

# **Strachans (Coachbuilders) Ltd**

## **A Brief History**



*including Brown, Hughes & Strachan, Strachan & Brown, Strachans*  
**1894 - 1974**

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Cover Illustration: This unidentified vehicle sports Strachans coachwork and is seen outside the Acton works sometime in the late 1920's. (Strachans Ltd via The Bus Archive).

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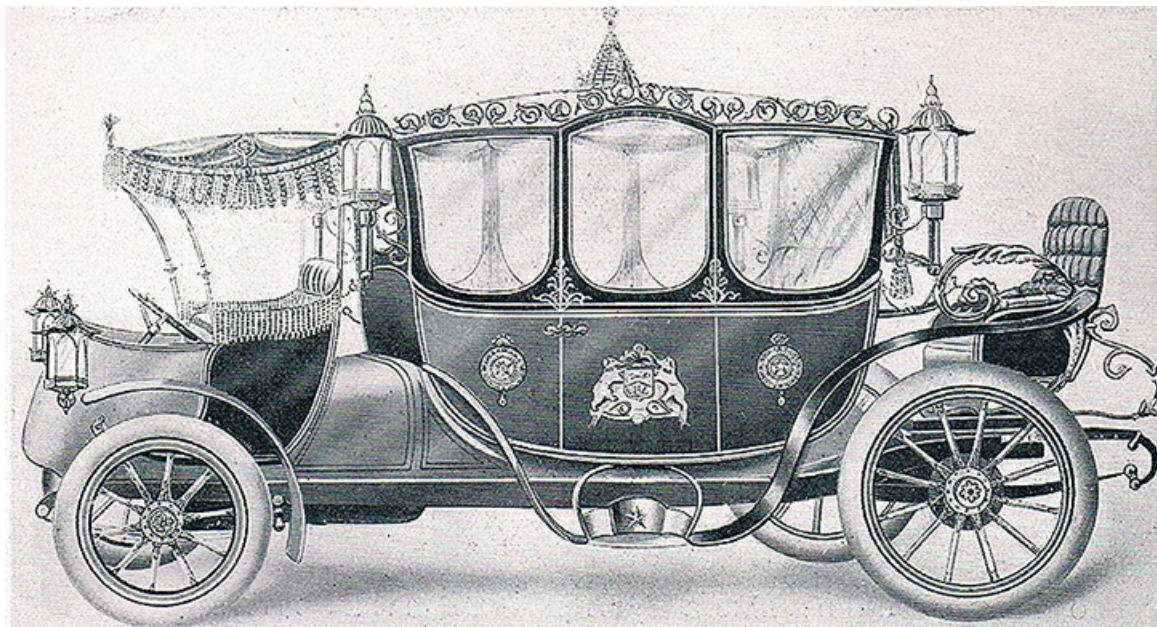
The history of Strachans (Coachbuilders) Ltd can be traced back to Walter Ernest Brown, who was born in 1867, the son of a farmer, in South Morton, Berkshire. By 1891 he and his family had moved to London and were resident in Chelsea. The young Walter Brown was employed as a coach trimmer with coachbuilders Laurie & Marnier of Oxford Street, London, where he served his apprenticeship. In 1894 he started his own coachbuilding business in Shepherds Bush and in 1896 entered into partnership with S. A. Hughes, becoming Brown & Hughes.

James Marshall Strachan was born in Medians near Aberdeen in Scotland in 1865 and by 1879 was an apprentice millright with Wilson of Bridge of Muchalls, Stonehaven. Between 1884 and 1888 he worked in Edinburgh for a number of employers. By 1891 Strachan had moved to Clerkenwell with his family and by 1894 had become foreman pattern maker with Wicks Rotary Type Casting Company and by 1897 was employed by Sherard Cowper-Coles of Westminster (making centrifugal pumps) as foreman model maker. In 1898 he became works manager of the Library Supply Company of Queen Victoria Street, London who, amongst other things, installed electric plant and gas engines as well as manufacturing iron bookcases and fitments. In 1901 he and his family moved to Fulham and by now he was managing foreman at Everett, Edgcumbe and Company of Colindale Works, Hendon. Between 1904-1907 he was works manager at the Adams Manufacturing Company of Bedford, who manufactured cars under the name Adams-Hewitt. In 1907 he entered into partnership with Brown and Hughes, which became Brown, Hughes & Strachan and became a limited company in December 1908 with Strachan as Managing Director. The Company maintained that it

