

# The Horse-Trams of Oxford, 1881-1914

By HAROLD W. HART

'... we will mount the horse-tram's upper deck  
'... Bound for the Banbury Road in time for tea.'

—*John Betjeman.*

IN many cities and towns of Great Britain horse-tramways for passengers were replaced by a system of electric trams, in a number of cases with extended and new routes. There were, however, some instances where the withdrawal of horse traction brought about the end of tramways of any kind, transport thereafter being passed to motor omnibuses operated by company or by corporation. Such was the case in the City of Oxford for here, after a brief period during which horse drawn omnibuses were operated by the tramway company, mainly to extend horse tram routes, motor vehicles under other ownership took over the urban transport.

The horse-tramways of Oxford were authorized by the Oxford Tramways Order (1879) under the Tramways Act (1870) and were registered as the City of Oxford and District Tramway Company. The Memorandum of Association, dated 20 November 1879,<sup>1</sup> contained a statement that it was the Company's intention 'to make, equip, maintain and work tramways in the City of Oxford and elsewhere within a distance of 20 miles from the Town Hall thereof'. Although on completion the routes terminated considerably short of the 20 mile radius the facilities provided formed a balanced network.

The same Memorandum or Prospectus named the Chairman, Directors, of whom there were two, the Engineer and the Secretary of the Company and gave the registered office as 7 Poultry, London E.C. Capital of £42,000 was to be raised in £10 shares and the sums of £31,300 and £1,434 were allocated for works and parliamentary purposes respectively.

The very nature of Oxford had raised the need for some form of urban passenger transport for, the centre of the city being to a great extent occupied by University colleges, college grounds, and buildings the property of or closely associated with the University, a large proportion of the population had perforce to reside further out and on the city fringes. It was fortunate that the streets of Oxford, for the most part broad, level and straight, were suitable for tramway operations.

<sup>1</sup> The Prospectus appeared in *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 22 Nov. 1879.

The first route, running roughly west to east, and the second route south to north, both across Carfax, were introduced mainly to bring these workers to and from their homes. The Cowley Road line, which started outside the railway stations, served the residents of a thickly populated area whilst the route northwards, from Carfax to Rackham's Lane, catered for the occupiers of better property in improved surroundings.

The vicinity of the railway stations was a natural location for a tramway terminus and mention of this was made in the 1879 Prospectus: 'The City is very favourably situated for railway accommodation with London and the North, both the Great Western Railway and the London and North Western Railway having stations at which nearly all the fast trains stop.' This information overlooked the fact that the London and North Western Company's station, now no longer in use, was a terminus so that all trains had to stop there.

The first line was put into operation on 1 December 1881. A Board of Trade inspection had been made by Major General Hutchinson on the preceding 28 November when, accompanied by the Deputy Mayor, Alderman Galpin and also Alderman Saunders, both of whom were new 'Local Directors'<sup>2</sup> of the Company, he walked the route from the railway stations to the Cowley Road terminus and travelled back in one of the cars.

On opening day four cars carrying an official party including Directors, the Mayor, and a number of civic officers, started from the terminus at the railway end and, passing through Park End Street, New Road, Queen Street and across Carfax, continued their way to the Cowley Road terminus via High Street, Magdalen Bridge and The Plain. On the arrival of the cars the system was declared open to the public and on the same day, such was the line's popularity and novelty, fares were collected from 992 ordinary passengers. By this time a complete change had been made in the matter of Chairman, Directors and Secretary, the Local Directors replacing the two original members of the board.<sup>3</sup> This first line was followed by one which ran from a point in St. Aldates, just below Carfax, to the Banbury Road, terminating near St. Margaret's Road, then known as Rackham's Lane. This route was opened on 28 January 1882.

Basically the lines constituted a single track system eased where necessary by crossing loops although a section from Carfax to The Plain was laid double. The only operating difficulties came later from negotiating the sharp curves at both ends of Beaumont Street, served by cars which ran to the Kingston Road; there were a number of cases of trams leaving the track and running against the Taylor Institution or on to the railings of Worcester College.

As the Oxford population increased the existing system became inadequate and three extension Orders were obtained with the result that the routes, still centered on Carfax, served the city reasonably well until the closing down of all the lines in January 1914. The complete system can be summarized:

<sup>2</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 3 Dec. 1881.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Original Routes	Extensions	Opened
The railway stations to Cowley Road		1.12.1881
Carfax to Rackham's Lane via Cornmarket Street, Magdalen Street and St. Giles Street		28.1.1882
	To Kingston Road via Beaumont Street and Walton Street	15.7.1884
	To New Hinksey via St. Aldates	15.3.1887
	To Summertown (South Parade)	5.11.1898

The Banbury Road route as first laid down failed to reach the intended terminus and, as will be seen above, did not reach it until some sixteen years had passed. The Kingston Road line was known locally as the 'Jericho Extension' or 'Jericho Line' after Walton Street's earlier name, Jericho Road. Carfax remained the centre of the system both because of its central location and because here cars could be switched from one route to the other if need arose.

Single, and later double-decker, cars were used and in the last years these numbered 19,<sup>4</sup> overnight stabling accommodation for vehicles being provided at Leopold Street depot near the Cowley Road terminus where five covered tracks were available. The horse stud by this time totalled 150.

