

SWEET TASTE OF SUCCESS

Like every coach and bus operator, the pandemic has brought Sharpes of Nottingham its fair share of challenges. But thanks to an appetite for diversification and a helping hand from a certain chocolate manufacturer, the family-run business is well positioned for the future, reports **Peter Jackson**



Lots of unusual and bizarre things have happened over the last year-and-a-bit, some much less positive than others. But even something as wretched as the coronavirus pandemic can, in fact, do the odd bit of good.

Cadbury is an official partner of Notts County F.C., Sharpes' local team, and is committed

to supporting local businesses, community projects and charitable campaigns as a core part of the partnership. This partnership helped Sharpes by raising the firm's profile, with the operator being made shirt sponsors and pitch side advertising being donated to the firm. "Jason Turner, who's the CEO of Notts County, called me and said, 'this is going to be

the weirdest phone call we've ever had – how would you like to be our home shirt sponsor for the next two to three seasons? And it won't cost you a penny!" recalled James Sharpe, Operations Director at Sharpes of Nottingham.

"Cadbury had approached Notts County and asked them 'who in your supply chain has been badly affected by Covid?'" explained



Neil Sharpe, James' brother and the family firm's Managing Director. "There were three tiers of support that Cadbury provided to these businesses, and we were fortunate enough to be chosen to receive the top tier. Notts County put forward their case to Cadbury, explaining why the businesses they'd chosen had been the worst affected. Cadbury then had a series of meetings

with us, discussing their strategy and what they wanted to do. And it grew from there."

Recounting the experience, James continued: "I was shocked a bit, obviously, and went back to the family to tell them what we'd been offered. It was great news, a great boost. We got more detail from Cadbury through various Zoom meetings, and emerged that not only

would we be the home kit sponsor, but we'd get room hire, four pitch-side advertising boards and sponsorship in the programme (which allowed us to advertise our day excursions and holidays) – it was an amazing package, we really appreciated it. If that wasn't enough, Cadbury sent us a massive box of chocolate, and they bought all 10 of the children in our

OPERATOR UPDATE / SHARPES OF NOTTINGHAM



From left, Trevor Sharpe and his wife Joy with sons James, Neil and Russell



One of the firm's Van Hool TX27 Astromegas

family Notts County kits with their names on, which was great!

“Cadbury wanted to help these teams with sponsorship, but they didn’t want to push their brand – they wanted to ‘donate’ the brand, that was the idea. It’s a great thing for them to do, helping others instead of just pushing their own brand.”

Neil added: “I think, had we not been in lockdown, we could’ve exploited it even more, but because we’ve been in lockdown for much of the time, it’s restricted the opportunities we’ve had to really capitalise on the support Cadbury and Notts County have given us. We’re hoping it will pay dividends more when we get supporters back into the grounds and we can enjoy the remaining benefits of the package, like the hospitality suite and the advertising space in the home programme. It can only get better, really.”

Making a difference

Cadbury’s support package, which is set to last for the remainder of this season and two more after that, soon began to raise the profile of the local coach and bus operator. “They first contacted me in early July, and it was supposed to start at the beginning of the season in September,” said James. “But Notts County was in the play-off final for the National League at Wembley in August, and they allowed us to feature on the kit for that match as well as a one-off. That was another bonus for us, as we got to see the kit at Wembley on national



Plaxton Supreme Mk. IV, STM 238W



A cross-section of the coach fleet

television – it was amazing. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up when I saw it!”

As a perfect example of how much more well-known Sharpes is outside of the industry now thanks to the paid-for sponsorship, scale models of its vehicles have been flying off the shelves. “We were selling some models at Christmas,” said James, “and a young girl bought one as

she’s a Notts County fan. That would never have happened before we were on the team’s kit. We’ve also sold models to people in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as Denmark, Belgium and Holland – and one in Australia!”

“There were two models made in batches of 100 each, and there’s a handful of each left at the moment,” Neil revealed. “We have had



will,” Neil replied. “We’ve got to concentrate our efforts on regenerating business though now, as we have a roadmap out of this pandemic. That said, we haven’t fared badly in it at all. We’ve lost a lot of work and revenue, don’t get me wrong, but we’ve had to diversify and get through it. We just hope we’ll come out of it bigger and stronger because people are going to want to travel.”

