# Journal of the Road Transport History Association

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## **The Demise of Bedford Motors** Rod Ashley

The recent controversial decision by the UK government to proceed with HS2 is the latest example of political decisions influencing or overriding economic and social debates about the benefits of transport infrastructure. Whilst there are those who argue strongly for more rapid connections between London and the north of England, others point to the lack of east-west and regional rail and bus infrastructure in the north, or how the project will not benefit large parts of the rest of the UK – the west of England, Wales, Scotland and areas east of the Pennines. (The RTHA would welcome articles or presentations on this debate).

Other examples of political will overriding other arguments exist. This article will focus on the demise of one of the great, established names of British commercial vehicles – Bedford. The Vauxhall Motors company started in 1903 (as its current advertising indicates) in Vauxhall, London. By 1925 it had grown sufficiently to have transferred to Hendon and to be of interest to the US automobile conglomerate General Motors (GM). With GM's takeover, Vauxhall transferred to Luton in Bedfordshire. Additionally, until 1925, GM had been assembling commercial vehicles from parts manufactured in Canada. Under the Imperial Preference system (which favoured imports from the British Empire), these vehicles were known in the UK as British Chevrolet.

#### **Production at Luton**

With production facilities in Luton starting in 1929, GM was able to add newly-named Bedford trucks to its stable. A variety of trucks was manufactured, gaining popularity with commercial operators and the British army. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Bedford was sufficiently established to operate a newlyopened shadow factory in Dunstable to build military equipment, including 5,600 Churchill tanks. Such was the status of Bedford that they gained a contract to supply military vehicles to the Soviet army, taking the total of military trucks built to 250,000.

Dunstable became a truck town, like Leyland in Lancashire for its namesake and Sandbach in Dunstable factory focused on buses and trucks,

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The Editor is always interested in hearing from members and nonmembers who would like to write an original piece about transport history and/or research for inclusion in this journal or online. Cheshire for Foden and ERF. Post-war, the Dunstable factory focused on buses and trucks, particularly those for large utility companies, whilst van production continued at Luton. Bedford became the default choice for The Post Office (both Royal Mail and Post Office Telephones) and gas boards as they were seen as reliable and, despite the US-ownership, 'British'. In addition, the British army used many Bedford trucks and Bedford became a popular basis for coaches, particularly those bodied by Duple.



Above: The big Bedford S Type of the 1950s. It also became the basis of the beloved 'Green Goddess' fire trucks. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bedford\_S\_T ype\_1954\_3600cc\_Battlesbridge.JPG)

In 1959 Bedford introduced the TK truck, whose tilt-cab design set the template for many manufacturers. The modern, space-saving design with the cab over the engine meant that frontnosed design was reserved for the largestengined vehicles like Scammell. A tilting cab also gave excellent access to the whole engine.

Smaller commercial vehicles under the Bedford name also achieved great commercial success, particularly the CA of the 1950s and 1960s, and the Vauxhall Viva based HA light van. Indeed, the HA outlasted the car version by many years, still being bought in the 1970s in large numbers by BT, British Gas and the Royal Mail.



Above: The ever-popular Bedford TK, seen here in Bangladesh. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bedford\_TK \_trucks,\_Bangladesh.\_(39807256810).jpg)

#### Problems in the 1960s

However, not all went well. The CF replaced the CA and was up against stiff competition from Ford's newly-launched Transit. Whilst the Transit was hailed for its ease of driving, low maintenance costs and sleek design, the CF was slow, heavy, had an unreliable engine and cumbersome design. Tweaks, including the adoption in the later CF2 of the Opel Ascona engine and gearbox rather than the Vauxhall Victor's did little to increase market share. The Bedford trailed in sales, although it proved much more popular than the Transit as the base for icecream vans. By contrast, the British army remained undiminished in its loyalty to Bedford, whose trucks proved themselves reliable in a wide variety of climates, conditions and terrains.

