

Birmingham-Corporation Transport

The Trolleybuses 1922-1951



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Cover Illustration: Birmingham trolleybus No. 11 (OK4833), a 1922 Railless F12 with Roe 51-seat bodywork. (LTHL collection).

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In 1921 a delegation from the Birmingham Transport Committee visited Bradford, where two experimental double-deck trolleybuses were being operated. By this time the state of the tramway track on the route to Nechells was in a poor state of repair and the trolleybus was seen as the ideal replacement. The committee was impressed by the Bradford vehicles and a decision was made to convert the route to trolleybus operation. An initial order for 12 double-deck vehicles (1-12), was placed with the Railless Company of Rochester, Roe of Leeds supplying the 51-seat bodies.

In preparation for the changeover, the tram track was removed and the overhead wiring was altered. The new route was to run from Old Square to Nechells terminus, a distance of just under 2.5 miles.

Following the introduction of the service, receipts on the route rose by over 50% and the trolleybuses were an immediate success with the passengers, who appreciated the smooth and almost noiseless ride.

Up until this time the Board of Trade had been reluctant to allow double-deck buses to be top-covered, but the Birmingham Corporation Act of 1922 and the introduction of the 12 top-covered trolleybuses, overcame these inhibitions and top-covered vehicles became the norm from then on.

Between August and October 1923 a single AEC 602 chassis with Brush B36R bodywork was demonstrated. It was painted in red and white livery and given the fleet number 13. The number 13 was used again the following year when the Electro-Magnetic Brake Company of West Bromwich supplied

an experimental trolleybus with Roe H28/20R bodywork, the first in the fleet to have a totally enclosed staircase. In the event it turned out to be the only trolleybus manufactured by the Company, running in the City for four years before being returned. In 1926 three more Railless LF chassis (14-16) were purchased, this time with Short Bros. bodywork. A fourth vehicle, which was exhibited at the 1925 Olympia Show, was found to be fitted with a foot controller and was sold to Nottingham (Birmingham's trolleybuses were fitted with a tram-type controller, which the driver worked with his left hand while steering with his right).

On the 3rd March 1926 a single AEC 607 with Vickers H26/26R0 body entered service. Numbered 17, it was the last 'solid-tyred' vehicle. This made up the operating complement of the Nechells trolleybus fleet for the next six years.

By 1930 the original 12 trolleybuses were nearing the end of their life span. They had already been overhauled twice, whilst the other four were looking very dated with their outside staircases and solid tyres. Guy Motors was approached with a view to assessing the six-wheeled trolleybuses it was currently manufacturing. Two were provided as demonstrators; the first (18) was a Guy BTX with Guy H27/26R body, featuring an enclosed staircase, which subsequently became standard on all trolleybuses. The second (19) was another Guy BTX with Guy H27/26R body. This vehicle only stayed for one week and never actually ran in service. In May 1931 a Leyland TBD1 with Short Bros. L24/24R body was

tested. Numbered 19 it was used intermittently until August when it was returned to Leyland. This vehicle was later converted to a petrol-engined bus and sold to Jersey Motor Traction. It still survives in preservation today.

The test of the Leyland TBD1 was considered successful and as a result an order for ten (later amended to eleven) trolleybuses was made. Although the original intention was to have the bodywork built by a local builder, John Buckingham, the company went out of business in the depression and so the order was given to Short Bros. The new trolleybuses were numbered 1-3/5-7/9-11/13/15; the missing fleet numbers were still carried by the last two Railless LF's of 1922, which remained in service until August 1932.

In May 1931 a Guy BT trolleybus with Guy L24/24R bodywork was demonstrated, although it was only retained for 11 days it received fleet number 20. On the 16th February 1932, following the inspection of a demonstrator by the Transport Department, an order for five new six-wheeled AEC 663T chassis with Brush H33/25R bodies was placed. The vehicles entered service between August and September of that year.

By 1932 the tram track along Coventry Road to Yardley was in dire need of replacement. It was unremunerative and elderly trams maintained the service. Bearing in mind the success of the trolleybuses on the Nechells route the General Manager suggested that trolleybuses should be used to

replace the trams. Although the Transport Committee accepted the recommendation it was not until May 1933 that the decision to proceed with the conversion was made. In the meantime a Leyland TTBD1 six-wheeled demonstrator (17) was used on the Nechells route for driver training and evaluation of the GEC electric motor, although not in service. It was sufficiently successful to warrant an order for 50 TTBD2 trolleybuses being placed. The bodies were to be 58-seat and manufactured by the Metropolitan-Cammell Carriage and Wagon Company. They were numbered 17-66 and commenced service from Coventry Road depot on the 5th January 1934.

On the 9th February 1934 a single Sunbeam MS2 (67) was delivered. It had been exhibited at the 1933 Commercial Motor Show in Birmingham livery. It only ran until the 24th March and was never actually owned by Birmingham.