built the very first top-covered double-deck motorbus body (*Commercial Motor 27 May 1909*). This fact was confirmed by Mr. H. C. Burford, at the time the managing Director of Milnes-Daimler, who also added that it was on one of their Milnes-Daimler chassis.

In 1911 he established Aberdonia Cars Ltd with offices at Aldine Works, Aldine Place, Uxbridge Road, London *'to carry on the business of manufacturers and dealers in motorcars, motors and vehicles of all kinds and also to acquire the right to manufacture and sell a motorcar of new and improved design'*. The Aberdonia was a 4 cylinder 20 hp car built between 1911 and 1915; the bodies for these cars were constructed by Brown, Hughes & Strachan. One of the most unusual designs was for an Indian customer in 1913, on a specially built Aberdonia chassis which resembled a state carriage rather than a car!

During the World War I, the Company built ambulances; amongst them was a fleet for the 7th Cavalry Brigade and 3rd Cavalry Division, the ambulance bodies being fitted on any chassis which seemed suitable. Other vehicles were built including a motor bath wagon for the St John Ambulance Association built on a Daimler touring car chassis and featuring twelve folding canvas baths and an Army kitchen car on a Willys-Overland one-ton chassis, fitted with kettles, steam heaters, racks for utensils, and so on.



Built for an Indian maharajah in 1913 was this ostentatious Brown, Hughes & Strachan body fitted to a specially adapted Aberdonia 20hp chassis with 10ft 6ins wheelbase and 4ft 8ins track. (LTHL collection).

Brown, Hughes & Strachan Ltd moved to new premises on a three acre site at Park Royal, London, which was badly damaged by fire in April 1915. The company was subsequently dissolved (probably in 1916).

Both Strachan and Brown resigned as directors in July 1915 and set up in partnership operating from premises in Holland Gate, Kensington, London (which were the former premises of Brown, Hughes & Strachan!). Commercial Motor (24 June 1915) records that they '*will there carry on, upon their own account, the business of engineers, motor-body builders, motor ambulance, field-kitchen and bath experts*'.

However, on cessation of hostilities they began to include PSV coachbuilding in their portfolio. Most of their output was bespoke coachbuilding and tailored to the needs of their customer and many unique designs were produced. During the course of their work they also patented many items including a self-contained window that could be removed without disturbing any other part of the bodywork, an all-weather roof, sprung bodywork that used separate springs to dampen the vibrations from the chassis and many other novel inventions used in the construction of their coachwork. Most of these were designed by Strachan himself.

In 1923 Strachan & Brown moved to a new purpose built factory at Wales Farm Road, Acton, London W.3, designed by Strachan and by 1926 the Company needed additional workspace due to the growing number of orders. As a result a new factory adjacent to the original one was constructed which enabled output to be doubled,

although since many of the bodies, particularly luxury saloons, were built to specific and exclusive designs, overall production remained relatively low. One third of the orders received were from municipalities. Also in 1923 Strachan & Brown produced a combined passenger, mail and goods body to the design of Frank Hopper & Sons of Glasgow, mounted on a W&G chassis. It was one-man operated, seated 14 passengers and could carry mail and luggage in three compartments at the rear and was intended to meet the requirements of rural communities.

Bodies were also constructed for BET companies and in 1924 a number of single-deck bodies framed in ash, panelled inside with fumed oak and with long side panels of mahogany were built for Barnsley and District Traction Co., Ltd on Leyland forward control chassis. They incorporated Strachan & Brown patent drop windows and patent corner brackets joining the side pillars and roof members.

