

Rolling out the welcome wagon in Cheltenham

The phrase 'Rolling out the welcome wagon' is defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary as '*a happy and friendly way of greeting people who are new to a place*'¹, as in '*She likes to roll out the welcome wagon for everyone who moves onto the block*'. I have also seen it described as '*A vehicle bringing gifts and samples from local merchants to newcomers in a community*'².

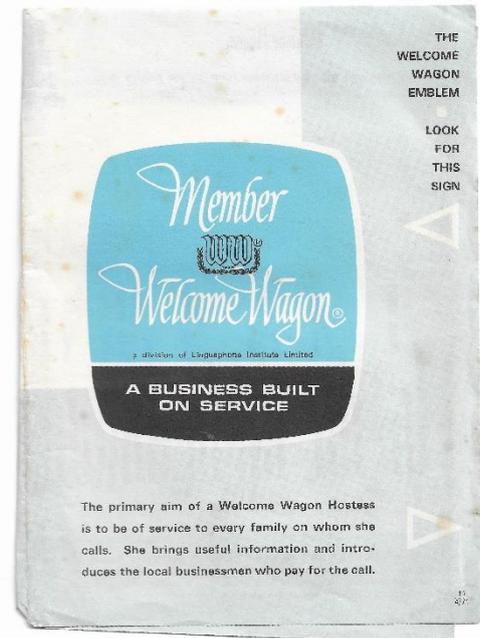
Welcome Wagon is officially the name and trademark of an iconic American and Canadian company based in Florida which connects local businesses with people who have recently moved into an area. They describe themselves as 'America's welcoming service'. Today, Welcome Wagon use email, social media and digital advertising to make those connections between businesses and movers, but their principles have remained unchanged since the company was set up in 1928. Interesting, at one time Welcome Wagon was a division of Linguaphone Institute Limited. Welcome Wagon's hostesses were expected to visit around 40 homes a month. From the beginning, the company's business model provided an opportunity for women to earn an income, as they could work around family commitments.

'So, what does this have to do with the history of Cheltenham?' I hear you ask. Well, recently I came across evidence that the Welcome Wagon company was operating in Cheltenham in about 1971. Of course, as a researcher and local historian I had to find out more. The leaflet that I have in my possession shows that newcomers to Cheltenham would be greeted by a Welcome Wagon Hostess who would introduce them to the participating companies who paid for her to call. The Hostess on my leaflet is named as Mrs Harris from Prestbury.

My leaflet includes a list of companies that were members of the scheme in Cheltenham in 1971, and who offered discount coupons to encourage newcomers to take up their services:

- Associated Motorways, Coach Station, Cheltenham
- British Rail Information Services, Eastgate Street Station, Gloucester
- Cotswold Life Magazine, Oriel Terrace, Cheltenham
- Cheltenham Dairies, Church Farm, Leckhampton
- Drake & Co. Department Store, Winchcombe Street, Cheltenham
- Farrars Ltd., Fuel Merchants, Albion Street, Cheltenham
- Lotus Garden Restaurant, Winchcombe Street, Cheltenham
- Midland Electricity Board, Winchcombe Street, Cheltenham
- Paragon Laundry, Hatherley Road, Cheltenham
- West Midland Fuel Oils, Llanthony Mills, Gloucester.

Spa Vision of 271 High Street Cheltenham was also apparently a member, although not on my leaflet.



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Spa Vision

OF 271 High Street

10% off first purchase

EXTENDS GREETINGS

to

Through Welcome Wagon

PLEASE CALL AND BRING THIS CARD

HOSTESS DATE

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/welcome-wagon>

² https://www.lexico.com/definition/welcome_wagon

Welcome Wagon was a form of franchise, but I have no idea how widespread the company was outside the USA in 1971. Interestingly, they still have a significant presence in America. According to their website³, Welcome Wagon has helped over 100 million households since 1928, including American Presidents as they moved into the White House. Interestingly, I have since discovered that Welcome Wagon came to the UK in early 1964. A separate company was set up, although it shared the same principles of the US and Canadian company. Welcome Wagon UK Ltd. started in London and was soon spreading across the country⁴. This new concept was not universally 'welcomed'. Newspaper reports suggest that some people considered it was too American and traders complained that the costs to their businesses were excessive. On 31 March 1975 Mrs N J Bazin, the Company's British managing director, announced that the company would be wound up on 30 April because of rising costs, after about 10 years⁵.

All this got me thinking. How long did Welcome Wagon exist in Cheltenham? Do any members of the Cheltenham Local History Society remember anyone using their services? Did anyone work for one of the companies that were part of the scheme?

It would appear that Welcome Wagon was very much of its time in Cheltenham and by 1975 it had gone the way of Green Shield Stamps and other American ideas - unless, of course, you know more...

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Cheltenham Local History Society

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³ www.welcomewagon.com

⁴ *Daily Mail* 26 Jun 1964 p.21 col.2

⁵ *Reading Evening Post* 31 Mar 1975 p.7 col.3