An extension to the Yardley route serving Sheldon was opened on the 5th July 1936. Sheldon had been absorbed into the city in 1931 and the increased catchment area, supplemented by building projects had swelled the population. In September 1936, to cater for the longer route and increased frequency, twelve Leyland TB5 chassis (67-78) were ordered, again with Metro-Cammell bodies. They were delivered in September the following year.

In 1938 the lease on the tram routes beyond Handsworth to West Bromwich and Dudley were due to expire. Although West Bromwich Corporation, who would inherit the operating rights outside the city boundary, was in

favour of replacing the trams with trolleybuses, Birmingham was not. Eventually Birmingham's view prevailed and the services were replaced by buses. At the same time as these routes were being replaced by buses Birmingham placed an order for twelve more trolleybuses. Based on Leyland TB7 chassis (79-90) they again had MCCW bodies to an H30/24R layout and entered service between January and February 1940.

With the outbreak of war and Birmingham's first air raid on the 9th August 1940, it became clear that the Nechells area, with its gas and electric works, railway marshalling yards, the LMS locomotive depot at Aston and a variety of small military factories, was a target. Any breaches of the blackout in the area were considered to be serious. The arcing of the trolleybuses working the Nechells route, especially in the hours of darkness was an obvious problem. Because of this, and the likelihood of more air raids, the decision was made to suspend the Nechells trolleybus service until the end of hostilities, which, in the first few months of war, was considered to be not too distant. The trolleybuses ran a normal service until 30th September 1940 when, without warning, they were returned to Washwood Heath Depot. They were taken to Sampson Road paintshop and put in storage.

Gradually, however, with increasing air raids, parts of the disused Nechells trolleybus system, particularly the overhead wiring, was cannibalised to keep trams running. With much of the overhead missing it

became impossible to re-introduce the services in 1945; the Nechells section was abandoned and buses continued to provide the services.

However, in 1938, plans were put forward by the Rover company for a new site, later to manufacture engines important for the war effort, at Solihull. The factory opened in 1939 and was at full capacity by September 1940. The Birmingham and Midland Motor Omnibus Co., (Midland Red) provided local bus services in Solihull, which was outside the Birmingham boundary. Providing sufficient vehicles for transporting the workers to and from the site became something of a problem, especially during the war years when there was a need to conserve fuel. It was realised that an extension of the existing Coventry Road system of Birmingham's trolleybuses would be a better option than providing extra buses. In the summer of 1941 the Ministry of Supply and War Transport authorised the extension to the plant by way of a private road. It was opened on 29th October 1941 and initially only worked to coincide with Rover worker's shifts, although they were allowed to carry other passengers if there was available space. By December 1942 the service was on a regular hourly frequency.

When hostilities ceased in 1945 it was apparent that the re-introduction of the Nechells service was impossible. The stored trolleybuses that had worked the route were taken from their storage place at Sampson Road and sent for scrap. The remaining trolleybus fleet was repainted and continued in service.

A new section of trolleybus wiring was opened in January 1949 to provide a turn-back at Lyndon End. The development of the Sheldon area was causing rush hour problems for the trolleybuses and the new section enabled them to work short journeys at peak times.

The Coventry Road trolleybus service came through the war relatively undamaged and continued to operate an efficient and successful service. It was, however, at a serious disadvantage. Fifty of the fleet of 74 trolleybuses were becoming due for renewal and formed only a tiny part of the Birmingham fleet, which still had over 400 trams and 1500 buses in service. In June 1949 the Transport Committee proposed the abandonment of electric traction in favour of motorbuses. This was to be achieved in stages, with stage 4 being the closure of the Coventry Road trolleybus system, which, in the end, was to be survived by over 200 trams, the very vehicles it was to have replaced! Another key factor in the decision to abandon electric traction was the Labour Governments decision to nationalise electricity, which, at that time was provided by the Corporation's own Electricity Department. This removed most of the advantages of electric traction and so the abandonment went ahead.

Fleet maintenance of the trolleybus system continued, with 41(OC1141) being the last to be overhauled in March 1950 and several were given a coat of varnish between November and December 1950. Gradually, however, as mechanical and electrical defects occurred, the trolleybuses were parked up. In early June 1951 public notices of the imminent closure were

on display. On Saturday 30th June 1951 the last service trolleybus 45 (OC1145) left Albert Street at 11.02 p.m. Trolleybus 90 (FOK90) carried an official party from the depot at 10.45 p.m. for the very last journey into the city, arriving back just after midnight on 1st July 1951. The power was switched off and after 28 years of service to the Birmingham public the pioneering trolleybus system closed.

Trolleybus Fleet List 1922-1951

This listing is in the format - Year into service; Fleet No; Reg. No; Chassis; Chassis No; Body; Seating.

1922

1-12	OK4823-34	Railless F12	?	Roe	H25/26R0
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Withdrawn 1932 (1-12).

