

# The Roads and Road Transport History Association

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## The Southern Railway and its response to bus competition: the company's situation in 1923

**Reg Davies PhD**

*At the March 2016 meeting in Coventry Reg Davies presented the principal results of his research into the history of the Southern Railway (SR) and its response to bus competition, recently completed as a PhD thesis (as reported briefly in our May issue, page 3). This paper is drawn from the first part of that research, examining the position the railway faced on its formation in 1923.*

### Introduction

To understand the competitive position of the SR at its formation in January 1923, it is necessary to review the competition to railways that arose in the UK from the mid 1890s. Coming first from trams in urban areas, the railway response was electrification of its suburban services. Although in their early years buses operated complementary road services in rural areas, after 1920 their rapid development made them competitors. However, the demands of war, the continuance of

government control, agreeing a new structure and then implementing that structure limited the railways' ability to react to competition. Their one major attempt, by seeking powers to operate road services, was unsuccessful.

Against this background, the SR predecessor's loss of business to trams and their response of electrification were typical of national trends, as was their minimal involvement in bus services. However, each company's support for its particular system of electrification was one of the major causes of conflict in the amalgamation negotiations. The difficulties of this process meant that the organisation of the SR was not finally effective until 1924. Only then could formulation of its competitive response, especially to buses, begin. However, much valuable time had been lost, in which competitors had become established.

### National trends

From 1830 railways obtained the advantage of speed over other forms of transport. This meant that there was little effective competition to them except in niche markets. Consequently railway management did not have to be greatly concerned with competition from other forms of transport. However, governments introduced a regulatory system to try to

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prevent any abuses of the monopoly power the railways possessed. Since it was regulation that curtailed their freedom of action rather than competition, the railway companies concentrated on responses to the regulatory regime. Developments by other forms of transport did not concern them overmuch and they grew unaccustomed to considering their competitive response. That situation was understandable so long as the only form of locomotion on the roads was the horse. However two technological developments to mechanise road transport, the use of electricity and the internal combustion engine, changed that.

The use of electricity was the earlier of the two. First demonstrated in Berlin in 1879, pioneer electrified railway lines were opened at Brighton and the Giant's Causeway in 1883, Blackpool being another early example. However, their scope was limited until Sprague's work in America in 1888, which allowed many individual cars to operate at the same time on one tram network, and thus enabled successful electrification of hitherto horse-worked tramways. The first UK system to be operated on what was to become the standard overhead wire system was Leeds in 1891. Doubt surrounds the inception of the internal combustion engine, which could be said to date from Daimler's trials of 1886 or the Paris to Bordeaux race of 1895. However, a significant date in the UK is generally taken as the removal in November 1896 of speed limits of 4 mph in the country and 2 mph in towns and the need for a man to walk ahead of the vehicle. Further discussion of this early history may be found in the paper by John Dickson-Simpson in our November 2014 issue.

The 1890s may thus be taken as the beginning of effective road competition. Sensing the new markets British Electric Traction (BET) was established in 1896 to operate electric tramway systems in urban areas and National Electric Construction Company, with similar objectives, the next year. Development was rapid from the mid-1890s. Faster and of higher capacity than horse trams, with a high standard of comfort and significantly, cheaper fares, the electric tram spread in urban areas and sometimes outside them, where they encouraged building. They offered a much superior alternative to the railways' short distance services.

The use of the internal combustion engine came later and it was first seen as a replacement for the horse in short distance work. Initial difficulties of vehicle reliability and the lack of repair facilities and petrol soon began to be overcome. A significant development was the establishment of the Eastbourne bus fleet in 1903. Although introduced on amenity grounds in preference to a tram system, it proved for the first time that buses were a practical alternative. But reliability problems lingered; they forced the bus subsidiary of

BET in Birmingham for instance to abandon its operations from 1907 until 1912.

The first really reliable vehicle to be built in quantity was the London B type bus of 1910. Indeed they were so reliable that they were used to transport troops in the First World War. Once established, the motor bus was able to carry more passengers with a lower operating cost than the horse bus it replaced. Like the electric tram, it had greater speeds and lower fares. Although there was some indication before the First World War that buses could compete with railways over longer distances, their challenge to the railways came after 1920.

The internal combustion engine was also used in cars and motor cycles. Consequently their development, like buses, came in the 1900s. Cars especially began to be used for business and professional purposes, especially by doctors, as well retaining their original pleasure use. Not only did cars and motor cycles displace horse drawn personal travel but the latter began to be purchased by those whose only form of transport until then had been a pedal cycle. Nevertheless the number of cars was small and their use confined to the upper classes. This, and their only partial use as an alternative to rail transport, meant their challenge was to come after the First World War. Indeed it was not until about 1930 that mass motoring really began.

