

PLASTOWS COACHES

The ladies are spot on!



Jean, Margaret, and Barbara Plastow.

Our industry is male dominated. There are some very capable women in it, but in positions of authority they are greatly outnumbered. At Plastows Coaches of Wheatley, near Oxford, things are a little different. There, three female generations of the Plastow family, together with transport manager Bernard Seacole, run the business started by Margaret and Harold James (Joe) Plastow.

Margaret has been at Wheatley since 1952 when she and Joe took over a garage on the A40, building it up until the petrol sales were among the highest for any outlet on that road. Initially the coach and taxi, side of things was essentially a sideline but it grew in importance becoming the main activity when a new dual carriageway by-passed Wheatley and petrol sales fell dramatically overnight. Margaret handled all the accounts as well as driving the Armstrong Siddely taxi. Their daughter Jean joined the business in the bitterly cold winter of 1963. She worked alongside her parents, driving a car on school contracts, but it was Joe who was in charge. Margaret recalls, 'He wouldn't let me drive the

coaches, there were no power clutches then.'

Joe's sudden death in 1976, apart from being a great emotional shock to the family, left a vacuum in the business he had led. 'A lot of people told us we wouldn't last six months,' said Jean, adding, 'When we first wanted finance the company were very good, but were also wary that we wouldn't be able to run it after father died.'

They were underestimating the determination of the Plastow ladies, not a particularly wise policy to adopt. Jean and her mother are shy about revealing too much of what they went through in that period, they prefer to keep themselves to themselves, but the fact that the company is still around and in a healthy financial position 16 years later, shows that they did everything they had to. As Barbara, the latest Plastow to enter the company puts it, 'We're a family that, once we get our teeth into it, tend to see it through.'

As Jean was reluctant to be too precise about the role she played in ensuring the company prospered, I asked Ted Newitt, a driver who has worked for the

company on and off since he was 13,40 years ago. He said of her, 'She was brought up with her Dad, she didn't come here as a soft hearted female, she worked damn hard, as hard as any man. There's nothing she hasn't had a go at, changing gearboxes, anything that's needed doing. She's always had the determination to say, if you can do it, so can I.'

Now Barbara is following in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother. After completing their A levels Barbara and her twin sister Margaret both began careers in accountancy. What suited Margaret did not suit Barbara so she gave up number crunching and started helping Jean to run the company. Why did she opt for coaching rather than any other line of work?

'I needed a job with a challenge. It was difficult for Mum to cope with the paperwork and running the business as we got a bit bigger, so it seemed a good idea,' she said. In many ways it wasn't a huge change because the family has always been a close one, and both sisters were used to lending a hand when jobs needed doing.

Since she came she has gradually taken on more and more responsibility, learning about the industry as she goes along. Ted Newitt recalls, 'Barbara came here knowing nothing about the job, but she works extremely hard to keep us out on the road now. She's got most things at her finger tips now.'

Barbara believes in learning from those around her as well as from any other available sources. She has already passed her national and international CPC qualifications which she took by correspondence course with Graham Lewis of Carterton. Bernard Seacole is the named CPC holder, but Barbara's qualifications show her commitment to learning all she can about the job. She has taken and



Operator Focus

passed her class three PSV driving test too, but much of the practical knowledge about the day to day running has been picked up by listening and learning.

She acknowledges the help she has been given by other members of staff. 'We've got senior staff a lot older than me and I've learned a great deal from them. I pick their brains for routes and ideas. When I first came I didn't know how long to allow, but they know how long journeys take. I let them do their jobs - I don't say, 'This can be done on paper.' Couriering has helped me to see what drivers have to put up with.'

I enjoy it, though I don't see it as different to any other job. You take it for granted that you're a bit headstrong and a bit ambitious. It's a lot of hours, and work has to come first, especially for someone of my age. You're working seven days a week in summer. This time of year it's not so bad. I've still got time for a brilliant social life, we're a family that's always worked hard. I'm treated fine, we've a good working relationship.

With a low staff turnover and several drivers who have been with the company for prolonged periods, Piastows is a close knit company. Barbara commented, 'It's very rare that Mum has to become the boss. We all work in together.'

Jean Plastow recognises that with the relatively low wages that prevail in the industry it is inevitable that drivers will come and go. She added, 'We've never fired anybody. There's only been one driver we wouldn't welcome back.'

Jean is very pleased with



One of five Piaxton Supreme bodied Ford R1114s owned. Piastows find Ford spares are still relatively easy to obtain.

the job her daughter is doing and commented, 'We're running a lot smoother since Barbara took over the paperwork, she's more than capable.* Her next task is installing a computer to handle accounts, planning, routes and word processing. 'I'll be obsolete next,' said Jean gleefully. She claims to want to retire early but Barbara says, 'she'll never retire.'

