

WRIGHTS GARAGE KEYWORTH

The history of a village family firm



By Bob Hammond and Stephen Wright



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During most of the past hundred years which have seen vast changes in Keyworth, one of the constants has been Wrights Garage. On 1 April 2008 this ceased to be so: all the land on Selby Lane belonging to the Wright family was sold to a development company, William Davis Ltd, and the garage, one of the oldest family businesses in the village, changed hands to trade under a new Name, Keyworth Garage Ltd. It is appropriate therefore to write the story of Wrights Garage in 2008, for although it has had a constant presence on Selby Lane since the early 1920s, its roots go further back and it has changed since that time almost as much as the village itself.

The Wrights' connection with Keyworth can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century: Joseph Wright, born at Stanton-on-the-Wolds in 1843, moved to Keyworth as a young man to marry Fanny Richards and become a framework knitter. The couple had eleven children, one of whom, Samuel, was born in 1864 with a disability which prevented him following his father into the hosiery business because he could not operate a knitting frame. Fortunately he had sufficient wit and initiative to apply himself to another trade; indeed, the handicap proved to be a blessing in disguise, because by the time Samuel was in his twenties domestic framework knitting was a dying industry in Keyworth and elsewhere. The trade he took up was that of a licensed hawker, and in retrospect one can see here the origins of the future garage: it prompted him to take an interest in vehicles to carry his wares to people's houses, an interest which in turn led his son into one of the great growth industries of the twentieth century - motor vehicles.

The 1891 census shows Samuel living on Nottingham Lane (now Road) with his wife, Maria, their infant son George, and Samuel's brother Albert. He started hawking by carrying a basket of items for sale round the village on foot; later he acquired a pony and cart. By 1897 he and his family had moved from Nottingham Lane to what later became the Forge on Town Street (now number 39, Main Street). They were still there by the time of the 1901 census, with the family now including six children. They then moved to Blind Lane (the building that in 2008 is a Police Contact Point). Here

Samuel established a shop - a general store selling hardware, groceries, drugs and haberdashery. He also sold apples from the orchard on his property (which came to be known as Wright's Orchard), and bought rabbit skins for a penny each from villagers, reselling them in Nottingham. More significantly as a pointer to the future garage, he continued with the pony and cart on his hawker's round, and expanded this side of the business by purchasing a wagonette and team of horses to carry people (at nine old pence a trip) and goods to and from Nottingham.

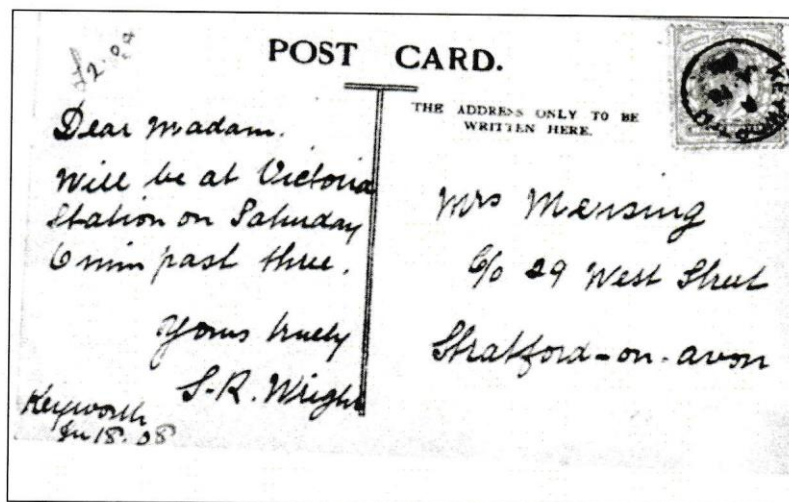


Figure 1. Postcard sent by Sam Wright to a client.

One such trip is recorded on a post card dated 18 August 1908, addressed to a client in Stratford-on-Avon, in which Samuel lets her know he will be at Victoria station to meet her at 6 minutes past three on Saturday, and presumably bring her back to Keyworth (see figure 1). At one time he had four horses which were stabled off Blind Lane. Nonetheless, Samuel remained primarily a retailer; it was his son, George, who really founded the garage.