Looking up

So far, the signs are positive that Sharpes’ customers certainly do want to travel, its Facebook page littered with comments from loyal travellers who are looking forward to booking their next getaway onboard one of the firm’s coaches.

“We sent out a special mail shot last week advertising trips to ride on the Flying Scotsman on the Norfolk Railway, and sent out letters to customers, and we’ve got four out of 52 tickets left,” said James. “I took six bookings for it myself and I was only in the office an hour!”

Looking ahead, Neil added: “After the first lockdown ended, we started to get busy again quite quickly. So, I’ve no reason to believe it won’t bounce back quite healthily. It’s not going to be instant, though; a lot of what we do is European touring, so we’re going to have to be a bit more patient with that side of our business.”

“The good thing about Sharpes is, because we are bus and coach, we have quite a diverse operation anyway. The buses are as busy as ever – we’ve actually picked up extra contracts because of schools wanting to ensure social distancing. Notts County Council drafted us in to help reduce the patronage on some of the services. We have more bus work now than we’ve ever had, to be honest, although we’ve lost the coach tour work that we normally do.”

As with most businesses, Sharpes had to act quickly in the early stages of the pandemic to ensure its survival. “During the first lockdown, any vehicles that weren’t being used were SORN and went onto laid-up insurance rates, although we kept moving them and inspecting them every six weeks,” recalled Neil. “We basically mothballed the business; nothing was running at all back then apart from one service for key workers and one for the elderly who wouldn’t otherwise have been able to get to the shops.”

“Notts County Council told us we didn’t have to run that one,” said James, “but we felt we should. By June, we were running about five other services along with rail replacement work, using our PSVAR coaches. And come September, all of our bus work was back on, but with extra contracts as well. We also managed to run a few tours last autumn as



A look at Sharpes’ ‘Club Class’ interior spec

models made before, but they’ve been just for us – we’ve not sold them to the public. It’s my dad’s passion. He’s got thousands of model buses, most of which are in our training room in glass display cabinets. We were brought up with that passion for models too, with remote control cars and things when we were kids.

“We used a company called Code 3 Models, who previously produced a special model of one of our vehicles, a Van Hool T9 Alizee, for my dad’s 65th birthday as a surprise gift. That started off the practice of having models made of our own vehicles.

“In the past, we’d sometimes sell models at

coach rallies throughout the year, like the UK Coach Rally, AC Rally and Wollaton Autokarna in Nottingham. Predominantly we attend these events with our heritage vehicles, but we always tend to take one of the latest touring vehicles along as well, and hand out brochures and sell models.

“I think it was a mixture of various things – people being locked down and having plenty of time perhaps – but when we advertised our latest models for sale online, the phone just rang off the hook. We’ve sold almost 200 so far, I’d say.”

I asked the duo if they planned to commission any more models this year. “I think we probably

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This unregistered Duple Viceroy is well-known in preservation circles



VWA 290L, a Plaxton Panorama Elite III-bodied AEC Reliance



The Sharpes family loves Van Hool coaches, new and old

well, which attracted quite a few late bookings. Fortunately, we've been able to keep all of our staff, which has been great."

Unprecedented times

With the second-hand coach market having changed beyond recognition in the past 12 months, I asked Neil and James for their view on the importance of PSVAR conversions – will they continue to command such a premium another 12 months from now? "I think we're in unprecedented times with the second-hand coach market," said Neil. "There have been so many businesses that have either chosen to cease trading or haven't been able to continue trading, so the market has been absolutely saturated. Nearly-new vehicles that would have cost £300,000 to buy new are now being sold for a third of that.

"The only way people can sell the vehicles on or generate any kind of additional value in them is by converting them to PSVAR. But PSVAR, to us, isn't the be-all and end-all, because it's not a requirement for the

closed-door tours we do in the UK and on the continent. It really depends on what kind of work you carry out."

James agreed, adding: "We have a mixture of high-capacity, corporate and Club Class vehicles in our fleet that are PSVAR-compliant, so if we have a client that knows they need one of those then they can book them."

"There's a place for PSVAR, clearly," Neil continued, "and people are investing a lot of money in it, but don't lose sight of the fact that it's not required for all types of coach work."

