

Dearne District Light Railway



1924 - 1933

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Cover Illustration: The crew of car No 21 pose under Wath LMSR railway bridge (the low bridge that precluded the use of double-deck tramcars). The destination shows 'Special Car' which suggests that the photo may have been taken around the opening date in 1924, especially with the interested crowd. (LTHL collection).

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There were six tramway systems within present day South Yorkshire, four in the towns of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield and two connecting smaller places, the Mexborough and Swinton Company line and the municipal Dearne District. The Dearne District Light Railways formed the last complete electric tramway system to open in Britain. It had been proposed and authorised just before World War I, but could not be opened until 1924, by which time motorbuses were already deeply entrenched. The already dated vehicles, layout and operating practices were no match for the more flexible motor bus and the line closed again in 1933, making it one of the shortest-lived tramways in Britain. The goodwill was sold to the competing Yorkshire Traction bus company.

The river Dearne flows through Barnsley to join the Don at Denaby. In this section of the valley are the townships of Bolton-on-Deerne, Darfield, Goldthorpe, Wath and Wombwell. In 1913 the Urban District Councils of Bolton (which included Goldthorpe), Thurnscoe (a little to the east of the places mentioned), Wath and Wombwell combined to promote a tramway to connect the area with Barnsley.

The population of the four authorities was 42,119 in the 1911 census. If Barnsley and Worsborough are added, this rises to 105,496. The main industry was the mining of coal from the Barnsley and Silkstone seams. By 1870 there were 108 mines in the South Yorkshire Coalfield as a whole with some, such as Manvers Main, also associated with coke ovens and by-products plants. By 1913 the other two employers in the area were the railways and the glass industry.

The existing transport network in the Dearne valley included the Dearne and Dove Canal, dating from 1798, various fairly recent road transport facilities and the railways. The Midland had a station at Wath, which also had two other stations. One was the terminus of a Hull and Barnsley line serving Hickleton & Thurnscoe en route, the other on the Great Central route via Wombwell and Stairfoot to Barnsley. The Midland had a separate station at Wombwell and also ran a joint line via Bolton with the North Eastern Railway. The small Dearne Valley Company had opened to passengers only in 1912, and had halts at Great Houghton, Goldthorpe & Thurnscoe and Harlington (for Adwick-on-Dearne).

Railway services were widely criticised locally for unpunctuality, inadequate services and the unsatisfactory location of stations; this was undoubtedly one of the major reasons why the tramway was promoted in the first place. Electric tramways had already been built at either end of the valley. The first was owned by the Barnsley and District Electric Traction Company (B&DETC), a BET subsidiary, dated from 1904 and ran 3.06 miles from Smithies in the north via the railway stations to the twin Worsborough Bridge and Dale termini. At the other end of the valley, in 1907, the Mexborough and Swinton Tramways Company (M&STC) opened a line from Rotherham - where it connected with the Corporation tramways - to Denaby via Swinton and Mexborough, originally on the Dolter surface contact system and later using normal overhead.

The M&STC was one of the five tramway subsidiaries of the National Electric Construc-

tion Company (NECC). In 1912 the Company proposed to build trolleybus routes out from its tramway, but determined opposition from the Dearne local authorities ensured that only two were approved, from Denaby to Conisbrough and Mexborough to Manvers Main; service began in 1915, but did not become regular until 1922.

There were horse buses and wagonettes in use in the area, and the first motor bus service may have been started in Darfield by the brothers Camplejohn as early as 1905. By 1913 numerous proprietors were running buses and charabancs on the West Melton to Barnsley road, which was also chosen by the B&DETC for one of its pioneer motor bus routes opened on 3 May 1913; another Dearne valley route served Goldthorpe.

Despite these fairly extensive transport facilities, they linked the local communities in the valley either badly or not at all. A need for improved transport was still clearly felt, and the local authorities too may have wanted to put forward a scheme as a counter to the M&STC plans.

