

Engineering

Safety and reliability were always the watchword at Epsom Coaches, right from the very beginning, when the founder Roddy Richmond, used his skills as an engineer to look after the fleet. In those days however, it was also necessary for the driver, to be capable of carrying out on the road repairs. The roads were poorly surfaced (not much has changed!) and that took its toll on the early Charabanc's. Fuel was obtained from chemists and brakes, such as they were, needed to be regularly adjusted. Add in the oil lamps and it can be seen, that drivers had much to do in those days.

As the company expanded, Roddy took on mechanics, to look after the vehicles, both coaches and horse boxes. Not only did they look after the fleet, but also offered the services of a general garage, repairing and servicing cars and local tradesman's early motor vehicles.

The first workshop, was in a large shed, situated where Epsom Library now stands. There are no interior photographs, but the entrance can be seen, in this picture, with Roddy Richmond and a young Roy Richmond standing by the latest covered saloon coach. Behind the workshop, stood a larger building, backing onto the railway embankment where the fleet was housed. Nearby were Wernhams Blacksmiths, convenient for heavy duty repairs.



Entrance to the High Street Workshop

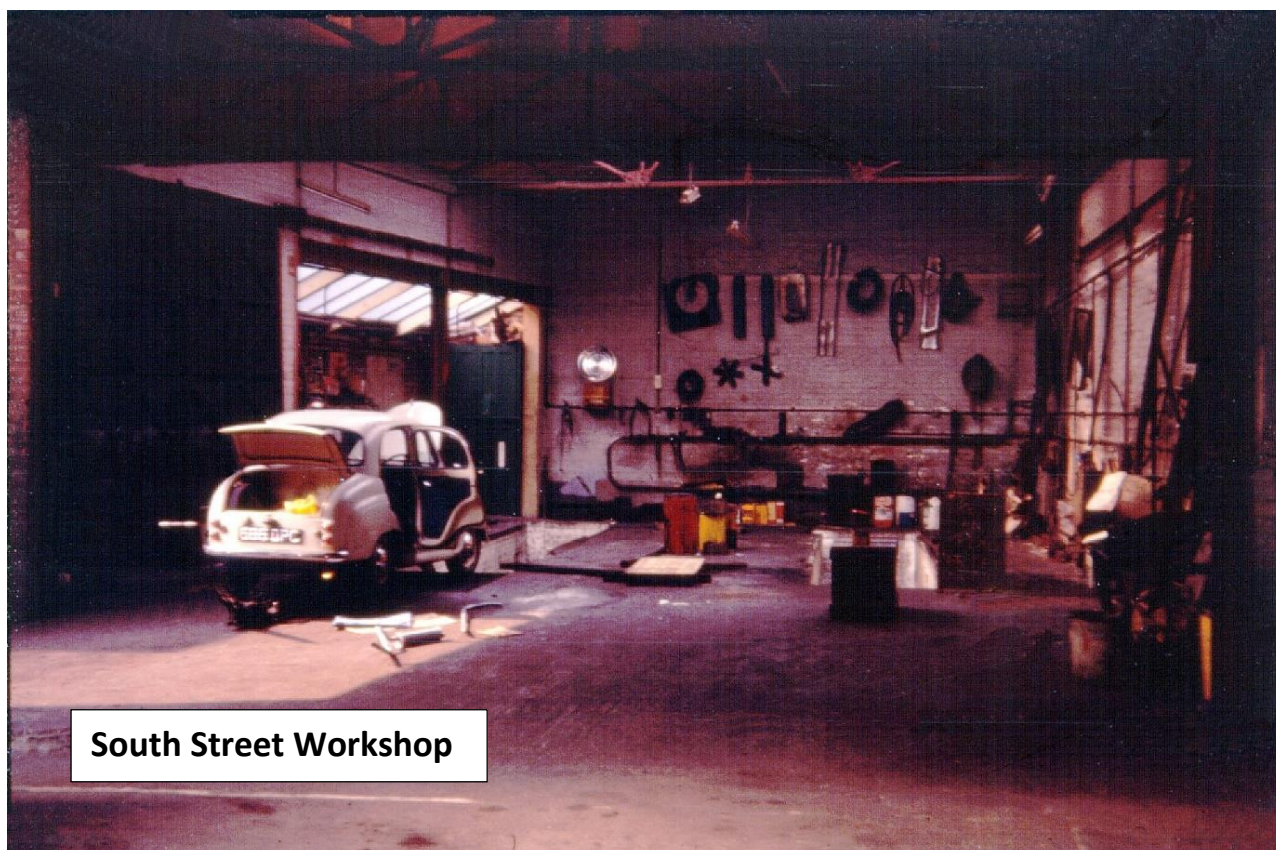
1933 - The move to 37 South Street

In 1933, the company moved up the road, to South Street, where they established a two-bay workshop and a stores area, with two inspection pits. If you were to go to the stage door of Epsom Playhouse, you can still see one wall of the workshop, backing onto the shop wall. The entrance to the workshop, was to the left of the main entrance of the garage, off South Street.

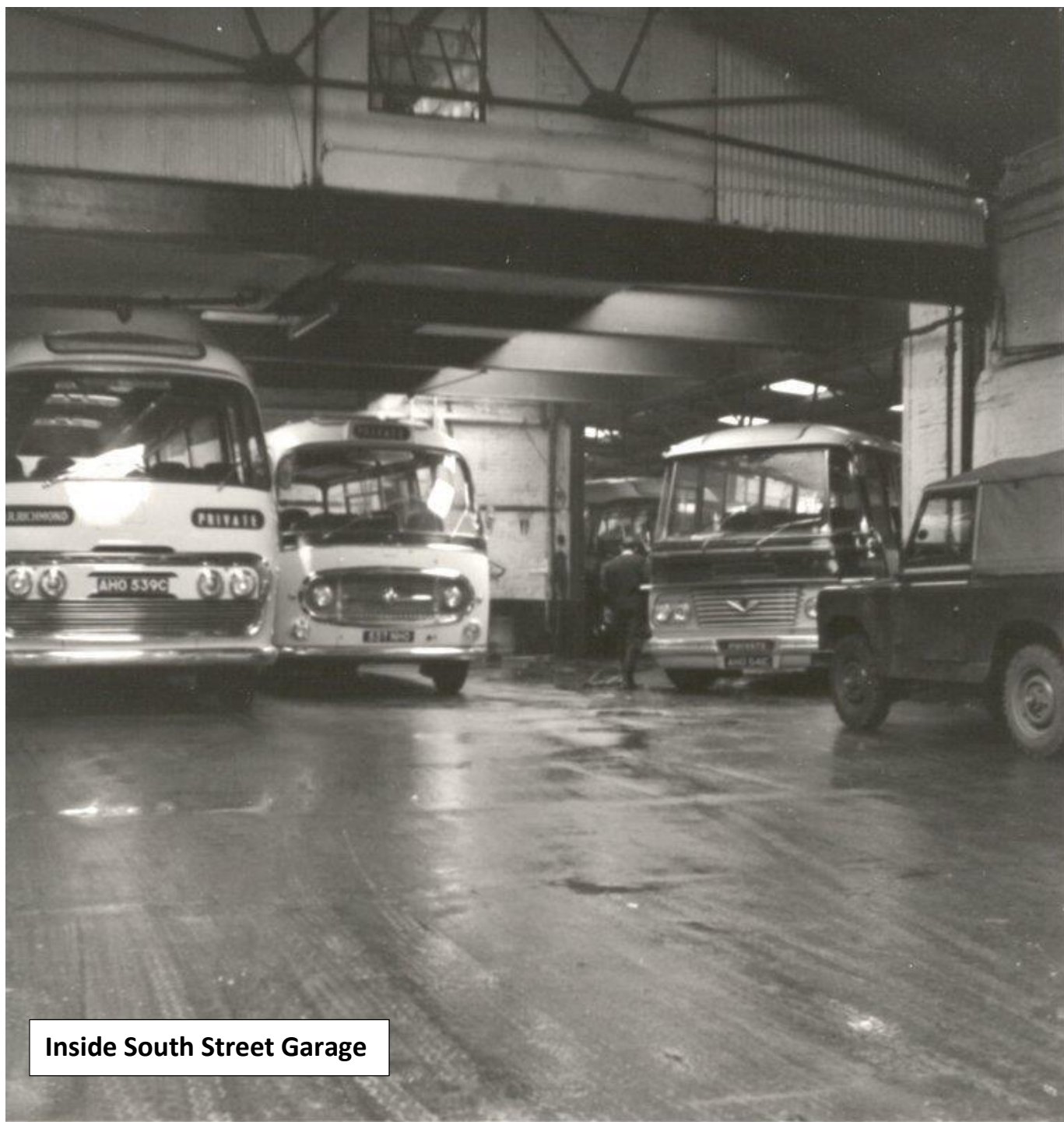
This workshop was in use until 1971, when the company moved again, to the new Longmead Estate. At that stage, the company had a fleet of 30 coaches, so the South Street facilities were starting to struggle to cater for the larger fleet and as the physical size of the coaches increased, parking also became a problem, as vehicles had to be reversed in, causing traffic problems in South Street.



