

Minnie Tennant of Armadale

A story of petrol rationing and two tragedies

Minnie Tennant (born 1896) was one of seven children of James and Marion Tennant of Armadale. Her father and two older brothers worked in the local coal mines, and as a sideline, offered motor cars and 'char-a-bancs' (open, single-decker buses) for hire. As the motor business developed, Mr Tennant was able to give up mine work and become a full-time motor hirer, using his sons as drivers in their spare time.

When the war broke out, all three sons – Joseph, James and George - went off to the army, and so James turned to his older daughter Minnie for help with the driving. In addition, she worked as a bus conductress with a local firm; the photograph shows her in her work uniform.

Joy-riding and jaunting

Another difficulty that James Tennant faced was the growing scarcity of petrol. From September 1916, the use of motor char-a-bancs for 'pleasure running' was prohibited, and a writer in the gazette deplored 'joy-riding': 'the number of motors that pass along the highways with hampers slung behind show that petrol is being freely used for pleasure purposes by private parties. It will be interesting to observe if the new restrictions will bring about a diminution of this kind of jaunting.'

Linlithgow Gazette 25 Aug 16, p2

Throughout 1917, petrol became ever scarcer. Britain imported most of its petrol (with the exception of a small amount produced by the Scottish shale industry), and German submarine warfare had caused the loss of 'several very large tank steamers'. Those who relied on motor vehicles sought alternative sources of fuel. Mr Tennant fell foul of the law when he was charged with having used petrol for his char-a-banc to take football players from Armadale to Bathgate for a football match, this not being an essential journey as defined by the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). 'He had applied for and been refused a certificate from the Chief Constable to allow this, and claimed to be running the vehicle on naphtha, but lab analysis showed it contained 73% motor spirit.' He was admonished.

Linlithgow Gazette **Between 19 Jan and 30 Mar** 1917.

Permits and gas bags

In mid 1917, the local Petrol Committee (which oversaw the licensing of petrol supplies in the local area) reduced the allowance. '...hirers especially have been hard hit... they must now apply for a permit to use their cars, state for what purpose the cars will be used' and obtain a permit and licence. 'This regulation just about snuffs out all the local hirers who have been depending upon chance hires and have little regular work of a kind which the authorities approve...'

'A motor hirer was brought before the Sheriff Court, so that the Fiscal could make clear to the wider motor trade but it was not legal to use a motor car to drive to visit any person who was ill, unless the person was dangerously ill. 'He would like to point out to the trade that if a party asked for a car to go to Bangour to see someone in that institution, the owner of the motor must satisfy himself as far as possible, that

the hirer was going to see, not simply a relative who happens to be at Bangour and is getting on nicely, but necessarily a patient who is there and who is dangerously ill.' Linlithgow Gazette 14 Jun 1918, p3

Bus services had to be curtailed, even those taking school children to school and miners to work.

By late November 1917, "local owners of motors are arranging to install gas as the motive power in place of petrol, which is now almost unobtainable.' Linlithgow Gazette 2 Nov 1917, p2. Some local buses ran on gas, storing it in huge balloons on the roof.

'The restrictions on petrol have brought the horse brake back into its own, and the fine weather we have been having during the past week has seen it in great demand for short distance pic-nic parties.' Linlithgow Gazette 6 Jul 1917, p3

Knocked down

Bureaucracy, DORA, permits, little petrol, no drivers - by early 1918, Mr Tennant must have thought his problems could not get any worse – but they did. 'When Miss Tennant, daughter of Mr Joseph Tennant, motor hirer, West End, Armadale, was conveying a party to Bathgate in a motor car, a man coming towards Armadale staggered in front of the car and was knocked down. The car was immediately stopped, and the man picked up and brought to Armadale Police Station in an unconscious state. Dr Gilchrist, having been called in, found the man suffering from a fractured skull, fractured left thighs, and fractured ribs. He died at noon on Sunday.... No fault whatever was attached to the driver.' Linlithgow Gazette, 22 Feb 1918, p3

Spanish flu

But the worst was still to come. In November 1918, just before the Armistice, the Gazette reported two more deaths in Armadale from the Spanish flu. 'Miss Minnie Tennant, the eldest daughter of Mr Joseph Tennant, motor hirer, West End, Armadale, died from heart failure brought about through the effects of the "flu"... Miss Tennant, from the fact that since the start of the war, when her three brothers were called upon to do duty, she had acted as principal motor driver to the firm, was deservedly very popular. She was 22 years of age.' Linlithgow Gazette 8 Nov 1918, p3

The three sons survived, and the bus hire company of Tennant and Sons was bought out by SMT in 1926.