### **The railways' response**

Since the earliest challenge had come from electric tramways, the first railway reaction, in the 1900s, was to the resulting loss of short distance urban business. The North Eastern Railway suffered an almost 60% loss of passengers and receipts in 1902 on its Tyneside services by the introduction of competing electric tramway services. In deciding to electrify its own services in the area, it typified the railway response. Services began in 1904. Not only were passengers regained from the trams, new traffic was attracted especially from stations outside the city. Similar reasons and results could be seen in the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway's electrification from Liverpool to Southport in 1904 and to Aintree in 1906, as well as from Manchester to Bury in 1916. Two of the SR's predecessors were comparable. The London Brighton & South Coast Railway (LBSCR) and London & South Western Railway (LSWR) London suburban schemes of 1909 and 1916 respectively will be noticed later. However each scheme made use of a different system of electrification and only in the 1920s were attempts made to standardise them.

Railway reaction to buses subtly changed. Initially they were seen as extensions of the system. Hence Sir George Newnes, Chairman of the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway, a company later to be absorbed by the SR, formed a separate company to run a service to

Ilfracombe from the railway's Blackmoor station in June 1903. After prosecution for exceeding the speed limit of 8mph, the service was withdrawn and the vehicles sold to the Great Western Railway (GWR). That company opened a service to The Lizard in August 1903 in what is taken as the start of railway bus services. It introduced the service as a cheaper alternative to the light railway it was being pressed to construct.

This rationale was also at work in the introduction of services by the North Eastern Railway between Beverley and Beeford also in August 1903. 1904 saw an LSWR service between Exeter and Chagford and a Great Eastern Railway one from Lowestoft to Southwold. In 1905 the London & North Western Railway (LNWR) began bus services for much the same reason. Although the GWR built up the largest railway owned bus fleet, it was never clear whether it had legal powers to operate them, a situation shared with some other railways. However, the value of the bus services meant nobody was prepared to bring an action to establish the legal position. The railways attempts to obtain such powers will be considered later.

### **The aftermath of World War One**

If the competitive challenge and the railway response began to become evident from around the mid-1890s and the outbreak of war, the return of peace saw a greatly changed situation. Technical development of road vehicles was greatly accelerated by the war. At its end there was a large fleet of vehicles for disposal, former servicemen who had been both trained to drive and paid terminal gratuities. In addition, vehicle manufacturers returned to peacetime production. This supply of equipment, labour and capital, coupled with pent up demand from unspent wartime earnings, fuelled the great expansion of road services for both passengers and freight in the post war period. And the railway strike of 1919 demonstrated that road transport was a realistic alternative. The railways' competitive position had been fatally weakened.

However, the ability of the railways to react to this challenge was severely restricted. Maintenance and renewal of the system had been limited under the pressure of wartime traffic and the companies now needed to overtake the arrears of work. As wartime government control was extended until August 1921 in order to allow time to decide on the future structure of the industry, the companies were prevented from beginning work on modernising their systems. Instead their energies were principally concentrated on negotiations with the government on the new structure for the industry, then with their partners in setting up the new grouping company and finally in agreeing that company's new organisation structure. In some cases it took until 1924 for this process to be completed. Ten years had thus elapsed from the outbreak of war in 1914 during which little had been done to react to road

competition. And equipment and services had not much changed in that period.

### **Parliamentary powers**

There had been one attempt to react by rectifying the doubt about whether the railways had the legal powers to operate road services noticed earlier. In 1921 the nascent London Midland & Scottish Railway (LMSR) promoted a Bill to enable it to carry goods exclusively by road without using rail for any part of the journey. Since the Ministry of Transport contended that railway rates should be charged for such journeys, rather than a distinct road rate that it had proposed, the LMSR withdrew the Bill. The Ministry's opposition to a proposal agreed with traders' representatives was given as the rationale. However, the unattractive rates to traders that would have resulted may have been an unspoken reason for the withdrawal. No further application was made until 1928. By then, much damage to the railway's business had been done by the rapid growth of road transport.

### **Rail electrification**

The three constituents of the SR suffered from tram competition to their suburban services. The first to respond was the LBSCR. Election traction was introduced from 1903 on the London County Council tramways that competed with the LBSCR South London Line between London Bridge and Victoria via Denmark Hill. The 8 million passengers on the line consequently declined to 3.25 million in 1909. In that year an electrified service was introduced and by 1910 all the lost traffic had returned. After twelve years experience, William Forbes, the General Manager, stated there had been increases of over 150% in traffic and over 200% in receipts. The return on capital for the scheme was over 15%.

To Philip Dawson, the company's Consulting Electrical Engineer, it was certain that all passengers travelling 3 or 4 miles or more would prefer the electric railway to the tram, even at higher fares. Speed of travel was two or three times that of the tram and the passenger's time of arrival at destination was predictable. Waiting rooms, sheltered platforms and the certainty of joining the next train were more attractive than waiting in the streets. Forbes added that passengers crowded on to the trains but the company received no complaints, as the journey was so quick and the service so frequent.