By the 1970s the British motor industry generally was in trouble on a variety of fronts. Competition of reliable vehicles from Japan and labour relation difficulties across the board caused considerable problems. Mergers became commonplace with the once-mighty BMC merging with Leyland to form British Leyland. Not only did this pit car models against each other – Triumph 2000 against Rover 2000, MGB against Triumph TR7 and so on – but also gave rise to some overcapacity in the commercial vehicle market. Some Austin/Morris commercial vans were rebadged as Leyland and the ill-fated Standard Atlas became the Leyland 20. The nationalisation of British Leyland (BL) was difficult for a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher to stomach and herein lay the demise of Bedford.

The Bedford TK had reached the end of its life and was replaced by the similar-looking TL. Whilst it was up against stiff opposition in the commercial world from manufacturers like Scania, Mercedes and Volvo, it retained its loyal British army following, particularly in its more powerful TM guise. Despite this, Bedford failed to gain a Ministry of Defence contract for a standard 4-ton 4x4 general service truck. Extensive tests by the military demonstrated that the Bedford was the equal of the Leyland competitor and the army expressed its preference to continue with Bedford on the basis of reliability, suitability and efficiency of accessing spares. But with the UK government having nationalised Leyland and put so much trust into BL's anticipated success, the army was overruled. Military needs, engineering excellence and established relationships could do nothing against political expediency.



Above: One of the final Bedford TMs, much-beloved by the British army. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bedford\_TM \_4x4\_pic2.JPG)

The result was catastrophic for Bedford. Its Detroit owners had already been rebuffed for their attempt to buy Land Rover; additionally, the Bedford CF was losing hand over fist to rival Ford's Transit. Whilst the little Bedford HA van was a success story, it was now several design models behind its Vauxhall Viva base. For many years the profits from Bedford had been used to subsidise Vauxhall's losses.



Above: A 1980 Bedford CF. It failed to ignite the market like the Ford Transit. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1980\_Bedfor d\_CF\_van\_(14574397562).jpg)

#### The sale of Bedford

GM sold the Dunstable site and Bedford trucks in 1987 to a consortium called AWD who continued to manufacture trucks until 1992, at which point they went into receivership. Cambridge dealership Marshalls gained the licence to use the Bedford name, but poor sales caused the division to close in 2002, sounding the final death-knell of the Bedford name.

Whilst the Cabinet Papers of the decision to award the military truck contract to Leyland are not available, below is an edited extract from Hansard (15 July 1992) relating to the later demise of AWD (Bedford) Trucks and an unsuccessful appeal by the constituency MP that it should be allowed to c fulfil a civilian order for trucks to Libya, as distinct from any military trucks order for then ruler of Libya, Col. Gaddafi.

#### AWD (Bedford) Trucks House of Commons Debate 15 July 1992, vol 211, cc 1206-10

#### Mr. David Madel (Bedfordshire, South-West):

This short Adjournment debate is an appeal for help to try to save AWD (Bedford) Trucks in Dunstable in my constituency from total collapse. I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Carlisle) is listening to the debate, because he shares with me intense concern about the current position.

AWD (Bedford) Trucks is now in the hands of the receiver. It went into the hands of the receiver on 4 June this year. In my view, the company can be saved if a large order for civilian—I stress the word "civilian"—lorries for Libya can be given the go-ahead

Bedford Trucks stopped being part of the General Motors group as a result of the collapse of the General Motors-Leyland deal in the mid-1980s. That severe commercial setback had bad economic consequences for Dunstable and the vehicle industry in this country. I am looking forward to reading about what the people at the top thought about it and Lady Thatcher's memoirs on it. I hope that I shall be around 30 years on from 1986 to see the Cabinet papers. I know how keen the Government are to publish more detail of what goes on. Who knows—the 30-year rule may be changed to a 20-year rule...

The present position is summed up in the receiver's letter of 1 July to my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. It says: 'Our role, as you will be aware, is to maximise realisations and our view is that a going concern sale of most or all of the business would not only enhance realisations but would also preserve employment and contribute to exports ...We have been attempting to encourage interest in the business and it has become clear that prospective purchasers of the business as a going concern have generally required of us, not unreasonably, confirmation of the precise status of the contract to supply trucks to Libya. I understand you are aware of the background to this contract and the current impasse ... We now understand that the matter lies with you for a decision. From our analysis of the situation, I should say that we do not accept that the trucks are 'military goods' and that there is, therefore, any basis on which the contract should not be allowed to proceed ... We have been led to believe that governmental approval is required, has not been forthcoming to date, but remains 'under consideration'.' The penultimate paragraph of page 2 reads: 'If we are unable to resolve this issue within the next few weeks'-this letter was written on 1 July, two weeks ago-'the chances of a going concern sale will be, in our judgment, much diminished with the regrettable consequences this may entail and I therefore would be grateful if you could give this matter your early attention.' That is the current position, and that is why I have raised the matter the day before we adjourn for the summer recess...