George began his career by helping his father in the shop and on his rounds, but he had more ambitious plans. He bought fifty shillings' worth of bicycle equipment from a wholesaler in West Bridgford (inner tubes, patches, connections etc.) and began

mending punctures on the kitchen table in his parents' house. However, he also saw how motorised vehicles were beginning to displace the horse and cart or wagonette, and persuaded his father to part-finance his early move into this field. Somewhere between 1912 and 1914 he bought his first charabanc - a twelve-seater with folding canvas roof together with pneumatic front and solid rear tyres; it was not in good condition and was soon sold. Then, in 1914 he purchased his first taxi (a Sunbeam) from a person who also taught him to drive it. It had an open front and rain beat on the driver's legs. Six months later, with the onset of World War I, George joined the army as a dispatch rider, where he no doubt gained experience of both driving and vehicle maintenance and repair. The Sunbeam stood idle for the duration; when he tried to start it again after the war, it back-fired, caught fire and burned out.

But George was not put off: he replaced the Sunbeam with a small, open-topped wagonette (today we would call it a mini-bus). However, it soon developed a leak in the radiator which he was advised to repair with oatmeal! Not only did this fail to stop the leak, but resulted in the radiator frequently boiling over, gaining for the car the name 'Chuffing Billy'. It was sold after six months. Another early purchase was a narrow bus, with room for seven passengers on each side, facing each other and nicknamed 'The Orange Box'. Thereafter, George bought a succession of second-hand vehicles, ran them for a few months and then broke them up for spares. He had married Laura Wade in 1916 and the couple settled into a cottage on Selby Lane (later numbered 28, when houses were given street numbers); when their first child, George, was born, they moved next door to number 26, which remained the family home for the next 23 years. From here he sold petrol, repaired cars and mended cycles in sheds beside the pavement. He also obtained a franchise to sell Raleigh cycles, with another shed acting as showroom.

The next step was to sell second-hand cars: he became an agent for Shippies, gaining a commission on each sale. His first customer was Claude Pike, the co-proprietor of Pike and Gunn on Factory Yard, now renamed The Courtyard, (off Main Street), the last hosiery business in Keyworth. He also began to sell petrol in two-gallon tins - there were only a few car-owners in the village,

and they tended to use their vehicles for short distances only, so sales were limited, averaging out at about six to eight tins, or under twenty gallons a week. The petrol was delivered to people's houses and cost ten old pence a tin (Shell) or eight pence (BP). Yet another venture was the recharging of accumulators for the newly invented wireless.

George now had several strings to his bow, though all were on a small scale: he sold cars, ran bus and taxi services, sold petrol, charged accumulators, and repaired both cars and bicycles - some of the latter on the kitchen table which he would have to evacuate when his wife wanted to set it for a meal. This part of the work was truly a domestic industry: it had first been carried on in his parents' home, and now in his own! Moreover, at that time, the early 1920s, far more people than today used cycles and their sale and repair formed an important part of the business.

One day a Shell representative asked George if he would like a tank and hand-pump installed - there was no electricity in Keyworth in the 1920s. It would need a minimum through-put of 200 gallons a week, more than ten times his sales at the time. However, George was looking to the future and took the tank, which he installed underground next to a wooden lean-to beside his house (P1 in Figure 3). He erected a shed and transferred cycle repairs to it from his home, no doubt to the relief of his wife, and also used it to store equipment; but cars were repaired outside (see Figure 5), or, in poor weather, they were driven to one of the empty buildings on his father's premises on Blind Lane, and worked on there.

Meanwhile, cars and coaches were bought and hired out, though the sale of cars was discontinued. George's wife helped by serving customers from the front downstairs room of their house, next to the workshop and petrol pump. But as Laura's growing family demanded more of her attention, the first employee from outside the family was appointed in 1923: a boy called Stan Armstrong, who turned the petrol pump handle, cleaned bicycles and helped with repairs.

