



TfL Corporate Archives Research Guides

Research Guide No 22: London Buses in World War I

Within a few weeks of the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, over 300 buses and their crews had been requisitioned by the government and were being used in France and Belgium for troop movements. Some are known to have travelled as far as Egypt. Although the military was still very much geared to the horse, the need for mechanical transport was realised by the authorities as early as 1912.

In total some 1,300 London General Omnibus Company (LGOC or “General”) double-deckers, mainly B-types, and other buses, e.g. Daimlers of the Tramways (M.E.T.) Omnibus Co, were sent abroad and proved extremely reliable in these unusual conditions. Single-deckers were requisitioned for Admiralty medical service. Some 2,500 LGOC drivers and conductors heeded the call during the first few months of the war, many having been in the ‘special transport reserve’. Around 9,500 busmen in total went to the battlefields, some also being involved with driving other vehicles on war service.

File LT000105/008 contains a war service register of LGOC busmen and ancillary staff.

Initially the buses remained in London livery but were later painted in khaki or green. The glass windows were prone to breakage by the men’s rifles and packs and were later removed, being replaced with wooden planks. A B-type could carry 24 fully-equipped infantrymen and their kit and performed remarkably well, considering they were operating in areas for which they were not originally intended. Whilst abroad, some buses were converted for non-passenger-carrying duties such as armoured cars and mobile anti-aircraft gun carriages and had their bodies removed. Others became mobile pigeon lofts to house communication pigeons or were used as ambulances, wireless equipment centres for the cavalry and for other purposes. The surviving buses served until the end of the war and were used to bring troops home. A great

many of them were badly damaged or destroyed and were abandoned where they stood, as a result. The numbers and operations of the buses overseas are patchy and not well documented.

In London, meanwhile, there was a shortage of buses and drivers as the men enlisted or (from 1916) were conscripted. Bus production was halted as the Associated Equipment Company (A.E.C.) turned to the production of military vehicles and could therefore provide only a few replacements for the commandeered buses, later increasing by some 350 new vehicles. Although horse-buses in the capital had ceased completely in 1914, there was a return to horse-drawn vehicles in the streets. A number of double-decker B-types were converted to single-deck to replace a number lost to the War Department.

Women were employed by the LGOC from March 1915 as bus conductors, cleaners and on the Underground in various capacities, but were not permitted to drive. File LT000317/004 relates to this policy and it is also referred to in File LT346/179. Conductors had to be at least five foot (1.52m) in height and aged between 21 and 35. By the end of 1917 over five hundred women had been taken on for a wide variety of duties and acquitted themselves very well. They had to give up their jobs when the men returned.

File LT000317/003 contains a summary of entitlements regarding wages and salaries, benefits and entitlements for clerical staff and their dependents on war service.

File LT000317/002, covering the period 1917-18, relates to allowances and rulings for Underground Group servicemen and dependents, including individual cases.

London suffered its first air raids from 1915, initially from Zeppelin airships but later from other airships and aircraft which were less vulnerable to attack. There were a total of thirty-one air raids during the war, resulting in 670 fatalities and nearly 2000 wounded. The capital was, of course, served by a very extensive tramway network and the LGOC met the vehicle shortage as far as possible by withdrawing buses from areas served by the tramways. A number of buses were damaged and passengers killed as a result of enemy action. It is known that two B-types were fitted with replacement bodies from store.

File LT000346/179 contains much interesting material on the bombing and disruption in London, including extracts from a journalist's diary 'In London during the Great War' with a description of a motorbus destroyed in the City, with fatalities; women working on public transport and an enterprising driver of a horse-drawn furniture van who, at least on one occasion, took stranded passengers through south London at two levels of fare, depending on the length of the journey! The file also includes:

- Details of the M.E.T and LGOC bus operations whilst serving overseas, taken from T.O.T. (Train Omnibus Tram) publications 1914-19
- The programme for the June 1919 'Welcome Home Celebration' concert at the Albert Hall
- Copies of T.O.T relating to the King's inspection of B43 (q.v.)

The Government requisitioned seven bus garages and the AEC workshops, which became a 'controlled establishment' under the Government, produced a substantial amount of war material; over ten thousand vehicles in all. War production work in the London area was substantial with vast numbers employed at Woolwich Arsenal, Enfield Lock (small arms), Waltham Abbey (gunpowder) and elsewhere, all of which placed more demands on public transport generally.

Bus and tram travel in London became most unpleasant, with overcrowding and minor injuries to passengers and damage to personal property. For the first time, standing on buses was allowed.

File LT000304/178 (two parts) contains details of LGOC staff war service, casualties, awards and memorials and victory celebrations.

Two principal surviving B-type buses are nos. 43 and 340. B43 was purchased by the War Office in 1914 and was the first to be shipped abroad. It served in France and Belgium until 1919, when it was repurchased by the LGOC. In February 1920 it was inspected by King George V at Buckingham Palace, carrying ex-servicemen Underground staff, being the first bus the King had ever boarded. Christened 'Ole Bill' after Bruce Bairnsfather's caricature of a British soldier, the bus was retired in the early 1920s and, fitted with another body, suitably decorated with plaques and plates showing locations served during the war, was preserved by the Auxiliary Omnibus Companies Association, being used in commemorative parades, before presentation to the Imperial War Museum in 1970.

B340, although requisitioned for war service, remained in London with others being used for convalescent wounded and for various home defence duties, after which it was re-purchased by the General. It forms part of the London Transport Museum collection and is today located in the London Transport Museum, Covent Garden.

Large backdrops containing photos of London buses overseas during the Great War may be found at the London Bus Museum at Brooklands, near Weybridge, Surrey.