The second response came from the LSWR. Electric tramway services had been inaugurated by London United Tramways in Middlesex and Surrey in stages from 1901 to 1907. In its suburban area by 1913 the LSWR had lost more than £100,000 a year in receipts and one and a quarter million passengers. The company's reaction lagged until the appointment of Hugh Drummond as Chairman in 1911 and Herbert

Walker as General Manager the next year. Whilst a service to Wimbledon came in 1915, most of the company's inner suburban services were electrified in the following year. Walker saw electrification as a way to obtain greater efficiency and to increase both traffic and net revenue. The results were similar to the LBSCR's. The half million passengers of the electrified area of 1913 had become over a million in 1921. The lost passengers had returned and there was the possibility of further growth.

The third constituent, the South Eastern & Chatham Railway (SECR), had plans to respond to tramway competition but was unable to put them into execution. When the SECR was formed in 1899, one of its prime assets was short distance London suburban traffic. Typical of this was the Herne Hill to Holborn Viaduct line. However this was paralleled by the Walworth and Camberwell Roads. When the London County Council introduced electric tram services along them in 1904, passengers deserted the railway. Receipts at Camberwell on this section declined from £3,800 in 1905 to £700 in 1914. Unsurprisingly Cosmo Bonsor, the SECR Chairman, bleakly recorded in 1922 the short-distance Metropolitan traffic of the company '...no longer exists; competition by tram and omnibus has killed it...'. Whilst electrification plans to respond to this challenge were developed, the First World War meant they were postponed.

Each of the SR constituents was therefore firmly convinced that electrification was the way to meet road competition. The LBSCR was keen to resume its suburban electrification scheme, originally authorised in 1913. On the LSWR second stage plans for the suburban area as far as Guildford remained unrealised. Having secured financing, the SECR was keen to press ahead. The contrast between the urgent desire to proceed of the LBSCR and SECR and the caution of the LSWR would be a thorny strand of the amalgamation negotiations. That each had selected a different system of electrification added more complexity.

### **Growing bus competition**

In line with the national trend, trams were seen as the principal form of competition by the three constituents. Their involvement with bus operation was minimal and was viewed as an extension of railway operation. Since the pioneering service from Blackmoor to Ilfracombe only ran for some five weeks, it was of little importance. As previously mentioned, LSWR bus operations began with a service from Exeter to Chagford in 1904. After an experimental period, a service from Lyndhurst Road to New Milton and another from Farnham to Haslemere began in 1905.

The complementary nature of these services was best seen in another from Totton to Fawley; withdrawn in 1908, the service was ultimately provided by a branch

line in 1925. Only the Chagford route continued to SR days, being withdrawn in 1924. Whilst the SECR had peripheral involvement in bus services, provided by a contractor, there was none by the LBSCR. Cosmo Bonsor of the SECR merely noted the beginnings of bus competition as a threat in 'the area outside the Metropolis' in 1922. This disinterest in buses contributed to the lack of support for the LMSR attempt to obtain road powers noticed later.

### **Merging the three companies**

Since the Railway Amalgamation Tribunal did not authorise the establishment of the SR until 12 December 1922, there was little opportunity to introduce a new organisation before the company began operations on 1 January 1923. Consequently the existing three administrations continued. The first Board meeting of the SR on 4 January 1923 appointed the three General Managers of the constituent companies to act jointly and to prepare an organisation for the company within three months. Joint management was 'not an ideal arrangement' but 'a temporary expedient to shelve a probably worse position'.

The new organisation for the SR was approved in principle by the Board in June 1923. In announcing this, the *Railway Gazette* remarked it was the last to decide on chief officers and even then no decision as to the General Manager had been made. Appointments began to be made from 1 July 1923. Eventually the introduction of one organisation with one head was completed in 1924.

### **Seeking powers for road transport**

Amid the concerns of the amalgamation, brief thought was given to applying for powers to convey both merchandise and passengers by road irrespective of whether either had travelled by rail. In November 1921, Sir Herbert Walker of the LSWR mentioned to his LBSCR and SECR colleagues that the group, which became the LMSR, intended to apply for Parliamentary powers to do this and he suggested the Southern Group might do the same. However, as the Parliamentary timetable meant there was less than two weeks to obtain agreement to such a Bill, it was agreed to 'wait and see' the result of the LMSR group's application.

October 1922 saw a return to the subject. The Bill promoted in the previous year had been withdrawn, as already noticed, but not before its scope had been solely confined to goods traffic. The LNWR, on behalf of the LMSR group, wished to make a further attempt to obtain road powers and had asked other railway companies to simultaneously promote similar Bills for that purpose. The LNWR felt that existing road hauliers were entitled only to protection from unfair competition. Consequently the rates to be charged should be settled by the Railway Rates Tribunal.

The General Managers and Solicitors of the three Southern companies met on 6 October and decided it was 'not desirable to accede to the request'. No doubt that was influenced by the decision to confine the previous Bill to goods traffic. With about three quarters of their receipts from passengers, goods traffic was not as important to the constituents as to other railways. The LBSCR Board 'approved and confirmed' the decision. On the SECR officers had pointed out the company's vulnerability to road motor competition in view of the short mileage and comparatively high class (i.e. high value and low bulk) nature of the goods traffic in its area. This was probably true of all three constituents. Yet it was felt advisable to follow the example of the company's partners in the SR. The SECR Board accordingly decided it should not join in promoting a Bill. In addition to the comparative unimportance of goods traffic, the SECR probably felt it had more important issues, notably electrification, to settle with its new partners.