In 1925 Strachan & Brown produced a 26-seater body for a Lancia Pentaiota running on a new bus service between Aberdeen and Ballater, which was operated by A. E. Strachan of Ballater (J. M. Strachan's nephew!) and made two journey's daily. The design included the Strachan patent rolltop roof and the company's two-piece patent one-man-operated door, which could be easily opened or closed from the driver's seat.



An order for the Sheppey Motor Transport Company in 1926 was described by Commercial Motor as featuring 'a galaxy of fittings and equipment not usually found on vehicles used for passenger service...some idea of the appointment of the interior can be gained when it is mentioned that the fittings include flower vases, bevelled edge mirrors, footrests, ashtrays, match-strikers and electric bells, which, coupled with the liberal use of woodwork especially inlaid, serve to give a most refined appearance'. Based on a Dennis E chassis it featured many of Strachan & Brown's patents including drop windows, door opening mechanism and emergency door. (Strachan & Brown via The Bus Archive).





Orange Brothers of Bedlington had a normal control Gilford bodied by Strachan & Brown in 1927 and once again there were a host of refinements. Built to seat 20 passengers the seats were of the semi-bucket type and upholstered in leather; in the rear part of the body they were arranged in horseshoe fashion, so that, when the vehicle was used for private touring, space was available for installing a table or for carrying luggage. The underside of the roof was covered with three-ply and decorated in lincrusta and mahogany; mouldings and ornamental frieze panels were used. The interior was equipped with footrests, ash-trays, mirrors, curtains to the windows and a clock. The full-length two-piece door was operated from the driver's seat by patent Strachan and Brown gear. The side windows were the patent Strachan and Brown drop type. (Strachan & Brown via The Bus Archive).

During 1928 all was not well within the partnership and it came as no surprise when on 9 November 1928 the London Gazette announced the parting of the ways for Strachan and Brown. The partnership being dissolved 'by mutual consent' from 17 October 1928. Walter Brown subsequently moved to Duple where he became a Director and the business became Strachans Ltd.

John Marshall Strachan sadly passed away on 10 June 1929 and in his obituary it was stated that he had *"undergone a serious operation three years ago, but he had recovered and resumed active control of the business until the end of 1928, since when he had been in indifferent health, but it was not until recently that it was realized he was seriously ill. He was a man of outstanding character and abounding energy. He had been connected with the engineering and motor trades all his life and in many respects may truly be said to have been a pioneer. He was early in the field of coachbuilding and realizing the possibilities in connection with passenger vehicles, he had, in recent years, devoted his energies with considerable success to the building of bus and coach bodies. The factory at Acton has been responsible for some of the most up-to-date types of passenger vehicle and is to-day giving regular employment to between 500 and 600 persons, a sufficient testimony to Mr. Strachan's abilities. Always a far-seeing man he produced one of the earliest types of roll-top roof for motorbuses which is still being built today. Also, we believe, he was personally responsible for the first top-covered double-deck motorbus - this was some years ago when the authorities would not consider this type of vehicle for public service in London."*



Early in 1929 Strachans were contracted to produce a body for the first sleeper-coach in Ireland for the Irish Sleeper Omnibus Service. Although sleeper-coaches had been tried in England the jury was still out on the idea. Commercial Motor stated *'the body incorporates a host of ingenious features bearing much tribute to the coachbuilding art of Messrs Strachans, who were responsible for its conception and construction'*. It was built on an AEC 426 chassis and Strachans once again applied for a patent of the arrangement of the berths and the general design was registered. (Strachans Ltd via The Bus Archive).

Following his death, Strachans (Acton) Ltd was registered as a private company on 2 October 1929 with a nominal share capital of £60,000 *"to acquire the business of coachbuilders and engineers carried on at Wales Farm Road and Victoria Road, Acton, London as well as that of timber merchants and sawmillers carried on at 15, Earl's Court Road, Kensington, London as Strachans Ltd"*. The directors included members of the Strachan family - Mr. J. R. Strachan and Mrs. E. E. Strachan. Despite the change of ownership the company continued to produce bespoke coachwork for its customers.

