



TfL Corporate Archives Research Guides

Research Guide No 14: Horse Buses in London

Although there had been earlier horse-bus operations in other British towns, eg Manchester and Glasgow, and there had been short-stage coaches operating very roughly to an eleven-mile radius from London, the first regular horse-bus service within the capital was that started by George Shillibeer in July 1829.

Initially using two buses with a capacity of 16-18 passengers each, his three-horse, single-deck, box-like vehicles operated between four and five services daily connecting Paddington Green and the Bank for a through fare of 1s (5p). The service ran via the New Road (now Marylebone, Euston and Pentonville Roads), which had been opened in 1756, originally running through open country well to the north of the built-up area (Ref: LT000346/167). This route was chosen because of hackney coach monopoly in the central area. Shillibeer's omnibuses followed guaranteed departure times, whether the vehicle was full or not and it was not necessary to book in advance, this being permitted by the Stage Carriage Act (1832). A uniformed conductor rode on the bus to collect fares.

The short-stage coaches were expensive to use and, until 1832, the operators were forbidden to take up or set down passengers once they had reached the paved streets within central London, known as 'the stones'. Early engravings of short-stage coaches show them having six or eight wheels of equal size, few small side windows and drawn by three or even four horses.

A survey in December 1825 recorded some 418 horse-buses making a total of 1190 journeys in and around London in one day. By far the most heavily-used London terminal was Paddington, with 54 coaches making a total of 158 return journeys, followed by Camberwell and Blackwall.

All short stage coaches were replaced between the late 1820s and the 1840s as other operators began to introduce omnibus services all over London. Competition was fierce, with drivers racing each other to compete for passengers. Individual licences

were introduced in 1838 for both drivers and conductors, following complaints over crews' behaviour.

Bells were introduced in 1839 in order to attract the driver's or conductor's attention, when passengers wished to alight. A later idea was for two straps along the side of the vehicle attached to the driver's arms, which would be tugged to indicate on which side of the road he should stop. There were no fixed stopping places.

Roof seats were introduced by the late 1840s, originally placed back to back and known as 'knifeboard' seating. This was followed later by forward-facing double seats known as the 'garden-seat' type (Ref: LT346/172).

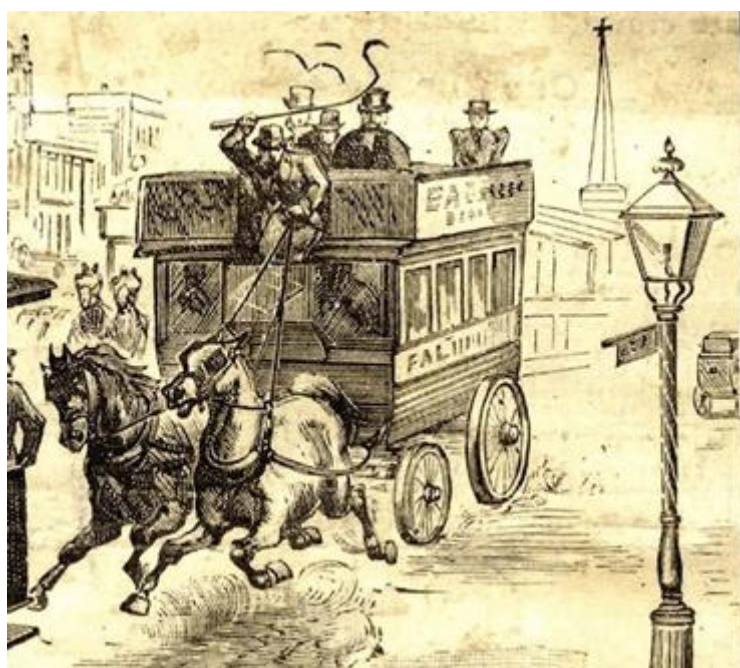
In 1856 the London General Omnibus Company (LGOC) was formed, being originally incorporated in Paris and by the year-end had acquired 600 of the 810 omnibuses then running to become the world's largest bus operator.

The Metropolitan Streets Act of 1867 decreed that omnibuses were only to stop on the nearside of the road. Later designs of horse-buses only required nearside access via a platform, in similar manner to the motor-buses which followed on.

Fare collection seems to have been fairly haphazard. The conductor seemingly would keep a list of the numbers of passengers carried, the system being wide-open to abuse. The Road Car Company (one of the larger operators and main competitor to the LGOC) and possibly others had already introduced tickets, and when the LGOC did so in June 1891 it sparked off a strike among their crews.

In addition to the LGOC and private operators, a number of omnibuses were operated by the tramway companies, serving chiefly as feeders for their services. Similarly, the two underground railway companies (Metropolitan and District) from 1888/89 ran or sponsored horse-bus services as feeders, on which through road and rail tickets were available.

The two types of horse-bus ('knifeboard' or 'garden-seat') generally carried around 26 passengers and had either three or four side windows, being known as the 'three light' or 'four light' type



respectively. Front wheels were smaller than those at the rear and top-deck passengers were exposed to the elements. Many buses were identified by their colour to aid identification and were generally plastered with advertisements. Route information was carried on wooden boards and also painted directly onto the vehicle, occasionally being abbreviated eg 'CT & KR'

(Camden Town & Kent Road) and 'BS & W' (Baker Street & Waterloo).

Horse-buses were in service for around fifteen hours per day and needed a stud or around ten horses plus one or two spares. The services were very much patronised by the middle-classes, the horse-tramways of the 1870s, with their lower fares, being the preserve of the working-classes. Two horses were normally used with a third ('cock horse') often being added on hilly routes.

Although the number of buses in London peaked at some 3700 in 1899/1900, it was only a matter of time before the motor-bus, which was being developed would largely replace them. The last LGOC horse-bus ran in October 1911 between London Bridge and Moorgate Street, the last into central London ran in March 1912 and the last of all in London ran in August 1914, after which many of the horses were required for war service.

The vast majority of buses were broken-up. A handful were preserved and may be

seen today in various locations, including the London Transport Museum (a 3-light knifeboard Thomas Tilling vehicle and a 1920s replica of Shillibeer's bus) and also the London Bus Museum, near Weybridge, who have a knifeboard and garden-seat bus on display, which are used to carry passengers on special occasions.



Other notable horse-bus operations in the past were a seasonal passenger service from Chessington South railway station to Chessington Zoo for a few years in the late 1940s and a summer service in 1979 between Baker Street and the London Zoo, through Regent's Park, as part of the commemorations to mark 150 years since George Shillibeer's pioneering service.

File LT000346/173 contains a large amount of

miscellaneous information on LGOC horse-buses, including staff matters, management appointments and salaries and industrial action. However, the majority of TfL's early LGOC material, including that on horsebuses, is held by the London Metropolitan Archives and contact should be made with them in respect of this material.

If you would like to know more, or would like to book an appointment to view any of the above items, please contact the TfL Corporate Archives at corporatearchives@tfl.gov.uk, or call us on 020 7126 1268.