### **Wider bus competition**

Some indication of bus competition can be seen in its upsurge in the summer of 1921. Sidney Garke, who had developed BET's bus operations, thought the increased traffic between London and the coast was not the start of an attack upon the railway. Rather it reflected their temporarily handicapped state and this explained the return to rail the next year. But for quite rural services 'there exists no practical alternative to the omnibus'. In a perceptive prediction he felt the car a more serious competitor to both the railway and the bus with an effect 'by no means limited to first class traffic'. Yet as the challenge came at the end of their existence, when they were preoccupied with amalgamation negotiations, the three constituents had not formulated a competitive response to the growth of bus services. This would be a task for the SR. However, since the SR's predecessors had twice decided not to apply for road powers, and in any case the LMSR had withdrawn its Bill, the course of action was by no means clear.

### **Conclusion**

Inevitably from August 1921 to January 1924 therefore most attention had been directed towards internal reorganisation. Although there was an awareness of the growth of road competition, these more pressing concerns meant no action was taken. Nevertheless the SR was well placed to respond to tramway competition by following the electrification plans of its constituents. By contrast it had no response to the growth of bus services. Indeed by twice declining to be involved in the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to operate road services, it had prejudiced its ability, at least for a time, to react to road competition. Only when the company's permanent organisation was established could attention be given to formulating its response. Much valuable time had been lost.

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## Association News

### Chairman, Bob McCloy

Two incidents have occurred, which possibly characterise extreme aspects of the Association's role: the serious pursuit of matters of long term strategic consequence, and, no less seriously, the enthusiastic search for the obscure.

The first was Ian Souter's visit to Swansea. Readers will remember Ian's lively address at Coventry. He had decided to follow up contacts in south Wales and had travelled down all the way from the Bridge of Allan. His was not, however, a simple quest to see transport artefacts: he was on a mission. How could we, as an association, get academics, politicians and the general public to take more seriously the vital importance of public transport, especially by road? We earnestly discussed possibilities over an enjoyable meal. Margaret and I spoke of our hopes for the development of the Journal in collaboration with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Here surely was the very instrument: a vigorous university and a journal working together. Ian undertook to join the enterprise suggesting immediately some ideas that might be taken forward. An article by Ian on this theme appears in the current issue.

Related thereto across the River Tawe, from our home, we excitedly witness the building of the University's new library and the faculty buildings scheduled to house transport studies. The foundations are being rapidly prepared, as shown in Margaret's accompanying photograph.

However, in the category of a search for the obscure, was an enquiry from the Farningham and Eynsford History Society. Could I help identify a green bus parked in the yard of the Bull Inn, Farningham, during or shortly after the Second World War? From an indistinct black and white photograph I was advised that it appeared that the bus was on route 498 to Dartford. Neither the chairperson who sent the letter nor I knew of such a route. This sent me on an enjoyable search yet to be fulfilled. [I think there is a keen member and regular attender at Coventry who will shed light!]



*A new library takes shape*

In the former category, of significant social import, I was also struck by an article in 'The Times' prompted by research undertaken by Professor Charles Musselwhite, of Swansea University's health sciences faculty, highlighting the highly beneficial results arising from, and an interest in, a pursuit of travel for the elderly in terms of health. John Ashley and I had earlier, on his appointment, met Charles with a view to his collaborating with the Association. Perhaps the moment is ripe for him to give a talk to members?

At the time of writing confirmation of a date when the steering group for the Journal's development is awaited. It is important that we will be able to report progress at the committee meeting on October 28 and thereafter, on the following day [29<sup>th</sup>] at our Autumn Conference, to which we look forward. Early responses suggest that the conference will be well attended.

The Spring 2017 AGM and Conference, it is anticipated, will take place on a Saturday in March, at the Coventry Transport Museum. Possible themes are the consequences for road transport of Brexit [a relevant article by Julian Peddle appeared in 'Buses'] and general current political turbulence. Full details will be provided following the committee meeting on October 28.

## **Transport: the Misunderstood Catalyst**

**Ian Souter**

For those not familiar with the term "catalyst", it is a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change. The thought is offered that transport is a catalyst for many of human society's activities; it has always been thus and it is a global phenomenon. That said, UK society is absolutely reliant on its many transport links but, collectively, appears to have a poor understanding or appreciation of the extent to which transport interlinks with other factors in society at large. Some significant interlinkages from the past are outlined below and some important issues are raised for further discussion.

As modes of transport have changed transport's impact on society has changed and our transport practices are thus critical parts of our national development. It is inconceivable that such a major event as the industrial revolution could have happened without the various transport links to move business information, raw materials and finished products. As the industrial

revolution matured, the attendant increases in urban population prompted the establishment of urban public transport systems from the late 1820s onwards. It also became apparent that transport provision had two separate roles: (i) generate profits and (ii) foster (catalyse) other developments. The success of the former role has long been quantifiable but there is still no universally recognised metric for the success of the latter. The point to be emphasised is that transport provision does not operate in a vacuum; it is much influenced by the ebbs and flows of factors outwith the control of transport management. The following paragraphs outline a few of the interlinkages of factors which have shaped the country's road based local transport networks, factors which may not be understood by other than the transport historian but which merit a better understanding by the general public to better appreciate what transport provision can and cannot deliver.