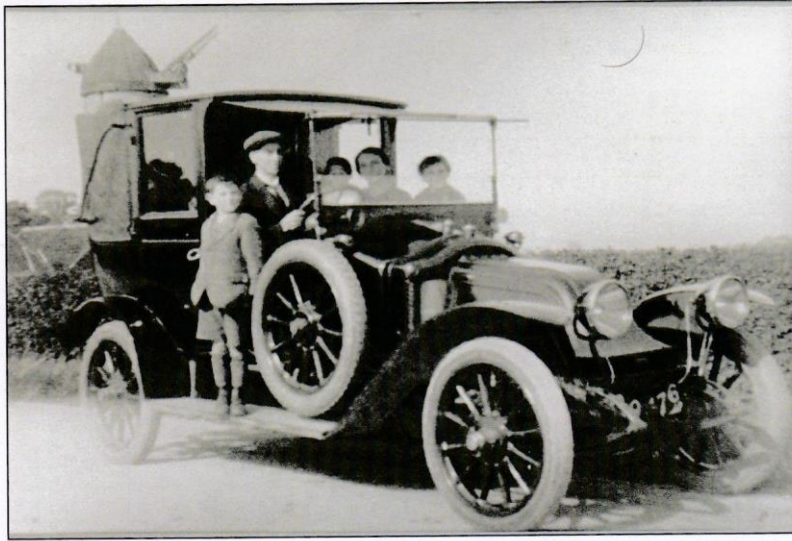


Figure 2. **The Wright Family in 1926** on Selby Lane near the present corner of Wolds Drive in their Renault. Note the top of the windmill behind the car. Left to right: George Junior, George Senior, Bernard, Mrs. George Wright Senior (Laura), Charlie, (John was not yet born). *Photo from Stephen Wright Collection*

He was later replaced by Bob Davis, who was employed full-time for 5 shillings (25p) a week, together with board and lodging, suggesting that he was recruited from outside Keyworth.

During the 1930s the number of people in Keyworth who could afford a car increased slowly as the village population grew. Many of the new settlers commuted into Nottingham, of whom some were fairly prosperous and could afford a car, while a greater number probably had a wide network of friends, leisure and business connections which gave them an appetite for travel. George recognised that they represented a growing demand for both taxis and coach hire. He parked his vehicles on his father's property on Blind Lane - behind the shop, approximately where Dennis Pitchfork now has his business. Here he built a garage, and bought the site some twenty years later, after his father had died.

As the household and the business both expanded, the small family home next to the workshops and petrol pump, still used in

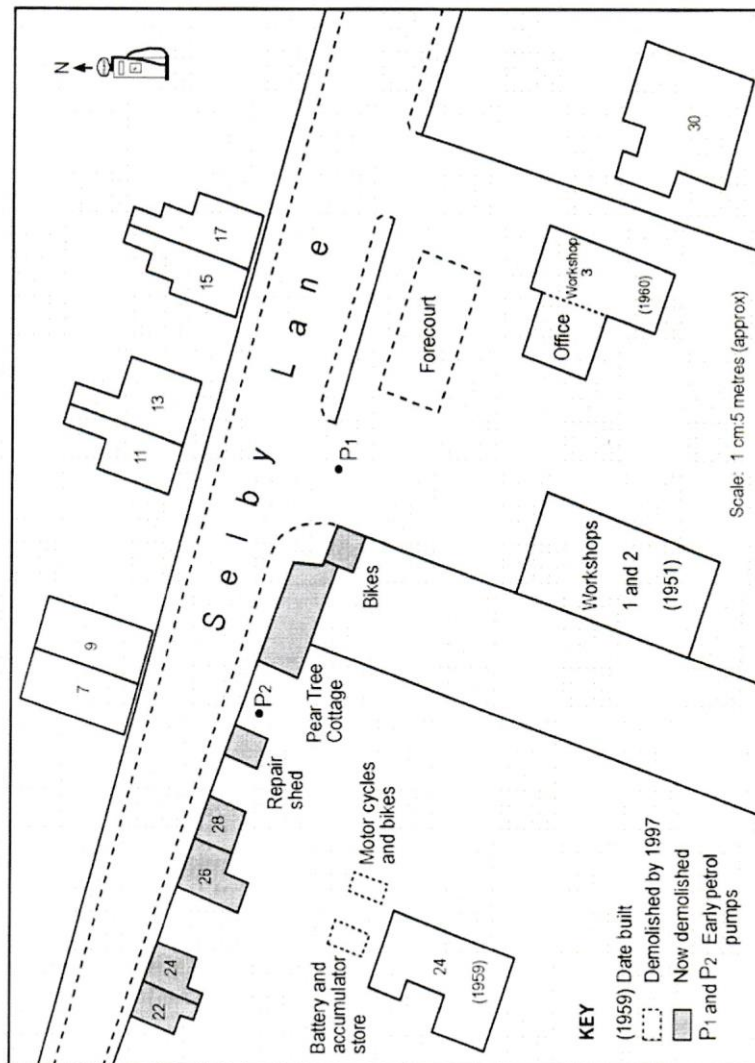


Figure 3. Plan showing the various features of Wrights site mentioned in the text.
Dr. A. Tarver from drawing by Bob Hammond

part as a shop, became overcrowded, so that the two eldest boys - George and Charles - for several years slept with some cousins on

Bunny Lane. Much of the profit from the business was being re-invested in a growing fleet of vehicles for hire, and also in expanding the working premises - Pear Tree Cottage, near the site of the present garage was purchased in 1935, and used as a storehouse and workshop (it is now demolished). The family therefore lived frugally, and it was not until 1939 that they moved into a more spacious property at No. 6, Selby Lane (where the village doctor, Dr. Rhind, still held his surgeries); George and Charles were now able to sleep at home again.