In June 1931 John Thornycroft and Company produced a low-frame offset-drive double-decker chassis, provisionally named the XC. Five chassis were sent to Strachans' for bodying. It was designed for the Eastern National Omnibus Company in consultation with their engineers and embodied a low frame height allowing an easy step up to the rear platform. Strachans designed bodies with an overall height of 13ft 3½ins with the platform just 1ft 3½ins above the road level. The finished product seated 51 passengers.

In November 1931 Strachans were called upon to provide the bodywork for the revolutionary Gilford oil-engined front-drive passenger vehicle. They designed a body with an overall height of 12ft 11ins seating 31 on the top-deck and 25 on the lower saloon. Both were exhibited at the 1931 Commercial Motor Show.



The provisionally named Thornycroft XC double-decker with Strachans (Acton) Ltd bodywork. (Strachans (Acton) Ltd via The Bus Archive).



The 1931 Gilford 'Zeus' double-decker with Strachans 51-seat bodywork. (Strachans (Acton) Ltd via The Bus Archive).

In 1934 the Company introduced a new all-metal double-deck body. Commercial Motor enthused: *"In employing the phrase "all metal," it should be pointed out that timber is used only for the floorboards, some of the internal panels, and fillets in certain of the frame members. Furthermore, the number of screws employed as a means for attachment of panels, etc, is low, yet the removal of any member, for example, a pillar, a longitudinal, a panel or a window, is a simple matter. The construction affords great strength and ample flexibility. The frame sections are formed of bent and folded high-tensile sheet steel, specially treated against rust, and all bolts are of similar quality. Upper and lower saloons are independently built and bolted together. Every member and every part used is made in the company's own works. There are no wood packings in the pillars for the attachment of panels with screws, the well-known Strachans-Meltz patented principle being employed"*.

Also in 1934 the company, ostensibly because of financial difficulties, was reorganised and re-named Strachans (Successors) Ltd, with a new management team and directors, although the core business remained the same.

Export orders formed a substantial part of the company's business over the years and this continued to be so. In 1935 The Metropolitan Omnibus Company of Perth, Western Australia which at the time was probably the largest private bus operating concern in the Commonwealth with a fleet of about 50 vehicles consisting entirely of Leyland's products, placed an order for six Lion oil-engined buses, four of them to be equipped with 34-seater streamlined bodies by Strachans (Successors) Ltd. The bodies for the

other two vehicles would be built in Australia. These were the first oil-engined vehicles in the company's fleet, and they would have to operate under difficult conditions, as high temperatures were prevalent, for which reason the English-built bodies were designed with maximum ventilation.

Between 1939 and 1945, during World War II, Strachans were designated to build utility double-deckers, although they still continued to provide specialist bodywork for the war effort.

In 1942 Strachans produced the bodywork for a mobile kitchen for the National Fire Service, with full equipment for preparing and serving meals for 250 persons at a time. It was the first of an intended fleet of nearly 100 similar vehicles which would be stationed in the principal towns and cities throughout the country. Based on a Fordson Thames chassis the body was specially designed and built by Strachans. The equipment included a large coal-fired range which extended the full width of the body, as well as a 50-gallon water tank and a 30-gallon soup copper. The mobile kitchen also carried its own coal bins, which were fitted at the rear of the vehicle, with a sliding hatch that allowed access to the coal from inside the vehicle.

Their utility bus bodies were mostly lowbridge style on Guy Arab chassis and were quite austere in their construction. Wartime restrictions meant that normal materials were in short supply and utility bodies were constructed with unseasoned wood. Some had short lives, others lasted years!





Strachans lowbridge 55-seat utility bodywork is carried by this 1945 Bristol K6A operated by Burrows of Wombwell, seen here in Leeds Bus Station in July 1957. It was withdrawn in 1958 still carrying its original utility body. (John Kaye).