With eight licences and nine coaches, the fleet relies on a mixture of school contracts for Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire County Councils and private hire to keep busy. There is also a Volvo saloon used as a private hire car. Piastows don't advertise anywhere other than Yellow Pages, except for the occasional sponsorship of local club events. Most private hire is generated locally, and business comes in by word of mouth. A lot of holiday work is done for groups, although the severe drop in the number of tourists last year, as a result of the

Gulf War, meant that this kind of work was severely reduced in 1991.

Specialising in trips for senior citizens, Barbara does a lot of background work to provide something they will really enjoy. Apart from regular bookings, an invitation for Barbara to be a top table guest at one local club's annual dinner is evidence that the service is appreciated. She commented, 'If you get too big you lose the personal touch. No end of clients come back because they know if they have a problem, we'll sort it out. They pop in for a cup of tea and a chat'

'We've no programme of our own yet, but we hope to expand into it,' said Jean. 'Now that Barbara has her feet under the table, she's looking for new challenges. We hope to start this year and develop it, probably mainly to UK destinations.*

Plastow's first coach was a Dennis Lancet with a five cylinder engine and half cab



The five Piaxton Supreme bodied Ford R1114s.

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7Ns is the oldest coach in the current tied.

coachwork with big heaters in the back. It was followed by the first full fronted Leyland in the area, and a Daimler but it was AECs which were Joe's preference. The acquisition of Parslows of Garsington in 1962 brought a couple of lightweights into the fold, but no-one can remember whether they were Bedfords or Austins.

Before a move towards heavyweights which began three years ago, the company had standardised on Fords. Of the nine vehicles owned today, six are Fords, the latest being a 1983 Paramount 3200. The flagships are a pair of Paramount 3500 Volvo B10Ms and warifcsAqps.

there is a simlariy bodied DAF MB. Every coach in the fleet has Plaxton coachwork because the marque is preferred to Duple, the spares are easy to obtain and Plax- tons are good sellers on the secondhand market in practice, most coaches joining the fleet enjoy long stays, being cascaded from front line work to contracts as time goes on. All are 53 seaters though one of the Volvos can be altered to 49 and toilet if required.

Family preference is for autumn tint interiors and light coloured floors, greys and black floors being avoided wherever possible. To match this the drivers all have brown blazers and beige shirts. They're ambassadors for the company, it's nice to see them going out looking smart,* said Barbara.

'I've always been lucky to buy vehicles from good operators,' said Jean, to which Barbara added, 'But you're always careful, you don't rush in.' The Volvos came from Pattersons of Selly Oak and Birds of Hunstanton

and the latest of the Fords came from Mick Horton of Ripley. In the past Jean and Margaret have made the decisions about new purchases, but Barbara has a look too. If any finance is required it is always arranged before a vehicle is looked at rather than afterwards.

The plan is to standardise on Volvos in time, another with either Plaxton or Jonck- heere coachwork will be added to the fleet before the new season. We'll be looking for something three or



The newest of Me Fonts recfewes attention ht the

four years old. Another new development on which the family is agreed is a move back into the minibus market, probably with a Mercedes.



Cce of the Fonts shorn off the whih, cream ■ and orange Kvery.



The premise* Wheatley, near Orford.

A two bay workshop with pit and driver's rest room attached was erected about ten years ago. Permission to build it was obtained with help from COSIRA, the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas. It is the domain of Leslie, who took his apprenticeship with the company after joining them from school. The emphasis is on preventative maintenance and is reflected in both the appearance of the fleet and the rarity of breakdowns. Jean commented, 'Until the DAP was hit by someone at the end of last year, we'd never had a prohibition. We keep on top of maintenance, anything a driver reports is fixed straight away.' Jean has been told by her tyre representative that she changes the coach tyres too often, but she prefers to be



A private hire car it operated and may be joined by a motorist in

sure everything is safe.

"We've never broken down anywhere and not been able to get help, so we help anyone who breaks down around here? it's not good for the industry to have people stood on the side of the road.' said Jean. Though they have been members of BCC for four years, Plastow's are not members of the BCC Mutual Aid scheme though they plan to join. Of the BCC she said, We've not needed their help much, but when we have they have been very good.'

Plastows have never sought publicity and were surprised when I approached them about compiling this article. 'I think we're a run of the mill firm,' said Jean, "I don't see that we're any different to anyone else, we all have our struggles.'

The recession might be biting our toes but at least everything in the yard's paid for. It's very competitive at the moment' Though last year wasn't very good, everything is on schedule this year. Asked about expansion the family were unanimously in agreement with Jean, 'We don't want to be any bigger, we want to update the fleet and keep giving the service.'



The newest vehicle in the Plastovrs fleet it this Volvo B7OH Phrtoo Paramount 3500 which was acquired from Pattersons Coaches of SaUy Oak.