1923

13	OL994	AEC 602	602.005	Brush	B36R
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Demonstrator; returned 10/23.

1924

13	OL4636	EMB	?	Roe	H28/20R
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Demonstrator; returned 6/28.



Birmingham's first trolleybuses were Railless F12 chassis with Roe 51-seat open-staircase bodywork delivered in 1922. This is No. 6 (OK4828) which gave 10 years of service before being withdrawn in 1932. (LTHL collection).

1925

-	T05011	Railless LF	?	Short	H26/26R0
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Exhibited at 1925 Olympia show but not operated by BCT as not to correct specifications.

1926

14-16	ON2825-27	Railless LF	?	Short	H25/26R0
17	ON3261	AEC 607	607001	Vickers	H26/26R0

Withdrawn 1932 (14-17).

1930

18	UK8341	Guy BTX	BTX23456	Guy	H27/26R
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Demonstrator; returned 5/31.



No. 17 (ON3261) was the last solid-tyred trolleybus. It was a 1926 AEC 607 with Vickers 52-seat bodywork. (LTHL collection).

1931

19	OG9886	Guy BTX	BTX23648	Guy	H27/26R
19	OV1175	Leyland TBD1	60342	Short	L24/24R
20	OV1194	Guy BT	BT23747	Guy/PRV	L24/24R

Demonstrator (OG9886); returned 4/31.

Demonstrator (OV1175); returned 8/31.

Demonstrator (OV1194); returned 5/31.

1932

1-3	OV4001-03	Leyland TBD1	722272-24	Short	H27/21R
5-7	OV4005-07	Leyland TBD1	72231/26/24	Short	H27/21R
9-11	OV4009-11	Leyland TBD1	72227/32/29	Short	H27/21R
13	OV4013	Leyland TBD1	72228	Short	H27/21R
15	OV4015	Leyland TBD1	72230	Short	H27/21R
12-16	OJ1012-16	AEC 663T	663T066-70	Brush	H33/25R

13/15 (OV4013/15) renumbered 4/8 respectively shortly after delivery.

Withdrawn 1940 (1-3, 5-7, 9-11, 13[4], 15[8], 12-16).



Looking very 'bus' like is trolleybus No. 2 (OV4002) of 1932, a Leyland TBD1 with Short 48-seat bodywork. (LTHL collection).

1933

17 TJ939 Leyland TTBD1 69657 Leyland H34/26R

Demonstrator; returned 7/33.

1934

17-25	OC1117-25	Leyland	TTBD2	3164/63/65-66/68/67/80/69/72	MCCW	H33/25R
26-34	OC1126-34	Leyland	TTBD2	3171/79/76/75/73-74/77-78/81	MCCW	H33/25R
35-43	OC1135-43	Leyland	TTBD2	3187/85/91/84/89/92/94/93/70	MCCW	H33/25R
44-51	OC1144-51	Leyland	TTBD2	3196/90/82-83/201/188/95/98	MCCW	H33/25R
52-61	OC1152-61	Leyland	TTBD2	3206/197/99/204/03/00/09-10	MCCW	H33/25R
62-66	OC1162-66	Leyland	TTBD2	3186/205/08/07/11-12	MCCW	H33/25R
67	OC6567	Sunbeam	MS2	12008	MCCW	H31/28R

No. 67, demonstrator; returned 3/34.

Withdrawn 1951 (17-66).

1936

68 TJ939 Leyland TTBD1 1654 Leyland H34/26R

Demonstrator (ex-BCT No. 17); re-motored and returned to BCT 5/36; returned to Leyland Motors 10/37.

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Birmingham No. 50 (OC1150) was a 1934 Leyland TTBD2 with MCCW 58-seat bodywork, seen here working route 94. (LTHL collection).

1937

67-73 COX67-73	Leyland TB5	13103/05/04/09/08/07/06	MCCW	H29/24R
74-78 COX74-78	Leyland TB5	13112/10-11/13-14	MCCW	H29/24R

Withdrawn 1951 (67-78).

1940

79-83 FOK79-83	Leyland TB7	303354/59/61-62/60/56	MCCW	H30/24R
84-90 FOK84-90	Leyland TB7	303363-64/53/5857/55	MCCW	H30/24R

Withdrawn 1951 (79-90).



The last trolleybus to operate was No. 90 (FOK90), which carried an official party to mark the closure of the system. It was a 1940 Leyland TB7 with MCCW 54-seat bodywork. (LTHL collection).

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Additional information, corrections and photographs are always welcome.
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In producing this history reference has been made to the following sources; Birmingham City Transport, Keeley, Russell and Gray (TPC, 1977); A Nostalgic Look at Birmingham Trolleybuses 1922-1951, David Harvey (Silver Link Publishing, 1997); PSV Circle Fleet Histories PD9C and PD10C.

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