Following the cessation of hostilities in 1945 Strachans returned to peacetime coachbuilding. Many operators sent their elderly vehicles for re-bodying rather than have a long wait for new vehicles and Strachans benefitted from this trade providing new bodies for a number of operators.

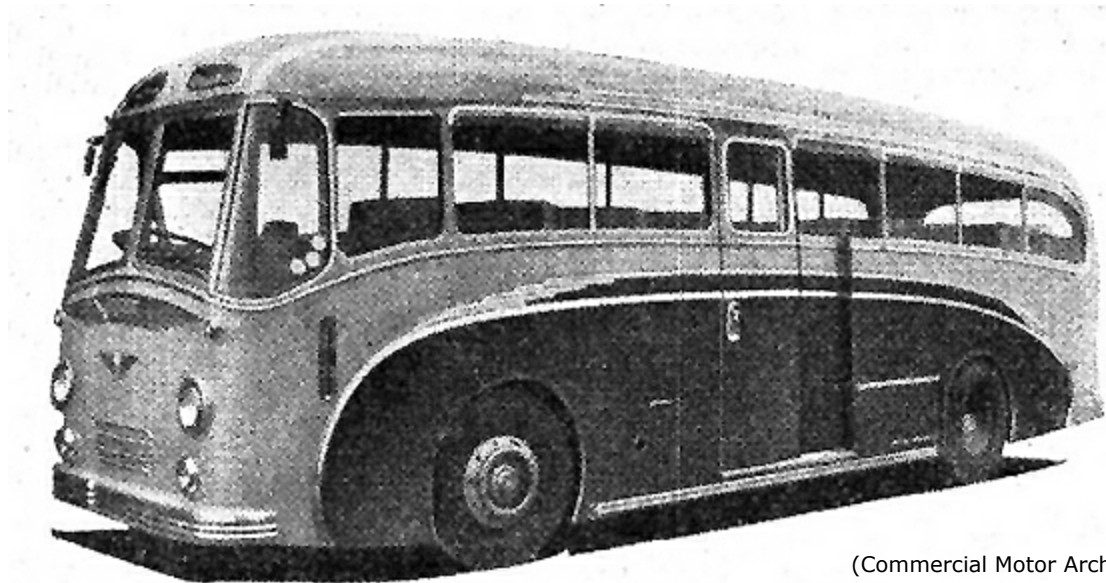
In 1948, a collaboration with S. Grahame Ross Ltd (of Chatham) resulted in the manufacture of one of their patent designs. The design allowed fabrication in several ways and to different degrees according to particular orders. Extensive jiggging was employed enabling details to be prefabricated and made not only interchangeable but capable of assembly by semi-skilled labour. 15 lowbridge Leyland double-deckers were constructed for the Western SMT Company early in the year using this design and it was expected to benefit Strachans through its simplicity of construction and cost effectiveness.

July 1951 saw the emergence of Strachans' "reversible" coach, probably one of the least attractive of their designs. Designed for underfloor engine coaches, the first body went to Jackson's Cleveland Coaches of Guisborough on a Leyland Royal Tiger chassis. It consisted of identical front and rear end styling with identical fitments such as windscreen glass, lights and corner panels. The bodywork was composite with a centre entrance and seated 35. It was not popular with coach operators and a total of only 5 bodies of this style were produced, the other 4 going to Valliant Coaches of London. It was dropped in favour of a more conventional design which appeared in 1952.



Jacksons Cleveland Coaches purchased the first "reversible" body from Strachans. The bulbous front end was replicated at the rear although without the radiator and embellishment (inset). (John Kaye).

In 1952 Strachans built the body for the first example of a new Dennis model, the underfloor-engined Lancet. This was fitted with a light-alloy 41-seat body, with the entrance at the rear. In February of the same year, the Company introduced a new model - the 'Strathrae'. The first body was built on an AEC Regal IV chassis, 30ft long and 7ft 6ins wide with seating for 41 passengers and sporting a centre entrance (below).