Entrance to the South Street Garage



South Street Workshop



Inside South Street Garage

As the fleet grew, space was taken in the car park behind the garage and part of the fleet was parked at the Company's garage, off the Guildford Road, in Lower Bookham, acquired in 1951. Ivy Cottage behind the garage was also acquired, providing much needed space.

Maintaining coaches and horse boxes was a heavy job, with regular maintenance to ensure reliability, but most importantly, safety. Vehicles were becoming more durable and the company always specified, luxuries such as heaters, armrests and sun roofs for those hot summer days. In those days, these were optional extras, even in the fifties. Prior to that, they were not available, other than the ventilation provided by an open top charabanc, which were largely superseded by covered saloon coaches in the late twenties.



Inside South Street Garage



Inside South Street Garage

1971 - The move to Longmead

Unlike South Street, the Longmead Garage was purpose built for the company at a cost of £68,000, providing under cover accommodation for the whole fleet. A 3-bay workshop with inspection pits able to accommodate the longest coaches and a body shop for repairs to the coachwork of the fleet and those of other operators, was provided. It was state of the art and reported at the time, to be “the best such facility in the UK coach industry”. However, such was the increase in the fleet, it was already proving to small and would see considerable expansion over the years, to cater for a fleet, that eventually grew to 150 buses and coaches.

There have been three workshops at the Longmead site, the first built as part of the original development in 1971, comprising three inspection pits, with a connecting pit and workbenches built in. Each pit was also equipped with rolling jacks and compressed air piped to each of the bays. Lubricants were also piped to each bay, from tanks contained in the stores area with a working area to build up engines, gearboxes and axles, all done in house. In an attached bay, but originally without an inspection pit, the separate Bodyshop was established, equipped to re-paint and repair the company's fleet.



Longmead Workshop Under Construction 1971

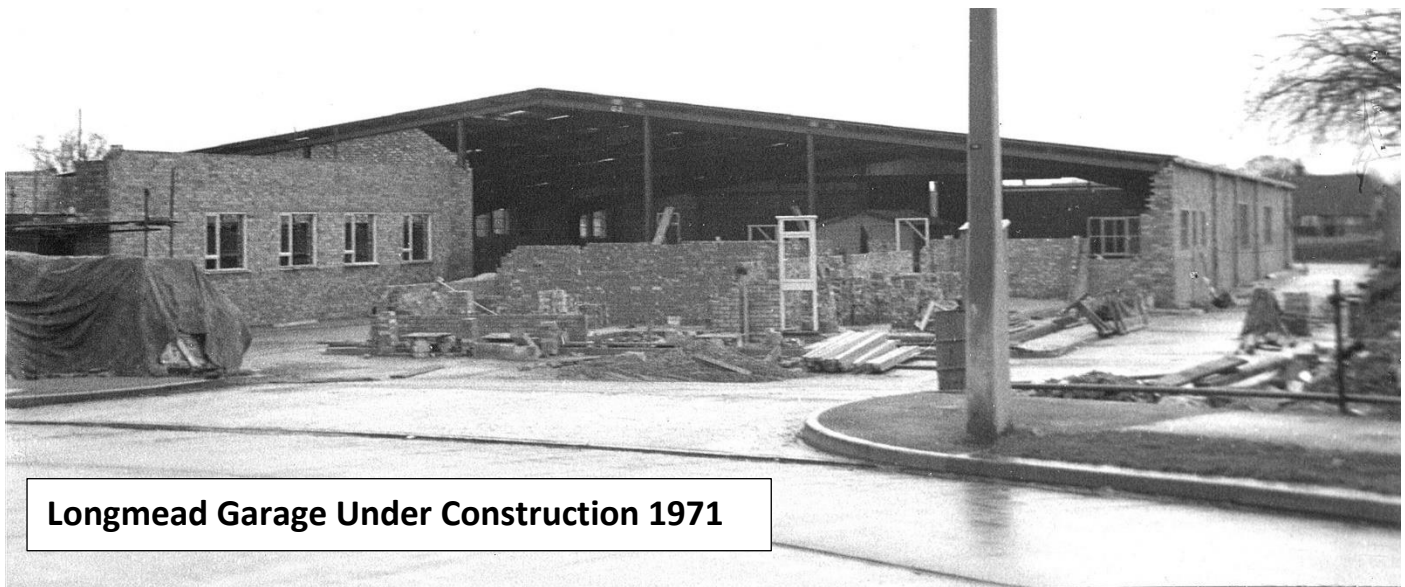
The workshops had the benefit of oil-fired central heating, with a dedicated engineers rest room. Such luxury after South Street! The workshop area was accessed off Blenheim Road and the site faced the Paragon Sheet Metal Works. A company with which Epsom Coaches had a cordial relationship, as the first residents of the expanded Longmead Industrial Estate. Accessed via the adjacent service road, was Heat Treatments Ltd, a company that specialised in specialist heat treatments of metals. Epsom Coaches later acquired the Heat Treatment site and converted their building into a workshop.

