction of a second post-war Eccles model. This was a 12 ft. design and proved a successful type. The next move was to combine the 15 ft. 'Enterprise' with this 12 ft. model. The result was the 14 ft. 'Alert', which proved to be the most popular model ever produced by the company. So great was demand for the 'Alert' that it remained in production for five years, during which time well over 1,500 were sold.



The illustrations opposite show: the use of jigs in the shell-building section; a close-up of the 'Enterprise'; flow production in action on the assembly lines

Company policy was always to hold and improve Eccles' position in the medium class touring market. In consequence, oversize caravans were never scheduled for regular production series. Aiming at quality, as part of the policy, all the caravan chassis were manufactured within the Eccles factory. These were, of course, tailor-made to suit the various body patterns.

The construction of the bodies featured a high percentage of laminated timber, which was also produced in the factory, from offcuts. An economy measure and a quality safeguard in one.

Production has been rising steadily in the immediate post-war years and from around 1954 Eccles averaged 1,500 caravans a year. These were of all types, from 10 ft. to 22 ft., from lightweight 2/3 berth models to the lavish 'Showman' or 'Traveller' models which retailed at £1,000 or more.

The "Caravan Club" buyer was encouraged and the company was always willing to give regard to the many practical suggestions such customers put forth. Many interior layouts were, in fact, designed with these enthusiasts in view.

Various special models have been built from time to time. One of these was an amphibious type to be used on an expedition to South America. This posed unusual problems in design and construction, but floating tests were carried out and the caravan emerged completely "river-worthy."

Another special was the one made for Paul Delmer. This he used when he toured Europe and America. For Paddy Garrow-Fisher, Eccles provided a modified 20 ft. model, which was towed behind a coach on the London-Calcutta run.

The specially designed models and the modified types all added variety to production life, but the 14-footer was always the bread and butter model. It seemed somehow to be right for Eccles chosen section of the market, and not one was introduced that did not pay its way handsomely.

The system of steel tracks used for body assembly, plus a first-class production team, enabled Eccles to keep three or four different models moving through simultaneously in any week. Production could doubtless have been expanded, but it was felt that this would inevitably have meant some lowering of quality. A possibility that could not be entertained.

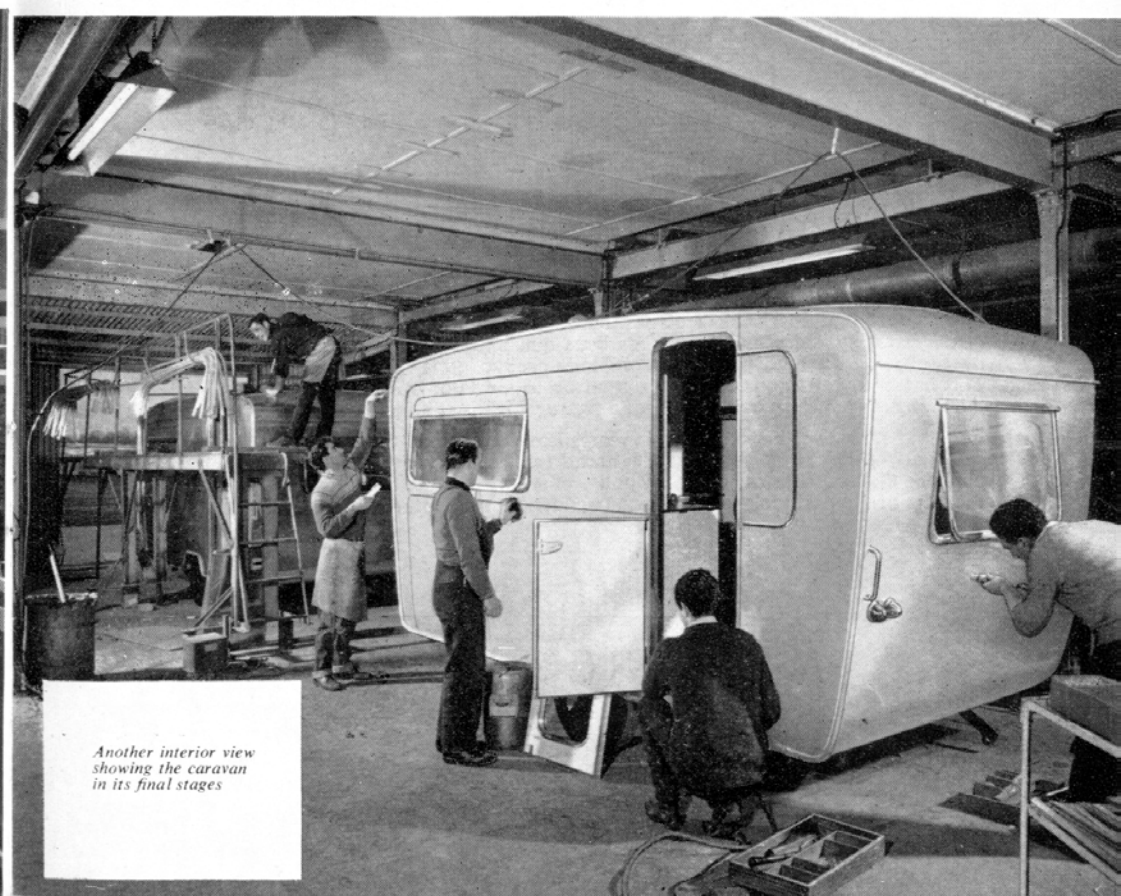
Eccles had always been a trusted name. Technically, the caravans were as far advanced as any competing designs and it is a known fact that breakdowns were practically non-existent. The number of times it was necessary for an Eccles owner to study his guarantee was negligible. And this despite the fact that the greater percentage of Eccles caravans are put to regular use, and are thus subject to constant wear and tear.

Even though production was purposely limited to maintain quality, Eccles' figures make an impressive showing, as is seen in these popular model outputs: 12 ft. 'Coronation', 300 in one season; 16 ft. 'Democrat', 600 in two seasons; 14 ft. 'Landfarer', 1,000 in two seasons; 12 ft. 'Avenger', 600 in two seasons; 20 ft. 'Traveller', 100 a year.

From 1950 onwards between 5 and 15 per cent of output was exported, and special models such as the E.10 were constructed for this market.



*Interior of Eccles
Factory at Newmarket
showing preliminary
construction work*



*Another interior view
showing the caravan
in its final stages*

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