Apart from the termini there were no fixed stopping places, Conductors and Drivers being ordered to look out for likely passengers. Speed was limited to 8 m.p.h. and service intervals ranged from 15 to 30 minutes, the speed limit remaining in force throughout the Company's period of operation. The facilities provided were appreciated by Oxonians and others, for by the end of the century the system was conveying 56,000 passengers weekly, approximately three million passengers annually, mainly on penny fares.

Employees of the Company were provided with a book of the Company's Rules and Regulations. Those concerned were Inspectors, Conductors and Drivers and from the points of view of general interest and odd phrasing a few examples may be mentioned; for instance, Inspectors were charged to refrain from conversation with Conductors unless matters of business were involved, neither were they to associate with them off duty but to keep themselves 'independ-

<sup>4</sup> Taking a mean of 22 seats for the single-decker cars and one of 44 in respect of double-deckers, the seating capacity of the fleet increased from an early 352 to 836 when the larger cars were all in service.

dent'. These men were also instructed to visit their particular termini 'privately' two or three times daily.

The instructions to Drivers call for no comment apart from the fact that they were warned to drive slowly 'through a herd of cattle or a crowd of people' and to stop their cars on the approach of a flock of sheep.

Conductors, among a number of duties, were warned not to permit 'a sweep in his dirt, a miller in his dust, or an intoxicated person to be received on, or any person to smoke or use obscene or foul language while inside the car'. They were also instructed to report any car which they saw 'loitering'. The regulations ended on a more humane note than had hitherto been sounded although this covered the welfare of the horses rather than of the men.

Wages accrued on a day to day basis and were paid weekly. They covered time worked only and it was laid down in the Regulations that it was not the intention of the Company to ensure constant daily employment for all their Conductors and Drivers.

Closely associated with the Company's horse trams was a small fleet of horse drawn buses which during the last years of the Company operated from Broad Street to Iffley Turn via Holywell and Carfax alternately, from Carfax to Wolvercote Turn and, on Saturdays only, between Magdalen Road and Cowley Village; there was a later facility of this kind, between Carfax and Headington.

The advent of the motor bus had, however, shown that horse traction in any form was doomed. Shortly before these vehicles made their countrywide appearance, in May 1902, a meeting was held in Oxford on the subject of the municipal ownership and electrification of the tramways at which some form of 'conduit' current supply was proposed. The scheme was dropped but not forgotten, for some three years later, in September 1905<sup>5</sup> an agreement was reached between the Company and the Oxford Corporation covering an undertaking to sell the tramway and its buses to the civic authorities with effect from 31 December 1906. A few weeks earlier, on 6 December, the City of Oxford Electric Traction Company was formed to operate a reconstructed system, the wider 'railway' gauge of 4 ft. 8½ ins. being strongly recommended in place of the existing width of four feet. The Oxford Tramways Bill (1906) and the Oxford and District Tramways Act (1907) covered not only the total reconstruction of the existing system accompanied by considerable doubling of the line but the provision of extensions and also five new routes.

Publicity in support of the scheme, addressed to the ratepayers, mentioned the increased dividends which already had accrued from the conversion of tramways in other parts of the country to electric traction. The opposition strongly countered the arguments put forward by the electrification party and on 22 June 1906 they, too, published a notice to the ratepayers warning them that the cost of converting the system would be a heavy charge on their pockets through

<sup>5</sup> Leave to introduce the Bill was decided by a small majority at a Council held 6 September 1905. This, taking place during the holiday season when only 41 of the 60 members were present, was considered sharp practice by the opposition.

inevitable rates increases.<sup>6</sup> In addition this notice stated that the existing horse tramway with a capital of £50,000 was paying dividends as high as 6 per cent on its ordinary shares, but it was agreed that if their case was lost and horse traction had to be abandoned they would give their support to motor vehicles as over electric trams they had the advantages of being faster and of creating less noise. It was also argued that the increase in double track mileage, the additional crossing loops, and the wider gauge would cause interference with other traffic, and commercial interests in the city would thereby suffer.

One of the chief objections at this time to motor vehicles, the smell of petrol fumes, was somehow missed by the electrification party whilst the supporters of the motor bus could further argue that if a road had to be closed because of engineering works, buses could be diverted along other thoroughfares whilst trams under similar conditions would remain line-bound.

Those in favour of electrification had naturally given the necessary thought to the means by which power was to be supplied to the trams, and here the roadway 'stud' method appears to have been favoured, Dolter's principle<sup>7</sup> being considered the best for the purpose. The trolley system with its mesh of overhead wires was dismissed as 'an ascertained nuisance'. The opposition were, however, the stronger party and their arguments prevailed with the result that conduit, stud and trolley methods were all abandoned. Some further efforts were made in 1909 and 1911 to renew the discussion but these failed and when the last horse tram was put away at Leopold Street depot, tramways disappeared from the Oxford scene and motor buses became established.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 'Bearing in mind the notoriously fallacious character of estimates it will be prudent to assume that the ultimate expenditure will be not much less than £200,000.'

<sup>7</sup> The Dolter system, using a form of roadway 'studs', had been applied to certain tramways in Paris and in some other cities and towns. It was described as an English company and in order to encourage interest in and support for electric tramways in Oxford an exhibition of the system was staged at the Randolph assembly rooms.

<sup>8</sup> The date was probably 27 January 1914. Some consideration had been given to the use of petrol-electric vehicles, *Oxford Times*, 22 February 1913. One applicant for a licence, in 1913, to operate motor buses between the railway stations and the Cowley Road was Lord Nuffield, then Mr. W. R. Morris.