The picture below, shows the Bodyshop under construction, later to become the company's famed Departure Lounge.



Longmead Bodyshop Under Construction 1971

The refuelling of the fleet was catered for with a 6,000 (28,000 litre) gallon underground fuel tank and a pump located at the rear of the new garage building. Vehicles could drive right round the garage originally, but later extension of the bays to cater for ever increasing coach lengths, took away the access road adjacent to the footpath, leading to West Street.



Longmead Garage Under Construction 1971

For the first time, Epsom Coaches, had a machine to wash vehicles, using a chemical rinse to remove dirt before being washed off with fresh water. This wasn't hugely successful and in 1979, was replaced with a rotary brush wash. One of several that kept the fleet clean over the years.



Ultra-Sonic Vehicle Wash 1971

This view is looking towards Blenheim Road and the Paragon Sheet Metal Works, replaced by a Rover Car dealership, but following their demise, a builder's merchant now occupies the site.

By 1979, the fleet had grown, as had the coaches, with 12 metre vehicles now permitted. The decision was taken, to invest over £250,000 to make the garage wider, with longer bays enabled on both sides of the garage. These bays later accommodated 13 metre coaches. In addition, a new double bay Bodyshop was built at the back of the garage, freeing up the original Bodyshop for mechanical repairs. At the same time, an additional inspection pit, was installed in this bay, bringing the number of pits up to four. An additional 33,000 litre fuel tank was installed underground, and two brand new fuel pumps were installed, with a state-of-the-art fuel monitoring system. At the same time, the adjacent patch of ground was acquired, linking up with the service road and set out as a staff car park.



Inside the Garage 1973



The Original Garage Frontage in 1971

Note this tranquil scene in the Longmead Estate. This road now leads directly to the Amenity Refuse Centre and is heavily used. The grass verges have long gone.



Workshop 1971



Bodyshop 1971

The company continued its considerable expansion, moving into bus services in 1986, when the coach fleet stood at over 50. With bus operation, the Engineering department moved to 7 day working to cover the more intense servicing requirements of a bus fleet.

Coaches were becoming not only longer, but higher. The company had for many years, restricted new vehicle purchases to a maximum of 3.2metres high, given vehicles over that height could not be accommodated on the right-hand side of the garage where the bays had been extended, back to the adjacent footpath. This policy changed, with the purchase of 3.5-metre-high Volvo/Plaxton coaches, from 1983. Whilst these could only be parked on the left-hand side of the garage, there was very good adherence to this rule and no coach roofs were sliced off! The extra height, however, was at the very limits of the ceiling height in the workshops, so jacking up had to be very carefully controlled. The coach lockers had become much larger and could not be raised, other than in the middle bay of three. This to enable access to the mid-engine Volvo. Buses were initially mid-engine'd but later front and rear engine configurations demonstrated the limitations of the 1971 workshop. A further problem was leaking inspection pits, which were eventually rebuilt.