A key selling point for PSVAR coaches is their versatility, which is something Sharpes as a business has prided itself on from day one. "In the early days, when we set the business up, we always maintained that we needed to do both school bus and coach work," James explained. "A lot of people don't want to do the school work, but we felt it was necessary because it is your bread and butter. That's still true to this day, especially during the pandemic."

"We're lucky because we have got a lot of loyal clients, both on the tour side and the day



Ex-London Transport AEC Regent III, LLU 701



The operator regularly attends coach and bus shows



Sharpes' Van Hool coaches are built to a high-spec

excursion side," Neil added. "I'd like to think that's a testament to our standards, our quality of vehicles and the operation we run."

Growing fleet

Talking of vehicles, Sharpes hasn't shied away from adding to its fleet in the last year, despite the turbulent times we're in. "Believe it or not, we've bought three extra vehicles in the last year," said Neil. "On the bus side, all of our vehicles are double-deckers – 15 Alexander ALX400 Volvo B7TLs and three Volvo Olympians. We recently added a Wrightbus-bodied Volvo. We've always wanted a 10.8m proper full-size coach – not a midicoach – so we bought a Van Hool TX11 Alicron as well.

"And finally, we bought back our first brand-new Van Hool that we sold on in 2016. It was new to us in 2011, and we bought it back in January of 2020. It hadn't had the best of lives since it left us, which is a shame really because it was immaculate when we sold it. But we got it for a very fair price, and we've since done a full refurbishment of it inside and out. Everything's been renewed; all of the interior has been out and it's been retrimmed, any bodywork damage has been sorted and it's had all of the maintenance it needed to the mechanicals."

Explaining the reasoning behind re-acquiring the Astromega, Neil admitted: "Being honest, we're not just about making money – we run the business with our hearts as well as our heads. It is important that we make money and we're profitable, of course, but equally we do have a passion for coaches. With it being our first ever brand-new Van Hool – we've had many since – it was a special milestone in our history.

"We traded it in at Arriva Bus & Coach for another brand-new Astromega, and they then

had it on long-term hire with another operator. They had to recall it though as the operator wasn't paying the rent on it.

"I'm a good friend and business associate of Andrew Cullen of Arriva Bus & Coach, which sadly closed earlier this year. He phoned me up and said 'I've got one of your old vehicles here, what do you think?' It didn't really fit our profile in terms of double-deck coaches, because it's too old, but I told him that we could do something with it if we could get it for the right price.

"It'll go back on a cherished registration like most of our coaches are and I think, now it's been refurbished, if you put it next to our newest Astromega few people would be able to tell the difference – they both have the same classic design."

"It'll be PSVAR when we've finished with it as well – it has the wheelchair space already on it along with the Hanover controller for the

destination equipment," James added.

"It was supposed to be going to the UK Coach Rally last year," continued Neil, "but obviously it was cancelled and this year's event has been as well. So, whether it'll go next year or not I don't know, but it certainly sits alongside all of our other touring coaches very well, despite being one of the oldest."

Has it found a permanent home in the Sharpes fleet now, then? "If it behaves itself, yeah!" said Neil. "There's no reason why we shouldn't keep it. This is why we're more diverse than a lot of other operators, because we can offer everything from a 17-seater minibus up to a proper, 83-seater double-decker touring coach. There's three Astromegas in the fleet, all 83-seaters, that can go anywhere across Europe. Even though there's a six-year span of age difference, if you put them all next to each other you wouldn't know the difference.

"In fact, if anything, the older T9s are probably better-built than the new TXs. There's been a lot of pressure in recent years to reduce the weight of vehicles to make them more efficient and environmentally-friendly, which comes with a compromise in terms of structural quality. That's not to say the TX isn't still good, because it is, but I think a T9 would outlast a TX."

Sharpes' heritage fleet remains a key part of the business. "We've got one of the biggest heritage fleets in the country I would say, and the vehicles that attend shows are in concourse condition," said Neil. "We've got stuff in the pipeline that's mid-refurbishment, and other plans on the heritage side once things return to normal.

"We've got a brand-new, unregistered Duple Viceroy that dates back to 1971 – it's never had a paying passenger on it. It'd done 168 miles when we bought it at 38 years old. It's like a time capsule, because it's absolutely original." //



The Sharpes name has become much more widely known thanks to the Cadbury partnership