- The Victorians at a local level were much concerned with improvements to society, local governments being to the fore in delivering change. Note that local governments were then being directed by leading figures from the local business communities, not political idealists. From the 1870s the range of long established municipal trading activities was expanded further to include the construction of tramway tracks, this in reaction to ever growing urban populations. Initially, such tramways were operated with horse traction but within a few years there were serious efforts to introduce mechanical traction. This conversion demanded access to new but underdeveloped technology and also required a change in fuel from agricultural produce to coal. The new technologies eventually triumphed and have been quite well described in contemporary papers but the latter aspect has been overlooked. Come the early 1890s, municipal authorities were permitted to operate the tramways within their jurisdiction, but the transition from franchised private operations became the subject of protracted legal wrangling, particularly in London. There were fundamental matters arising:

1. From the 1890s to the present time, debate on local public transport in the UK has been dominated by arguments over the ownership of assets, not on what they were to deliver.
2. The arguments over ownership delayed tramway electrification in the UK until well after that in Germany and France. To satisfy pent up demand, UK imported technology from the USA and also built up tramcar manufacturing capacity which was soon surplus.
3. The delayed then rapid adoption of electric traction was a catalyst for the

spread of public electricity supply in urban areas, much of which was done by municipalities. Note that electric traction was a very attractive base load for early electricity suppliers, this at a time when lighting, with its irregular demand, was the only established user. This close linkage between traction and public supply was repeated internationally, the traction parents eventually being outgrown by their supply children. The present day Balfour Beatty construction company had its origins in traction and public electricity supply. Both activities, with trolleybuses vice tramcars, were nationalised in 1948.

- The inter-relationships in society affecting local transport provision were no less complicated in the twentieth century. Coincident with municipalities getting an enhanced role in the provision of housing from the early 1920s, tramways started to cede their dominant role to the motorbus and the trolleybus. Motorbus technology advanced spectacularly throughout the 1920s and thousands of buses by dozens of manufacturers and worked by hundreds of operators spread to every part of the country. Road haulage was similarly encouraged by the new possibilities and the resultant was new taxes on road fuel and road access to fund road improvements. Radical changes in legislation were enacted in 1928 to allow the rail industry to take a stake in motorbus operation and then in the 1930s to control road transport more tightly. Government was also deeply involved at this time in ensuring reliability of supply of the imported oil required to power motorised road transport.
- Passenger numbers carried by local transport modes in Britain peaked in 1949, and then went into decline until the late 1990s; thereafter, demand started to increase significantly but only in London. The overall beneficiary of public transport's decline was the private car, a transition which accelerated urban sprawl. A reduction in passengers carried post war was a common experience in the western world but what makes the UK unique is the extent of the loss from the peak of passengers carried. However local public transport has had areas of recovery; a more recent global trend which can also be seen in the UK is the growth of commuter rail services in a variety of forms.

Is there then anything which transport historians can do to promote a better understanding of the role of



public transport in society? Given the public appetite for history and heritage, the answer could well be yes if the message was put across in a digestible form. Emerging factors which will also help win attention are the increasing public alarm at deteriorating urban air quality, rising CO<sub>2</sub> levels, traffic congestion and reliance on imported fossil fuels. Given the breadth and depth of its collective knowledge, could it be that the Association can serve as a catalyst in encouraging the serious study of local public transport?