I am most grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade and his civil servants for the helpful and courteous way in which, for a long time, they have listened to me pleading the case for the order for civilian trucks to go ahead. I end as I started, with an appeal for AWD (Bedford) Trucks to be allowed to sell civilian trucks to Libya. Time is running out at a terrifying speed. We must save the Dunstable plant from total collapse. I appeal to the Government for help.

#### The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Needham):

The workers of AWD in Dunstable have no more doughty champion than my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, South-West (Mr. Madel). He has done everything possible to assist in trying to resolve the difficult position that the company is now in, not only because of the unfortunate fact that it has gone into receivership but because of the complexities of the order. My hon. Friend and I discussed the order in detail on 9 July.

Exports are actively encouraged by the Government. Indeed, most of my work involves the promotion of exports. Having said that, everyone in government and in the House will accept that some exports need to be controlled because of the nature of the goods or because of the countries to which they are being exported. The Export of Goods (Control) Order 1989 lists goods which are prohibited for export without an export licence from my Department. The list of goods is extensive and is included in the order for a variety of foreign policy or defence reasons.

I shall not weary the House by giving a long list of the prohibited categories of goods, but, subject to certain conditions, the export of civilian lorries to any destination is not prohibited by the current EGCO which came into effect on 31 December 1991. My officials have made the position clear to the company and have been in regular contract with it since the proposed export of civilian lorries to Libya was raised with the Department.

On 16 January, Mr. Coolican, who is the head of the export control organisation, wrote to the company stating that the export of civilian lorries to Libya does not require an export licence under the EGCO. As with all such inquiries, the letter from Mr. Coolican also warned that the advice was conditional on the lorries not being used in contravention of the article within the EGCO with regard to activities associated with weapons of mass destruction.

The letter also warned that the order is subject to change very quickly. To be able to make such changes is, of course, essential if one is to be able to respond quickly to different and changing threats. All exporters of goods covered by the EGCO are or should be aware of the dynamic way in which the order can be changed. My officials constantly remind companies of that.

For those not usually involved in export controls, I accept that such qualifications may seem rather heavy-handed, but when advice about licensibility is sought, it is important that the Department should make those points plain to alert exporters as regards the way in which the controls operate and the way in which things could change. Mr. Coolican wrote in similar terms to one of the former directors of AWD on 13 August 1991, when the issue of exports to Libya was first raised.

I said that my Department advised that civilian lorries for export to Libya did not require a licence under the EGCO. Unfortunately, as we all know, that is not the end of the matter, and we now come to one of the complex issues I mentioned. The House will be aware that, from time to time, trade sanctions are imposed on various countries. The United Nations sanctions imposed on Libya are not the same as those imposed on Iraq or Serbia and Montenegro. The key difference is that the sanctions imposed against Libya are selective. To put it another way, the United Kingdom does not have a complete trade embargo against Libya.

The House will recall that the United Nations adopted Security Council resolution 748 on 31 March 1992, following Libya's refusal to abide by resolution 731, which called on Libya to, among other things, hand over the two suspects for the Lockerbie atrocity. On 15 April 1992, an Order in Council came into effect which implemented the sanctions adopted by the Security Council under resolution 748...

I remind my hon. Friend and the company that the responsibility for deciding whether to apply for an export licence under the Libya Sanctions Order rests with the exporter. A key decision that the company will need to make is whether the export of the lorries requires a licence under that order because the goods are arms and related material. My officials are perfectly prepared to offer help and guidance but, at the end of the day, it is only the exporter who has all the relevant information and only the exporter who therefore knows whether the goods will be caught by a control. That is the normal procedure for all exporters. If the company believed that to be the case, it would need to make an application for a licence which would be considered in the same way as any other application for a licence under the Libya Sanctions Order. As my hon. Friend knows, no such application has been made...