This remained the family home until 1959, when it was sold and George and his wife moved into a newly built bungalow (number 24, Selby Lane) behind their first home (see figure 3).



Figure 4. **Selby Lane c1930**

The garage in 1930 stretched between the two petrol pumps (P1 and P2 in Figure 3) identifiable by their white discs. Pear Tree Cottage is immediately behind the pear tree on the left. All the buildings shown to the left of the road are now demolished.

Photo from Stephen Wright Collection

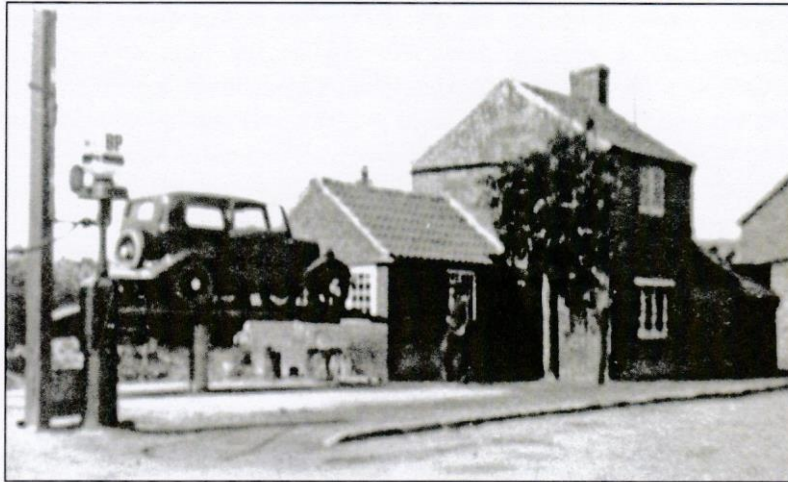


Figure 5. **Wrights Garage c 1936**

Note the BP petrol pump (P2 on map, electrically powered), the car on the ramp, Pear Tree Cottage and adjoining workshop, once a framework knitting workshop. Both buildings are now demolished; the present garage buildings mostly occupy the left half of the picture.

Photo from Stephen Wright Collection

World War II put a brake on the expansion of car servicing and petrol sales: there were few new cars as the capacity of car manufacturers was requisitioned for military needs; petrol was rationed; and many drivers (the majority being men) were called up. Petrol sales shrank and taxi hire was also limited by petrol rationing. In addition, the coach business was put on hold during the war, being limited to school runs and the odd works service (Bunny to Nottingham). During the period 1935 to 1940, George usually employed a second mechanic to help him in the repair of vehicles, but he was only operating a single coach - most of the hire work was with taxis. In 1940 he had four taxis and a Guy 26-seater coach. By 1943 he had an additional coach - a Bedford Utility with wooden seats softened by army blankets. By now the coaches (typically, 26 to 30-seaters) were double the capacity of the earlier ones (12 to 14-seaters), though still only half that of the present fleet average of over 50-seats. However, the coach side of the business did not expand significantly until after the war.

George's two eldest sons, George and Charles, were called up into the R.A.F. and Navy respectively, and George was killed in 1944 while flying out of Scotland. Bernard, working in a munitions factory and John, still at school and college, remained at home, where they helped their father run the business in their free time, and also their grandfather in his shop on Blind Lane. After the war, the three surviving sons became partners in the business, the name of which was changed from G.Wright to G.Wright and Sons in 1949.

The period immediately after the war was one of austerity and continued petrol rationing, but the demand for coaches grew. Three 29-seaters were bought between 1947 and 1949, and a further two soon afterwards, when Wrights were on hire to the Robin Hood and Skills companies. These, together with one bus acquired during the war brought the fleet to six in the fifties. Space behind the Blind Lane shop for parking and servicing was now inadequate, so land on Selby Lane - the site of the present garage - was leased in 1951, and bought in 1957. Taxis also enjoyed a short-lived revival, until petrol rationing ended. Then, as more people became car owners, the demand for hiring taxis decreased. That side of the business finally finished in 1956, when there were still four taxis in use, mainly for weddings and funerals.