## **Archibald Matheson OBE (1876 – 1936): an Authority on Traffic Problems**

**Amy Graham**

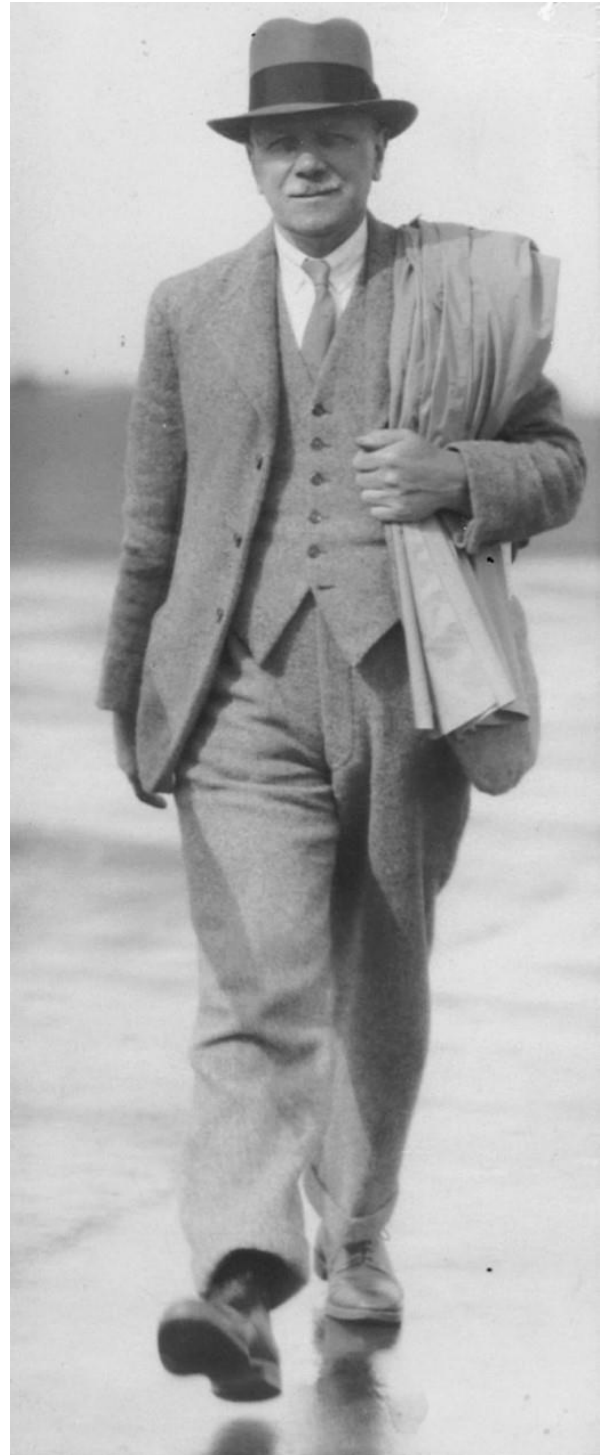
In my role as Local History Officer for the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, I recently accessioned into our collection personal papers related to Archibald Matheson OBE. Myself and a colleague discussed for some time whether the papers really belonged with Kingston's Archives. It's true for the second half of his life, Matheson lived in Surbiton (part of the borough), but he was Scottish, fought in both the Boer War and the First World War and ended up in the Civil Service working closely with the Minister for Transport. We decided to accept the papers because, beyond any of Matheson's achievements in the public world, what they tell of is him as a private man. Below is a little of his biography.

Archibald Matheson was born on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1876 in Inverness. His ancestors originated in Loch Carron on the West Coast of Scotland. They were cattle drovers until the Clearances when they had to take the cattle off the hills, and many families had to move away. His father was a shoemaker, and Archibald was the eldest of six children.

He began public service in Inverness as a rural messenger for the Post Office, then onto the Sorting Office in Edinburgh. He served in the Boer War, attaining the rank of sergeant with the Royal Engineers and was attached to the Army Postal Service in France during the First World War. He reached rank of lieutenant-colonel and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O) for his service.

On 29<sup>th</sup> July 1919, he married Anne Ross Ellice, nicknamed 'Bunny', with whom he had one daughter, Annie Ellice Matheson. The papers include two letters which he wrote to Bunny, one before they were married, and a second dated 17<sup>th</sup> September 1919 in

which he wrote 'I felt sure today's mail would bring a letter from you, but nothing arrived, the world seemed all blank'. Both are a nice reminder of how the postal service kept young love alive, and make one reflect on this changing world of instant electronic communication. Bring back the love letter, I say!



The family home was at 25a Lovelace Gardens, Surbiton. Each day, Matheson would travel up to 6 Whitehall Gardens to work (eventually) as Assistant Secretary in the Roads Department of the Ministry of Transport. Although he lived in the area for 16 years, he didn't have much involvement in local affairs because

of his commitment to his role at the Ministry having joined the Finance Department on its formation in 1919.

In his work at the Ministry, Matheson was particularly involved in getting the London Passenger Transport Act on the Statute Book, and on the proposal for a Charing Cross bridge. He served on the Interdepartmental Committee on Road Safety among School Children. Along with Leslie Hore-Belisha, Minister for Transport, he pioneered pedestrian crossings, beacons and other road safety devices such as roundabouts and cycle lanes. For his efforts, he was awarded the OBE in 1933, in King George V's Birthday Honours. I haven't yet been able to research his involvement in road history in more detail, so do forward information on possible sources to my email 213bus@gmail.com.

Matheson died on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1936, aged 59. He was buried at Surbiton Cemetery, with funeral wreaths from the Minister of Transport, and the General Manager and Officers of the London Passenger Transport Board. Letters of condolence on his death came from war fellows, ministerial colleagues, the Edinburgh General Post Office and a letter from the National "Safety First" Association. 'It is the simple truth that he was prematurely worn out in service to his country', wrote Tommy Walker, a friend from the war.

The collection of papers, reference KX630, were donated by Matheson's niece Mary Benson and can be viewed by prior arrangement at Kingston History Centre, Guildhall, High Street, Kingston upon Thames, KT1 1EU.

## Reviews

**Tickets Fares & Passengers of the Erith Council Tramways** Ken Elks. Solo Publications, 80 The Street, Kingston, Canterbury, Kent CT4 6JQ. 85 pages, lavishly colour illustrated, spiral binding. £24 + £3.25 for postage.