(Commercial Motor Archive)

The 'Strathrae' was superseded two years later by the better known 'Everest' model that was first exhibited at the 1954 Commercial Motor Show. Two models were on show - a Maudslay 41-seater of lightweight aluminium alloy construction with an unladen weight of 5 tons 13 cwt and an AEC Reliance with similar 41-seat bodywork.

Aldershot & District Traction Company had been a regular customer since 1922 when they purchased their first Strachan & Brown charabanc body, but in 1956 the last Strachans bodies were delivered. Nos. 275-282 were eight Dennis Falcon chassis with Strachans 30-seat bus body. The following year Aldershot & District chose Weymann bodies for their single-deck chassis bringing a long association to an end.

By the late 1950's the output of PSV bodies had dropped to a modest number, although the company still produced other commercial and specialist vehicles such as bodies for the bulk transport of eggs, based on Bedford-Scammell articulated units and on AEC 8-wheel chassis with 3,000 gallon tanks for the movement of milk, both for Express Dairies.

In 1962 Strachans (Successors) Ltd was acquired by the Giltspur Investment Group and its trading name was changed to Strachans (Coachbuilders) Ltd (although this company had been incorporated on 9 May 1956). The company was completely re-organised with a change of directors and management, with Mr A. E. Bullen as Chairman.



New in 1954 with Strachans 'Everest' 41-seat coachwork is Leyland Tiger Cub CU6950 of Hall brothers, South Shields, seen here in Manchester in December 1957. (John Kaye).

On 1 July 1963 production was transferred to Hamble, Hants and, under the Giltspur Group, the company had ambitious plans to become one of the largest coachbuilders in the United Kingdom, with a target output of more than 40 vehicles a week. A sales office was opened at 76 Marylebone High Street, London for customers' use when necessary.

The new works consisted of two aircraft hangars with pillarless floor areas, the main one covering 66,000 sq ft the other 21,750 sq ft. A further building of about 22,500 sq ft was planned directly in front of the main hangar and would accommodate 16 paint spray booths, each 16 ft by 44 ft. A special section of the main hangar was devoted entirely to experimental and design work, mainly in the field of glass-fibre, which Strachans considered a particularly important function at the time.

Strachans had plans to break into the municipal bus building field and had just secured an order from West Hartlepool Corporation Transport for five 33ft bodies on Leyland Leopard chassis. These would seat 43 passengers and carry 15 standees on one-man operated services and employ a dual entrance layout.

The first double-deckers to be completed at the new works were delivered to the Ayrshire Bus Owners group (A1 Service) in south-west Scotland. They were conventional 27ft highbridge bodies with rear entrance, incorporating platform doors; three mounted on AEC Regent V chassis and one on a Leyland PD2 chassis. The first front-entrance double-decker built by Strachans (apart from the unique Dartford tunnel vehicles built

in this year) was a 72-seat vehicle on Arab V chassis for demonstration duties with Guy Motors Ltd.

As well as PSV bodies other commercial vehicle bodies continued to be constructed; the company building a wide range such as battery electric milk-floats; personnel carriers for UNICEF; platform wagons on AEC chassis for British Road Services and a totally enclosed double-deck racing car carrier, complete with spare parts store, built on a Thames passenger chassis.

In 1964 Strachans introduced the Pacesetter and Pacesaver bodies. The Pacesetter was for larger buses of 45 seats, whilst the Pacesaver was for smaller chassis and seated 35-41. The range was extended in later years to include the Pacetraveller based on the Ford A 0609/0610 chassis, with a choice of petrol or diesel engine; aimed at the midibus market it seated 20; the Pacemaker for smaller 16-seat vehicles and the Pacerider an all-metal body based on the Bedford VAS chassis with an overall length of 25ft and width of 7ft 8in and seating 29.