It is only recently that I became aware that the receivers believe—as my hon. Friend read out from the letter—that Libyan order is crucial to the company continuing as a viable business. That has never been made crystal clear to my Department, but we now understand this to be the case, and we understand it doubly having listened to my hon. Friend's powerful speech. In conclusion, there is no requirement for an export licence under the EGCO. Whether a licence should be sought under the Libya Sanctions Order is a matter for the company to decide in the light of its own legal advice and after speaking to my Department... © UK Parliament

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#### A concluding note

As you may note, today's military trucks are predominantly either light Leyland DAF or heavy MAN. The Luton plant continues, now known as GMM Luton where it produces the Renault Trafic van, also badged as the Vauxhall Vivaro and Nissan Primastar.

Hence a sad end to a once mighty and proud heritage. The political rationale for business and infrastructure decisions continues to apply. Let us keep an eye on what happens with HS2 developments and the promised ongoing reviews, as well as the pledge of £5bn for bus services and cycle route infrastructure across England and Wales.

#### A comment by the Editor

The issue of British companies exporting goods to regimes of a questionable nature continues to be critical, especially where military use is explicitly intended - witness the protests at the Arms Fair at Excel London last summer. In cases where the ultimate use is uncertain – as indicated in the debate on the Bedford trucks order summarised above – this is still a concern. In the case of Libya, the regime was in any case removed some years later by combined action of Britain and other countries (albeit creating a somewhat unstable situation subsequently).

It is also possible that Bedford itself lost markets due to a failure to innovate and move with changing consumer demands. In the case of its bus and coach manufacture, which ceased in the 1980s, this may well have been the outcome, as indicated in 'Bedford Buses and Coaches' by Nigel Furness, reviewed in our February 2017 issue.

Mystery car and a mystery lady.



The view featured on page 10 of our previous issue has produced helpful responses from Rod Ashley and Martin Higginson. Rod indicates that the registration JO4426 is now allocated to a Mini Cooper. Martin found on the internet an advertisement from Autocar, 1932, which he considers as providing confirmation that the car was a Hillman Wizard, then priced from £270 to £305, depending on specification, plus £7-10-0 for a sun-roof. JO was an Oxford registration. But who was the lady?

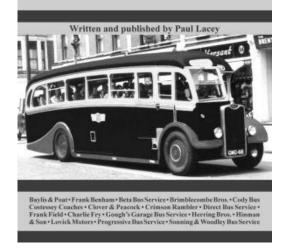


Above: Standing at the Forest Hill terminus of route 35 on 10 February 1952 is ex-Leyton 'E/3' No 185. Route 35 ceased just two months later. [Julian Thompson/Online Transport Archive] (from the book reviewed on pages (8 & 9)

### Reviews

Early Independents of the Bracknell, Crowthorne and Wokingham area. Paul Lacey. 112pp, A4, card covers, extensively illustrated. ISBN 978-0-9567832-5-7. Available from the author at 17 Sparrow Close, Woosehill, Wokingham, Berks RG41 3HT, priced at £15 to RTHA members including postage.

## EARLY INDEPENDENTS OF THE BRACKNELL, CROWTHORNE & WOKINGHAM AREA



This volume follows others which cover operators in the author's home region, most recently that on those in the Henley and Marlow area, reviewed in our September 2019 issue. In similar style, it is very comprehensively illustrated, and traces the family history of those who ran these businesses as well as vehicles and services operated. The area covered lies to the south east of Reading, covering the towns of Wokingham and Bracknell, the village of Crowthorne (now better known as location of the Transport Research Laboratory) and many smaller settlements in the area. The period covered extends to the 1980s, together with some ongoing operators. However, much of the detailed history of the smaller operators falls within the pre-war period, prior to the eastward spread of Reading or designation of Bracknell as

#### a New Town.



Above: Bedford OB CBL502 of Herrings of Wokingham, one of a small number completed in 1939 before the outbreak of war. It is seen here with another local independent covered in the book, Brimblecombe Bros of Wokingham

As in other areas, operators developed from a mix of origins, including country carriers shifting to motorised transport, and people who gained skills in motor vehicle maintenance and driving later developing public passenger services. In many cases bus and coach operation was combined with other activities such as taxi and private car hire, or shop-keeping. Scheduled service bus and coach operation was not necessarily the main function, but excursions, tours and contract hire often formed the mainstay of the businesses, with journeys to atomic research and weapons establishments being an important factor in the last category.