Various abortive proposals for tramways had been made between 1901 and 1906, but it was not until much later that the local authorities - at first including Darfield - combined to produce a plan for a circular tramway and branches to serve their area. Darfield withdrew at an early stage, and other voices were raised in support of municipal buses. Bolton and Wath had actually planned a joint motor bus service, but the idea was dropped on expert advice, and by 1913 Bolton seems to have wanted

trolleybuses. However in 1913 an extended tramway scheme was applied for under the Light Railways Acts 1896 and 1912. The main line was to go right through the valley, starting by a junction with the Barnsley tramway and passing through Ardsley, Worsborough and Wombwell, Brampton, West Melton and Wath with a deviation in Wath to Adwick and Manvers Main to join the M&STC line in Mexborough. Branches were proposed from Wath to Stonyford Bridge, the Darfield boundary; from Wath to Swinton, again joining the M&STC line; from Wath to Thurnscoe; and from Bolton to rejoin the main line at Adwick. About fifteen miles of line were proposed of standard gauge and mostly single track.

The DDLR was promoted as a light railway (the planned name was Dearne Valley Light Railway, but this was altered to suit the local railway company) and so the application was heard by the three Light Railway Commissioners in a quasi-judicial form with applicants and opponents being represented by barristers (twenty one of them). The inquiry was held at Barnsley in the period 26-28 February and resumed in London over 2-10 March 1914.

Each side produced expert witnesses. The main ones for the proposers were Stephen Sellon and Harry England. Sellon's firm had drawn up the scheme and he himself was a senior figure in the tramway world-consulting engineer to many tramways and the builder of some 800 miles of line, former member of and witness to various government committees, Vice-President of the Tramways and Light Railways Association. Sellon made particular use of his experience as Engineer and Managing Director of the

Weymss and District tramway, a line which had many similarities to the proposed scheme. So did the Wakefield tramways, of which Harry England was General Manager.

The main opponents of the scheme, who were the existing transport operators and a vociferous group of ratepayers, also had their expert witnesses, chiefly an official of the BET and Mr. Cownie, Managing Director of the NECC and a Director of the M&STC.

There were two main points at issue in the inquiry. First, were existing transport facilities adequate or not? As well as criticising the railways - who admitted they would lose traffic to a tramway - the promoters had put forward a traffic census showing heavy potential demand. Second, was a tramway the best means of satisfying this demand? Other actual or potential transport undertakers put the case for their vehicles, largely based on their lower capital costs. Most of the argument was about whether or not a tramway would pay. There was a difference of about £10,000 between Sellon's estimated profit of £4,750 per annum and the loss forecast by Mr. Chivers of the BET.

After all the evidence had been heard, the inquiry was closed to await the decision of the Commissioners. If an Order was granted it needed only to be confirmed by the Board of Trade, whereas under the Tramways Act parliamentary approval was needed.

The Commissioners decided to grant the application, except for Wath to Bolton and Manvers Main to Mexborough, where the M&STC already had trolleybus powers; the

railway could not be built without a bridge over Wath Staithes level crossing, and a bridge was necessary for the same reason at Elsecar. Whilst accepting the latter, the DDLR Joint Committee decided to appeal to the Board of Trade over the Bolton line.

However, although an inquiry was held at Bolton on 21 July 1914, some complex legal action by the Great Central and Midland Railways led to the appeal being ruled *ultra vires*. Thus when the Order finally appeared in 1915 it was as outlined above, with the addition of a deviation railway for the bridge at Elsecar. Powers would lapse if construction was not commenced within three years or an extension of time were not granted by the Board.

The Committee, advised by Sellon, were still unwilling to accept defeat and made a new application by means of an amending order. A draft order on these lines was actually published, but the Commissioners deferred the local inquiry and the Committee itself decided to suspend all expenditure until the war's end.

In 1918 the Board of Trade granted an extension of time and the Committee decided to proceed with the draft order, which would now need altering to increase the capital, fares etc in line with post-war prices. Without the amendment, and without a bridge at Wath, the railways would be in two halves; given this, it was still believed they would be viable.