The tramways of Kent are rather an esoteric subject that not many now living will ever have known. This is Ken Elks' third book on them – he his first two covered Dover and the Isle of Thanet. In his enormously thorough researches he has found, in various collections, 350 different Erith tickets. Such a large figure is a tribute to the diligence of his research; yet from the opening of the Erith tramways in August 1905 to their compulsory acquisition by the London Passenger Transport Board in July 1933, even on this small system there may have been thousands of varieties of ticket available for purchase, printed by Bell Punch, by Williamson and by Punch & Ticket.

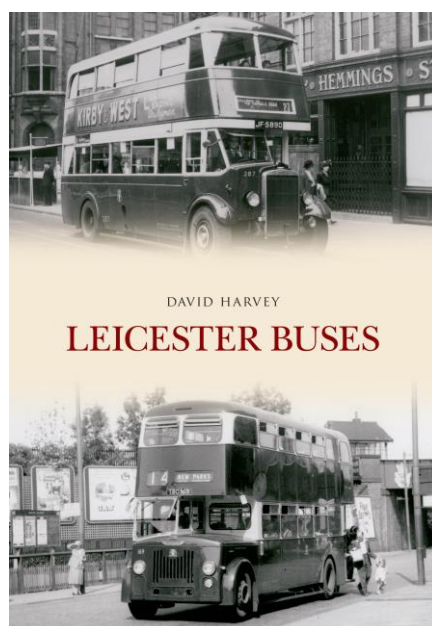
Ken Elks studies the tickets from many angles – the adverts on their backs, the social history in the slogan on ticket fronts in the period 1919-1922 "Dine at the Municipal Restaurant", and the inclusion among the stage names listed of the short-lived Northend branch (closed August 1910)

His book studies the route, the brief period of profitability during the Great War, the steadfast refusal of the London County Council to allow through running, the swift dismissal by Erith Council of their female conductors after the war to facilitate the re-employment of ex-servicemen. The necessity to avoid overloading the capacity of the power station and the advent of government subsidised bus services put on by the London General Omnibus Co Ltd, though only for the duration of the war.

Free passes for Councillors and instances of abuse of the facility are mentioned; and the inclusion among printed stage names on tickets of "Lower Abbey Rd (Recording Clock)". Both these illustrate the number of topics that might be seized upon from this book and developed into short historical articles in their own right. And this is a reason for buying the book, even if you have only one Erith ticket your collection – or none at all. The book itself is replete with aspects of social history that deserve to be seized upon. Buy it and at least you will find in it ample to exercise your curiosity.

RA

**Leicester Buses** David Harvey. Amberley Publishing, The Hill, Stroud, Gloucs GL5 4EP [www.amberley-books.com](http://www.amberley-books.com) ISBN 978 1 4456 47111 (print) or 978 1 4456 4712 8 (ebook). £15.99, 2016. 191pp, card covers, all illustrations in b+w.



This book follows earlier Amberley publications in similar form, notably those by the same author on Birmingham City Transport, and aspects of the Midland Red fleet, as reviewed previously in this Journal. After a brief introductory text and network map at 1966, it consists entirely of illustrations, albeit with considerably more informative captions than in some other outputs from this publisher. The history is traced from the first Corporation motor buses in 1924 (augmenting the tramway system taken over by the Corporation in 1901), up to the formation of a council-owned company in 1986 consequent on deregulation, and finally the sale to Grampian Region Transport in 1993. Today services are provided by First Group as successor to Grampian.

The early years saw a mixed variety of chassis, notably the substantial Guy C six-wheeler normal control double-deckers of 1927/28. These were superseded by the more modern Leyland Titan model shortly afterward. Six-wheelers reappeared in the form of AEC Renowns in 1939/40. Other manufacturers also provided vehicles, the operator being one of the first substantial users of Scania in Britain from the early 1970s.

The illustrations also indicate ventures into minibus operation in parallel with many other operations during the 1980s, and a coach fleet from 1975. The Dennis Dominator formed a large proportion of the double-deckers in later years, the General Manager Geoffrey Hilditch having encouraged development of this model during his tenure, as I recall from a discussion in his office around 1979.



*A busy street scene in Leicester as AEC Regent III FBC272 of 1949 speeds down Humberstone Gate in central Leicester (D.R.Harvey collection)*

The illustrations show a wide variety of street scenes as well the vehicles themselves, but sometimes lack contrast. Some colour illustrations, as featured in similar outputs from this publisher, might also have widened the visual appeal. A summary fleet list covering the whole period is also included. **PRW**

**Buses in Brentwood: a brief history** Chris Stewart. Omnibus Society London Historical Research Group in association with the Provincial Historical Research Group. 2016. £4.75 plus £2.00 p&p [cheques payable to 'Omnibus Society (LHR Group)'], available from LHRG Distribution Officer, Curry Farm, Halstead Lane, Knockholt, Sevenoaks TN14 7EP. 2016. 32pp, card covers, colour and b+w illustrations. ISBN 978-1-909091-15-3

Circulated on the occasion of the Omnibus Society's Presidential Weekend at the start of October, this book covers the territory on the Greater London/Essex border extending south to Thurrock, north to Ongar and west towards Southend. By the mid-1960s, it was dominated by Eastern National, with some London Transport routes extending beyond the present boundary, notably around Grays.