1956 was a turning point in another respect: George retired, handing the running of the business over to his three sons; and the firm became a limited company, renamed a second time as Wrights Keyworth Ltd., a name it retained until 1 April 2008 when the Wright family ceased to be involved and it became Keyworth Garage Ltd. 1956 was also the year in which the first diesel coach was purchased.

Two developments now led to a rapid expansion in vehicle maintenance and repair and in coach hire: an accelerating increase in car ownership, and a huge growth in Keyworth's population, which doubled in the 1950s, and doubled again in the 1960s. Both Charles and John had trained as mechanics and were keen to develop the car repair and maintenance side of the business.



Figure 6. **Wright's Garage and Family 1962**

Pear Tree Cottage and workshop are on the left, painted white and advertising SHELL. The pump P2 has been replaced by three in their present position but without canopy. The family from left: Mrs. George Wright Senior (Laura), Bernard, Charlie, Charlie's wife Jean, John. *Photo from Stephen Wright Collection*

At the same time, petrol sales rose sharply; but, as progressively fewer people rode bicycles, so their repair, mostly carried out by Bernard, shrank. In 1960, MOT tests were introduced, adding a further dimension to vehicle maintenance - that of vehicle inspection. All of the paper-work was done by Charles's and John's wives.

The additional activity required more space. A large building had been erected in 1951 on leased land adjoining Wrights' property on Selby Lane (workshops 1 and 2 in Figure 3). It is still in use today, mainly for carrying out MOT tests and coach maintenance. In 1957, that site and an additional plot alongside were bought, and in 1960 the present brick building was erected (Workshop 3 and office), with a line of petrol pumps on the forecourt. (The iron shed that had formerly occupied the site was sold to a farmer in Wysall). Pear Tree Cottage continued to be used as a store, with cycle repairs carried on in the adjoining former framework knitters' shop, both of

which were demolished in the late 1970s, together with the old family home at number 26 (see figure 3).

From the mid-fifties, and through the sixties, seventies and eighties, the three brothers continued to run the business, which now concentrated on vehicle maintenance, inspection and repair, as well as coach hire. They also specialised: Charles on repairs, Bernard on the forecourt and John on MOTs. They employed a small number of staff, but worked long, unsociable hours themselves in order to keep pace with the growing demand for their service, which was widely recognised for its quality and value-for-money.



Figure 7. **Wrights Garage 1962**

The present brick building was erected in 1960. Charlie, Jean his wife, daughter and son (Susan and Stephen) lived in the adjacent bungalow. *Photo from Stephen Wright Collection*

Four relatively recent developments must be briefly mentioned. First, in 1965 Brian Attewell was appointed as a director, with responsibility for the coaches, the only non-family member to hold such a position. Second, the coaches which had been driven by petrol engines began to be replaced by diesel driven models, with their reduced running costs. Third, Charles's son, Stephen, joined

the firm in 1982, though he did not become a director until 1994. And fourth, the three brothers retired: Charles in 1985 (he died in 1999), Bernard in 1988 (he died in 2003), and John in 1990; while Brian Attewell also retired, in 1997.

In 2007, John and Brian still held shares in the company, but Stephen was the only shareholder who was also a full-time working director. Under his leadership, the firm continued to expand, particularly in its fleet of buses, which increased to nine vehicles, all but one of which seated more than fifty passengers, while the firm employed a staff of nine, in addition to Stephen. However, by this time it was clear that the site and buildings were becoming run down and needed a great deal spent on them.



Figure 8. **Wright's Garage in 1972**

The three pumps in the 1962 picture had been added to by two others, separated from them by a kiosk, the whole now covered with a canopy. The workshop attached to Pear Tree Cottage is just visible on the right; it was used for cycle repairs.

Photo from Stephen Wright Collection

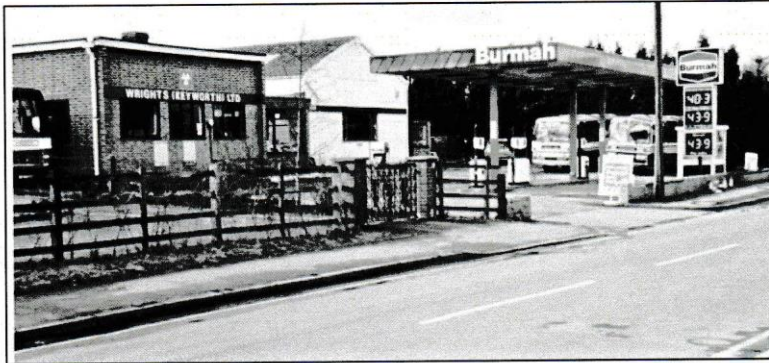


Figure 9. **Wrights Garage 1991**

Petrol sold is no longer Shell but Burmah, priced at 40.3p per litre (unleaded), 43.0p (four star, leaded), 43.9p (diesel). The kiosk under the canopy has gone.