The opposition, taking into account the two to two-and-a-half times rise in capital and

running costs since 1914, disagreed; one experienced witness was the first to forecast an actual working loss. A draft order was then drawn up amending the route and doubling the authorised capital and fares. Further opposition was brought to bear to try to prevent its confirmation by the new Ministry of Transport. More significantly, an official told the Committee that tramways would inevitably be loss-making and that motor buses alone might break even. However the law only allowed existing tram operators to obtain municipal bus powers, so he recommended coming to terms with the B&DTC to provide extra services. Mr. Hoare, senior partner in Sellon's firm since the latter's death in 1919, not unnaturally insisted that only a tramway could meet the traffic demands and, though somewhat imprecise on financial details at first, by 1921 was forecasting a surplus of over £5,000 after capital charges. Even though the Committee took Hoare's advice and obtained the confirmation of the Order in 1921, two years later some members were still uneasy and Hoare had to assure the meeting that 'the statement as to Revenue, Working Expenses etc was a very safe one'.

The tender of the Consolidated Construction Company was accepted and work began at Thurnscoe in May 1923. It was later decided to build the Swinton (Woodman Inn) branch along a different route in Wath, this being approved by another Order. The completed sections were inspected by Major Hall from the Ministry of Transport on 9 July 1924 and opened five days later from Barnsley to Thurnscoe and Manvers. The Woodman branch followed on 29 September 1924, but the Darfield branch and the outer end of the Manvers Main line were not proceeded with at the time. The total capital expended to date was £279,215, of which £274,142 was loaned.

The Operating Period

The DDLR was controlled by a Joint Committee comprised of representatives of the four participating authorities. The first Chairman was C. H. Oxley, 1913-20, followed by A. E. Allott, 1920-1, M. Nokes, 1921-32 and G. Probert, 1932. Policy could also be debated by any of the UDCs and major decisions were sometimes thrashed out at joint conferences of the Councils. The Clerk to the Committee was Joseph Ledger Hawksworth, who was also Clerk to both the Bolton and Thurnscoe UDCs and Accountant for the Wath and Bolton Gas Board; he kept all the Committee's minutes and accounts and normally attended all delegations etc. Day-to-day control was in the hands of a General Manager, first Major Fred Coutts, who had held a similar position at Paisley, and then when he resigned in 1925, his son Ronald. Many staff accompanied Coutts down from Scotland, where Glasgow Corporation had recently taken over the Paisley system. Probably because of this influx and because the depot was rather isolated, it was decided to take the unusual step of building a small estate to house the staff in Broomhead Road.

Standard tramway track was laid upon a thick bed of concrete and paved with stone setts, but most of the DDLR's track was laid on wooden sleepers and paved in tarmacadam; there was also a short length of unpaved 'railway' track near Bolton, which was equipped with signals. This construction was adopted for economy and also for ease of repair in case of subsidence. Most of the line was single track with passing loops, but there was double track in the centres of Wath and Wombwell. Some sections

were never built, nor was the authorised connection made with the Barnsley system. The only alteration which may have happened was the lifting of the final loop in Thurnscoe. Current supply was from the mains via a DDLR substation and the standard overhead wires. The depot, always known American-style as the Car Barns, was on Brampton Road, just outside Wombwell.

There were thirty single-deck trams, in a red and white livery and built by the English-Electric Company.

The main line from Barnsley to Thurnscoe took about ninety minutes to traverse; the Manvers and Woodman lines were usually operated as branches, though the cars normally ran to and from West Melton. In 1932 every alternate car was running through to the Woodman; there were four cars an hour in the mornings and six in the afternoons plus, of course, any special workers' or scholars' cars. Fares were set at 1.5d. a mile and 1d. for workmen, but generally the latter only was charged with further discounts offered to workers.

The financial situation of the tramway was never good, and it worsened considerably in later years. However even notional 'profits' were turned into losses when interest and repayments on the massive capital debt were taken into account. These losses were borne by the constituent authorities.