The chance to acquire the adjacent Heat Treatment works came in 2004, when Epsom Coaches seized the opportunity to acquire the third of an acre site, for parking, but also seeing the potential in converting the heat treatment building for a new workshop, able to accommodate double decker vehicles. Whilst there was no intention at that stage to operate such, it was opportune as the company's first double deck buses arrived just three years later!

After a £300,000 refurbishment, the engineering department moved into their new home, although the original workshop was still available. The new workshop had no pits, instead mobile column lifts, which were originally scorned by the engineers, who at that time had only worked with inspection pits. However, within weeks, the pits were hardly used. The lifts were found to be far more flexible and adjustable to the individuals height!



Part of Longmead Workshop pictured in 1997



The company had a rolling road brake tester, sited in the garage building, which wasn't ideal. However, the new workshop building enabled a new brake tester to be installed in the new building, freeing up space in the garage.

The new workshop building was opened by the then Traffic Commissioner for London and the South East, Chris Heaps. However, the building was to have a relatively short life, as plans were later revealed to rebuild the Longmead site, to accommodate a fleet that now totalled almost 90 vehicles.



In 2009, the site was at its limits and the original buildings were increasingly expensive to maintain. It was decided to go ahead with a £2.2million redevelopment of the Longmead site. The quest was to have capacity for up to 130 vehicles (eventually 150 accommodated), by making better use of the space and the acquisition of more land to the rear of the site, into the adjacent field.

The redevelopment was carried out in three distinct phases, with the original garage demolished first, whilst still providing for accommodation of the fleet overnight. At the same time, the 1979 Bodyshop was demolished. A new workshop stretching the length of the site, behind the original office block, was built. This provided for a 6-bay workshop, plus a dedicated commercial paint booth. This bright and airy space had more room and vehicles could access at any time. Interestingly, the original garage wall was retained and can still be seen from the public footpath behind. For the first time since 1979, it united the body shop with the engineering section, all working within the same building. It also had the advantage of linking the offices to the Engineering section, vastly improving communication. Following completion, the Engineers moved to the third workshop on the Longmead site and the 2004 building was demolished, along with the 1971 workshop. Its pits being filled in, no doubt to be discovered by archaeologists in the future! The 1971 Bodyshop bay survived however, as it housed the company's Departure Lounge and Heritage centre, which was also refurbished with air conditioning being installed. Used by its departing holiday customers, it also provided the venue for many special occasions over the years. The vehicle wash bay, was incorporated into the complex, providing for the first time, under cover vehicle and chassis washing, for year-round use.

With no garage building restrictions and flexibility to park vehicles across the increased area, eventually 150 vehicles were parked on the site of now, a little over 2 acres.

The new workshop was completely re-equipped, with lifts in all bays, a unique dust extraction system and excellent welfare facilities. It also enjoyed a mezzanine and heavy storage and plant area, along with air-conditioned offices and stores. Once again, the company could boast of the best operating centre in the UK bus and coach industry.



The new workshops pictured on completion in 2010

At this stage, the company had an engineering team of 24 people. In addition, external contractors took care of, CCTV, Air-conditioning, on road repairs and cleaning of the fleet.



The spacious workshops opened in 2010

A great deal had changed since Mr Richmond, brought and maintained his first coach. Through the years, vehicles have become more sophisticated, nowadays relying as much on an engineer's skills with a laptop as a spanner. However, in all the 97 years of Epsom Coaches, they led the field in engineering excellence, enjoying an enviable record for safety and reliability, firstly under Roddy Richmond, then his son Roy, with the engineering responsibility falling on Roddy's Grandson, Andrew, throughout the seventies, before allocating responsibility to the talented engineering management team, who continued the good work started way back in 1920. In 1990, the company were formally recognised as holders of the longest continuous Operators Licence in the London and South East region having held the licence under the name of H.R.Richmond Ltd, since licencing was introduced in 1933. This continued until the company finished in June 2017, when the operator name was changed to Quality Line Transport Ltd.

**For more information about the Longmead re-development,
please see the "Building for the Future" time line**





Vehicle and Chassis Wash 2010



**This feature is dedicated to all the Engineers
who were the backbone of Epsom Coaches reputation**