Photo from Stephen Wright Collection

The question arose: would it be better to sell and invest the proceeds in developing another site? Coincidentally, Rushcliffe Homes was considering the demolition of Debdale House and was looking for an alternative site to build sheltered accommodation for the elderly in Keyworth.

The outcome was that Wrights would vacate and sell not only the garage site but also adjacent properties on the south side of Selby Lane owned by different family members, from and including the private house at number 30 and extending west as far as, but not including the recently closed greengrocer, Wardens. Stephen would look for another site to carry on the business, preferably in Keyworth. However, two problems arose before the sale took place: planning permission for the new sheltered accommodation was refused by Rushcliffe Borough Council on the grounds that the proposed new building would be too high; and no suitable site for Wrights Garage could be found in Keyworth. The most promising was on the Debdale trading estate where a site had recently been vacated by Orchard Toys, but a restriction on the lease would not allow businesses connected with the motor trade other than Barn Garage which had been there since before that restriction was

introduced. Other sites in the village were also investigated but found to be unsuitable.

Rushcliffe's decision regarding sheltered accommodation went to appeal and, after a public enquiry, was overturned by the Secretary of State: the site on Selby Lane could be developed, following the original plans to build a complex of 48 two-bedroom apartments for people aged 55 and over, 19 (later reduced to 14) rented to replace the sheltered apartments at Debdale House and the rest for sale to owner-occupiers. Wrights Garage, a village institution for nearly ninety years, would close while all its buildings, together with neighbouring properties owned by the family, would be demolished.



Figure 10. Change-over Time, March 2008

Wrights Keyworth Ltd became Keyworth Garage Ltd on 1 April 2008. On the left: Stephen Wright (the outgoing director) with his son (also Stephen) and Victoria (daughter) on either side; on the right: Simon Bagshaw and Chris Stewart (the new co-directors).

Photo by Brian Lund

At the time of writing (May 2008) the situation can be summarised as follows:

1. Stephen handed over the business on 1 April 2008 to two of his long-serving mechanics, Simon Bagshaw and Chris Stewart, who became its new directors.
2. The business has from that date traded under the name of Keyworth Garage Ltd.

3. The new company is continuing to operate on Selby Lane, on a six month lease from the new owners of the land, William Davis, until 30 September 2008, during which time it is carrying on with MOTs, the servicing of vehicles and hiring of coaches (excluding school buses), but not the sale of fuel, which has already ceased.

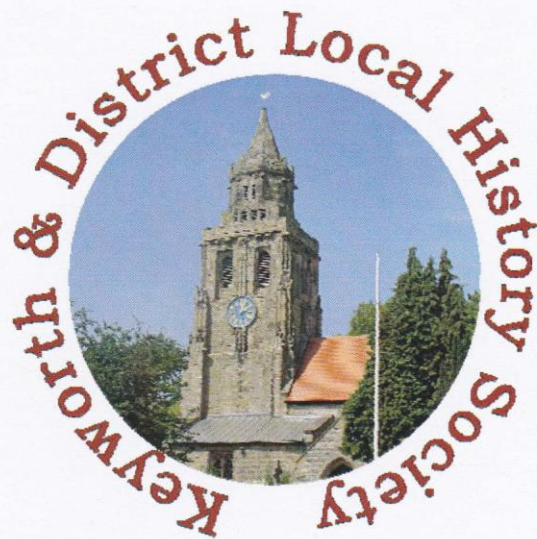
4. Keyworth Garage Ltd is looking to move to a new site by 30 September, possibly in the former clay pit and brick yard off the Gotham Road, Bunny, if facilities are made ready in time. It plans to continue to provide MOTs and vehicle service but with no bus hire or fuel sales in the foreseeable future. It is hoped that the link with Keyworth will be maintained not only in the company's name, but also through the Garage's continued use by many Keyworth clients.

Wrights Garage was in business for some ninety years; a hundred if the pony-and-trap decade is included. After Wardens (which closed a few months before Wrights changed hands) it was the oldest family business in the village. For almost all the history of the motor vehicle it has been associated in Keyworth with the name Wright. That was no longer so after 1 April 2008, a date marking the end of an era in the village.

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