From first to last, therefore, the DDLR minutes record varying degrees of concern

about the financial plight of the undertaking, and the efforts of the Joint Committee were principally directed towards solving or mitigating the problem. Their almost inevitable failure in the face of such odds was sealed by the closure of the line on 30 Sep 1933, the trams being replaced by buses of the Yorkshire Traction Company.

J.R Buckley

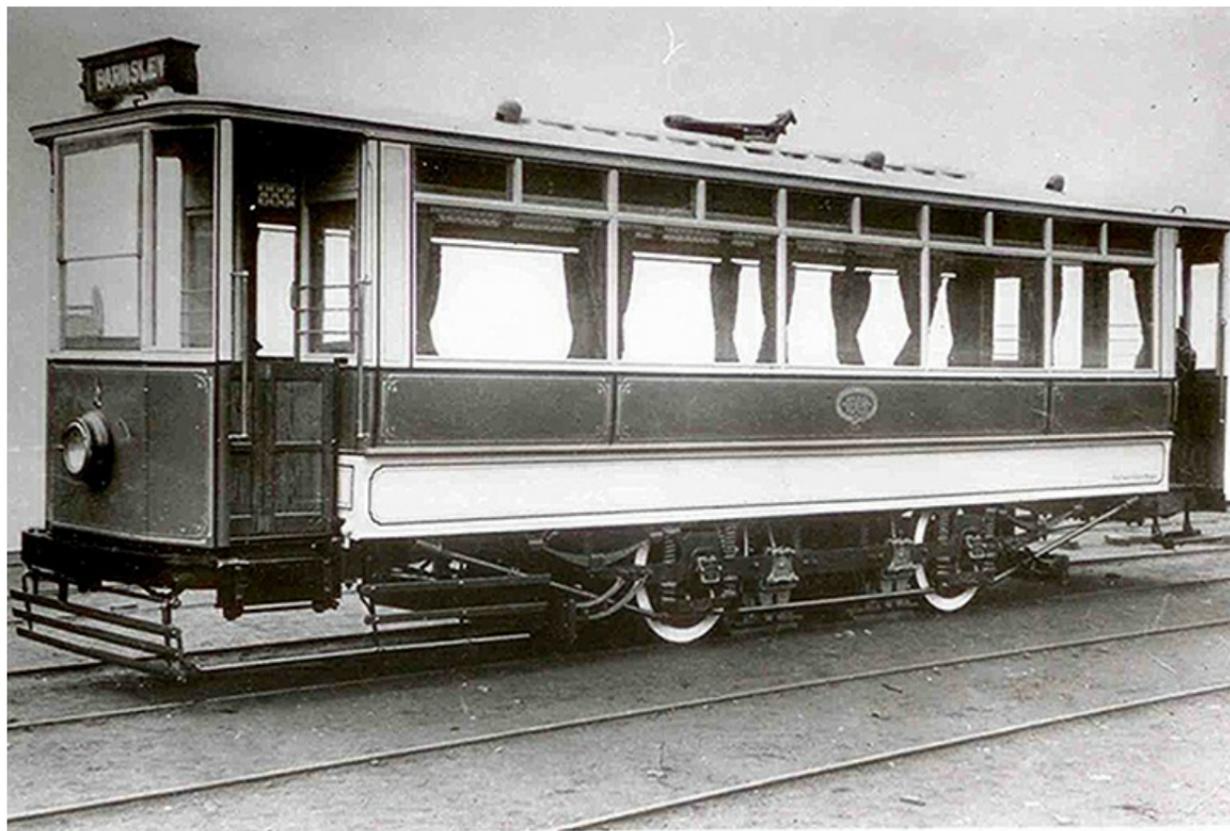
Tram Fleet List 1924-1933

This listing is in the format - Fleet No; Type; Trucks; Builder; Seating.

1924

1-30; Single-deck lowheight 4-wheel; Peckham; English Electric; 36

All withdrawn 1933.



Car No.1 photographed before delivery at the English Electric works in Preston. (LTHL collection).

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Additional information, corrections and photographs are always welcome.
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