

Ralph Lee MBE (1903–2002)

In 1999, at 96 years of age, Ralph Lee was awarded an MBE in the New Year's honours list for his services to the caravan industry.

Mr Lee first caught the camping bug in 1918 when he made a tent on his mother's sewing machine and soon after became a keen member of the Scouting movement. Twelve years later, a rainy honeymoon in South Wales with new wife Muriel (née Waters) encouraged him to discover a more luxurious way of camping.

Using the axle of a Morris Cowley he built his first caravan, which was named Who Cares after a popular 1930s tune. This was to be the first of 11 versions of Who Cares which Lee owned during his lifetime, some hand built and others purchased from manufacturers.



Figure 1: Ralph Lee (left) and his wife Muriel taking tea at Port D'Envalira, Andorra, the highest pass in the Pyrenees. The Cheltenham caravan is towed by a Triumph Herald, 1960s.

In the late 1930s Ralph and Muriel ventured across the channel for the first time, taking a leisurely caravan tour to Greece. However, Who Cares was soon to take on a new role as the family home following a German bombing raid which destroyed their house in Surbiton. The Lees, with the addition of their young daughter Patricia, spent the duration of the conflict pitched in a field near Guildford.

In 1947 the couple began touring once more, travelling through war-torn France and Belgium to Holland to attend an International Rally of Camping Clubs. During their caravanning career the couple crossed the channel 74 times, towing their caravans half a million miles to locations such as Portugal, the Black Forest, the Alps, Venice and Sicily. Ralph and Muriel also made pioneering trips which credited them as the first caravanners to enter the Soviet Union and to reach the Arctic Circle.

Despite continuing his profession as a dental surgeon, Ralph Lee worked as a consultant in his free time creating caravan and equipment designs. His innovative ideas inspired caravan manufacturer Sam Alper who later became the millionaire owner of Caravans International, the largest producer of British caravans during the 1960s.

Ralph Lee was also a keen and life-long member of associated clubs. He became a member of the Camping Club at the age of 18 (now The Camping & Caravanning Club) and later became a Vice-President. He also joined The Caravan Club in 1947 of which he became an honorary life member.

After Muriel's death in 1993, Ralph travelled abroad only once more to France. Instead he settled for trips on English soil preferring the Cotswolds until his death in 2002 at the age of 99.

A highlight of The Caravan Club Collection, hosted by the National Motor Museum Trust, is a collection of over 250 photographs which charts the touring adventures of this caravanning pioneer. Donated to the Club in 2005

following its discovery in the attic of Mr Lee's former home, the collection has been catalogued and digitised to improve preservation and access.

Ralph Lee's unique photograph collection is a lasting legacy of a true caravan pioneer and explorer.

Further Reading:

Constance, H., 2001. *First in the field: a century of The Camping and Caravanning Club*. Coventry: The Camping and Caravanning Club.

Hammond, R., 2009. *A short history of caravans in the UK*. London: Weidenfield & Nicolson.

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