Relationships with larger regional companies, principally Thames Valley, also emerge as important. In some cases independents directly competed against the larger companies but in others filled gaps in the bus network. Many were subsequently absorbed into the larger company networks, especially after the 1930 Road Traffic Act.

In addition to very comprehensive illustrations of both vehicles and the operators themselves, very clear maps are provided to show locations of depots. Fleet lists are provided for the larger operators. In addition to familiar types such as the Bedford OB, a number of unusual models were operated in the area, including two Crellin-Duplex one-and-half-deckers, and rare Dennis and Daimler models.



Above: Albion 'Valkyrie' ANW443 in the Brimblecombe fleet. New in 1934 and originally with Whitehead of Leeds, and acquired in 1948, shown as rebodied by Whitson.

As in the case of the author's earlier books, production is to a high standard, and very good value for money is offered.

#### **Peter White**

**Regional Tramways: London Tramways**. Peter Waller, 165pp, hardback. Pen & Sword, 2019, £25.00. ISBN 1473871182.

Peter Waller's Regional Tramways series for Pen & Sword now covers the whole of England in four volumes: Midlands & Southern England, The North West of England, Yorkshire and the North East of England, each at the time of writing this review (February 2020) offered at a discounted sale price of £22.50, and the final volume on London Transport, reviewed here.

The book is divided into five sections: a long introduction summarising the pre-London Transport period up to 1933, followed inexplicably out of chronological order – by Croydon Tramlink, Docklands Light Railway and only then London Transport; and concludes with a short final section on Preservation. Waller concentrates, as the book's title implies, on the London Transport era, 1933-52, with the lion's share of this 100-page section being devoted to detailed and well-structured descriptions of each of the eight stages of the closure process, which took place at approximately three-monthly intervals between September 1950 and July 1952. Clear route diagrams accompany each stage, showing which routes were withdrawn, which sections of tramway abandoned and where other services still ran after each date.

The 33-page introduction comprehensively summaries the evolution of London's tramways from the era of horse trams and a rapid turnover of small private operators, through to consolidation, municipalisation and electrification. For those patient enough to trace it, the development from the first short-lived routes in 1860 to the comprehensive, predominantly suburban 'polo-mint' network presented in the map on page 59 is fully outlined. A series of diagrams equivalent to those for the closure stages would, though, have made it a lot easier to see at a glance how the network grew. A particular strength of the Introduction is the summaries of each of the eleven local authority undertakings (10 outer London boroughs plus London County Council) and three main private companies (London United, Metropolitan Electric and South Metropolitan Electric). The Croydon Tramway and DLR sections summarise the evolution of these systems, emphasising fleet and route progress.

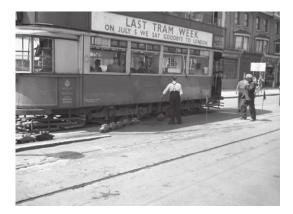
The book is largely factual, with little by way of analysis (nothing on tramway economics, management or patronage, for example), but there is good data on route lengths, types of tramcar and fleet deployment. Anyone seeking photographic evidence on London's tramways will be delighted with Waller's book. Printed in large format (22x28cm) on high quality art paper, with only one or two pictures to a page, photographic reproduction is excellent, as is the choice of pictures, almost all of which show trams in their surroundings, with the associated human, animal and vehicular traffic, commerce and architecture strongly represented. Apart from illustrations of the Croydon and DLR networks and from the preservation era, all the photographs are in black and white.