Strachans entered into an agreement with the Superior Coach Corporation of Lima, Ohio, in 1969 giving them exclusive right to manufacture, assemble and distribute Superior bus bodies throughout Eastern and Western Europe. Superior manufactured about 8,000 bus bodies per annum, which were supplied ckd to operators throughout the world, and had an annual turnover of \$56m. Strachans, at this time, had an annual turnover of £1,400,000, representing about 500 buses. A similar agreement was





Strachans 'Pacemaker' bodywork was designed to sit on a Ford Transit chassis and seated 16. This is Bournemouth Corporation's M2 (ERU402L) new in 1973. (Stuart Little).

signed between the Superior Coach Corporation and MCW Ltd early in 1967 but had been terminated "by mutual agreement". The new agreement with Strachans was an improved one, as it made Strachans sole agents for Europe, whereas the MCW agreement had been restricted to production in the UK for export. Superior considered that Strachans was a company with "drive" and was gearing-up for mass-production methods. It still continuously produced bodywork for Government departments, and was also handling Ford Transit conversions to PSV. Although the American factory only built 8ft wide versions of the Superior, Strachans would make any necessary modifications to the bus bodies, which would initially arrive at Hamble ckd, such as reducing the width to 7ft 6in. Strachans hold the exclusive world rights for such modifications. The company had already received an order from Ghana for 100 25-seat ckd bodies to the Superior 1300 specification, mounted on BMC 600 WF 13ft 8in. wheelbase chassis. In July 1969 a further order from the Bahrain Petroleum Co. Ltd was received; based on Bedford VAM 70 chassis, they would be generally similar to 10 Superior 5100 buses on VAM 70 chassis built by Metro-Cammell Weymann Ltd last year and will seat 53 passengers on slatted wood seats.

The following year a marketing agreement was signed with the Superior Coach Corporation for the supply of Pacemaker 16-seat minibuses built by Strachans (Coachbuilders) Ltd to America. The Pacemaker body, which was currently mounted on Ford Transit chassis would, together with other Strachan bus bodies, be modified to suit a variety of American as well as British chassis, and shipped ckd. With its 6ft 1in. interior headroom, and ease of entry and exit, the Pacemaker filled a similar

segment in the American market to that which it filled in Britain. In the rush to build bigger buses, the requirement for feeder service vehicles, school buses for rural routes and company buses had been neglected. At little more than the cost of an ordinary car, the 16-seat bus was expected to fill the gap.

In March 1971 the first four of an order for eight 46-seat Pacesaver Mark III school buses were delivered to East Suffolk County Council by Strachans, based on Ford R192 chassis. The eight buses would form part of a school transport fleet operated by the education department which, Strachans claimed, realized the economics of operating its own bus service. The coachbuilders further stated that the use of purpose-built, functional vehicles by local authorities was gradually superseding hire contracts with private firms.

Announced in 1973, following the launch of Ford's A-Series range, was a completely new passenger body. Called the Pacetraveller, the body was an addition to the company's already successful Pacemaker range on the Transit chassis. The Pacetraveller was based on the Ford A 0609/0610 chassis and offered with a choice of petrol or diesel engine. The new model was aimed at the growing midibus market and had seats for 20 passengers. Strachans was also building the parcels van version of the A-series range but the Pacetraveller was a completely separate design. The Pacetraveller was 21ft 6in long, 6ft 11in wide and 8ft 6in high.

Despite the initiatives in the early 1970's sales were disappointing; coupled with a slow market for Strachans' bodywork and a strike by the workforce in 1973 the parent

company made the decision to opt out of coachbuilding and closed the factory down at short notice in mid-1974. The final complete Strachans PSV bodies were built in the early part of 1974; possibly one of the last to involve Strachans was a partially-built Pacerider 27 seat body on a Bedford VAS3 chassis (SNY420N) for the London Borough of Hackney, which had to be completed by Dormobile in August 1974. Strachans (Coachbuilders) Ltd was finally dissolved in 1976, bringing 80 years of coachbuilding to an end.

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