The text outlines the early development of services in the area, originating with small independents, but later dominated by London General and successors on its western fringe. A notable operator in the area was the City Coach Company, which established its principal base in the town, running from north east London through southern Essex to Southend. The through workings have long since disappeared, but current local services can be traced to sections of these operations. The fragmented pattern of operation after deregulation in 1986 is described, along with the role of express coaches to the East Anglia serving the town en route. A mix of illustrations in black and white (notably of City's Brentwood HQ) and more recent colour illustrations broaden the scope.

**The Chartham Bus: Memoir of a Kent independent** David J Bubier. Omnibus Society Provincial Historical Research Group, 100 Sandwell Street, Walsall, WS1 3EB. ISBN 978-1-0909091-07-8. £8.95. 48pp. Available from MDS books.

The village of Chartham lies a short distance south west of Canterbury, and it might seem that the story of a bus service linking the two would be a relatively brief, simple account. However, as this book by Association member David Bubier reveals, the story is a surprisingly complex one. As well as the village itself, the substantial St Augustine's Hospital (initially, the Kent County Asylum) was an important traffic objective.

A sequence of local operators provided a bus link between Canterbury and the Hospital from the early 1920s, but for the great majority of the period covered operation was in the hands of the Drew family. The roles of individual family members, and others involved in the operation, are comprehensively described. Following a period of instability, the service was taken over by East Kent, already running through

Chartham village on its Canterbury –Ashford service, in December 1974.

The story is well illustrated, with numerous views of vehicles in the fleet. Perhaps most striking are those of wartime destruction in the vicinity of the company's garage in Canterbury, reminiscent in some respects of scenes from the Powell and Pressburger film 'A Canterbury Tale'. A comprehensive historical fleet list is provided. **PRW**

*Association member (and previous editor of this Journal) Roy Larkin, has produced a second edition of his 'Destination Western Front', documenting the role of London buses in World War One, available from Historic Roadways Ltd., PO Box 6924, Tadley, RG24 4D [www.historicroadways.co.uk](http://www.historicroadways.co.uk), at £19.95 plus £4.00 p&p (ISBN 978-0-9565014-6-2). A full review will appear in our next issue.*

## **A further aspect of Zimbabwe bus history**

**Peter White**

Following my paper in the May issue on this theme, a further insight into operations in Harare is provided in a dissertation by Ben Sambana, completed under my supervision (prior to visiting Zimbabwe for the first time in 1984) in 1979\*. Mr Sambana subsequently became an official in the government ministry responsible for transport, who I met on a later visit.

This examined bus operations in Salisbury, as the capital was then known, covered through the United franchise within the 26 km radius as previously described. It indicates that 420 vehicles were then operated by United on the 34 city services, serving a population of well over 600,000. Services were operated from two depots, at Willowvale and Belverdere. In contrast to European cities, children (aged 0-14) comprised about one third of the population, but the elderly only about 4%.

Very marked differences were found in service levels to the low-density, European suburban areas (such as Highlands, Hatfield or Mount Pleasant) where car ownership was about two per household, and the high-density 'township' suburbs. The European services, operated from Rezende Street in the city centre, comprised 15 routes but were covered by only 30 vehicles, with the best a.m. peak headway being 20 minutes and many irregular, approximately hourly. Conversely, the high-density township services (such as those from Harare, Mufakose and Glen Norah) were covered by about 380 buses, and operated at much higher frequencies to meet demand (on some routes, peak headways of less than 1 minute), even so experiencing considerable overcrowding. 77-seater full-length single deckers could accommodate over 20

standing passengers, giving peak loads of over 100. A very high ratio of peak to off-peak service frequencies (typically about 4 or higher) was found.

Some very low-density services were also operated to the city perimeter, typically peak-only journeys. Services from the European areas were one-man-operated, but others carried a conductor to cope with demand.

A graduated fare system applied to all adult journeys (albeit with a considerable taper), with a flat fare for schoolchildren and those under 10. Fares per km from European areas were about four times from other areas, reflecting lower traffic densities and ability to pay. All fares were charged as cash singles. At busy stops, off-bus tickets sale were provided, but nonetheless the ticket had to be shown to the driver or conductor before boarding the bus, resulting in long dwell times.

Almost all services operated as radial routes between housing areas and the city centre and/or industrial areas, with virtually no orbital provision, apart from a weekend-only service. He found considerable scope for simplified ticketing systems to speed up boarding, and also advocated use of high-capacity double-deckers as in Hong Kong.

*\*Sambana, B.M. 'Urban Bus Networks in Salisbury, Rhodesia' Dissertation for Postgraduate Diploma in Transport & Development, Polytechnic of Central London [now the University of Westminster] 1979, unpublished.*

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