Some interesting facts can be found this book, including that under a £1m refurbishment programme as late as 1948 15 miles of track were proposed for re-laying, despite complete closure being scheduled; that the four-tracking of Dog Kennel Hill in Dulwich was brought about so as to avoid trams following one another too closely up or down this steep alignment, with the attendant risk of runaways and collisions; and that many of the tram replacement schemes saw an increase in fleet requirements when buses replaced trams: e.g. 117 buses replaced 101 trams under Stage 2 of the closure programme.

There is a bibliography – which your reviewer notes, does not include his 1993 LRTA/LTM/Birkbeck College Tramway London: Background to the abandonment of London's trams 1931-1952 – but no index. Maybe the latter omission does not matter, as the text is largely in chronological order, with sub-sections on individual operators presented alphabetically. Just a couple of minor factual errors have been noticed while preparing for this review: Tower Gardens for Tower Gateway on p51 and Stratford Lower, for 'Low Level' on p53.

Given the wide range of previous books on London trams, the author and publisher are to be congratulated on producing a useful addition, that comprehensively summarises the subject matter without duplicating the work of others. Regional Tramways: London Transport should be read by anyone wanting an introduction to the subject and will provide useful material from which to embark on further studies.

**Martin Higginson** 



For almost half a century, the change pit had been a feature of conduit tramway operation in London. This was the last day of operation and, from the following day, the diesel bus reigned supreme. [Neil Davernport/Online Transport Archive]

# The Roads and Road Transport History Association Limited Notification of Annual General Meeting

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the company will be held on **Saturday**, 4<sup>th</sup> **April 2020** at the **Coventry Transport Museum**, **Millennium Place**, **Hales Street**, **Coventry**, **CV1 1JD**, commencing at **11.00am**. If any members have items to be included in the agenda, they should notify the undersigned by Friday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020.

## **Election of Directors**

As per our Articles of Association, two directors come up for re-election at the AGM:

- Rod Ashley has offered to serve for a further three-year term.
- Peter White is not offering himself for re-election.

If any other members would like to offer themselves to serve as a director, they should write to the undersigned by 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020, including details of a nominator and seconder both of whom should be existing members. Anyone requiring more details about these vacancies should contact the undersigned.

## **AGM Papers**

The agenda, accounts for the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019 and minutes of the last AGM will be available at the AGM. If any members would like these sent to them in advance, please contact the undersigned. Please note that there is no charge to attend the Annual General Meeting.

# Philip Kirk

*Company Secretary* (contact details on page 2)

# Spring Conference Programme

1030	Coffee and tea
1100	AGM
1200	Members' Interests including:
	John Ashley 'A Charabanc Postcard Genealogical Curiosity'
	(contributions from other members also welcome)
1300	Lunch
1400	Roy Larkin 'Repairs and Maintenance – Keeping the Mechanical Transport on the
	Western Front Working'
1500	Dr Craig Horner The Cheshire Motor Vehicle Registrations, 1904-07
1600	Close

## Payment details:

£18 members, £20 non-members. Booking fee includes buffet lunch. EITHER by bank transfer to: 40-52-40 00031614 CAF Bank and an email to <u>roadshistoryassoc@outlook.com</u> clearly stating the name(s) of those attending. OR By sending a cheque to: R&RTHA, c/o The Bus Archive, 8 De Salis Drive, Hampton Lovett, Droitwich Spa, Worcs, WR9 0QE including a note clearly stating the name(s) of those attending.

# Membership Renewals

A big 'thank you' to everyone who has renewed their membership promptly. This helps our small volunteer team tremendously.

For those who have not renewed, please now renew promptly – we don't want to lose you!

To continue your membership, please arrange for payment of £20 by one of these methods:

By cheque (payable to Roads & Road Transport History Association), posted to this address: RTHA, c/o The Bus Archive, 8 De Salis Drive, Hampton Lovett, Droitwich Spa WR9 0QE.

By bank transfer to: CAF Bank, Sort Code 40-52-40, Account Number 00031614. Please let us know by email that you have made a payment, as it is not always clear who has paid!

Please also tell us if any of your details (address, telephone number, email address) have changed since last year. If you would like future communications via email please let us know at <u>RoadsHistoryAssoc@outlook.com</u>.

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*Viewpoints and opinions expressed by contributors to this Journal should be seen as the personal views of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Association.* 

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Copy date for Journal No. 100 is 6<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

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