

Fig. 1: Metropolitan Railway Class A locomotive of 1866 on display at the Museum.

The London Transport Museum

Photography by John Earp

CLIVE ORTON

READERS may remember with affection the Museum of British Transport at Clapham, and mourn its closure and the transfer of many of its exhibits to the new National Railway Museum at York. The part of the collection relating to London Transport re-appeared at Syon Park, Brentford, in 1973, and would have stayed there had not the Covent Garden Market moved to a new site at Nine Elms. The Flower Market (built in 1871-2 by William Cubitt and Co. to a design by William Rogers) was one of many buildings left empty, and an entry by London Transport won a competition to decide its future. The Syon Park

Collection would be moved to Covent Garden and up-graded to a full London Transport Museum. The move took place in 1979/80 and the Museum was opened in 1980. After an interval to allow the Museum to settle down, we decided to visit it.

Two points are registered before a visit has even started — firstly, that this is the London Transport, Museum, not a London, transport museum: that is, it deals almost exclusively with the history and artefacts of the London Transport Executive and its antecedents, and scarcely mentions other means of getting about London. Secondly, the fact that the Museum is totally unsubsidised and



Fig. 2: K type motor bus of 1919.

must support itself and any future developments entirely from admission charges¹ shop sales, etc. Charges are therefore high, although in comparison with those for other (subsidised) cultural activities in the area they look less horrendous. They do show, however, what a tremendous bargain we get from our 'free' museums in London, even if we do pay for them through our rates and taxes (and are presumably subsidised by non-museum-goers).

As one would expect, the 'hardware', i.e. road and rail vehicles, dominate the scene. Although inevitable, this is unfortunate as one's attention is distracted away from the 'software', and one is tempted not to read the excellent displays on the walls and panels surrounding the exhibits. One

1. Adults £1.40, children and pensioners 60p, free admission for the handicapped, reductions for pre-booked parties. The Museum is open 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. every day except Christmas and Boxing Day. Write to London Transport Museum, 39 Wellington Street, London, WC2E 7BB or 'phone (01) 379 6344 for information.

is first led past a collection of three horse buses, ten motor buses, two trolleybuses and four trams (in apparently random order). Our archaeological background should help us to understand the subtle typological relationships and trends of development between the various types on display. For example, the STL bus just *has* to be a hybrid between the ST (short type) and the LT (long type), and so it is (though I don't expect anyone ever called it a short-type-long). It makes one wonder if typology *only* works for post-Industrial Revolution artefacts.

The rail side is represented by three Metropolitan Railway locomotives, four coaches and a milk van (yes, really), as well as the cab of a tube train in which one can stand and operate the various controls. There is also a signalling display and a lift from Hampstead Station which makes very satisfactory noises but does not actually move (although I did see some passengers in it, waiting to be taken to — where?).

The pictorial displays round the walls, as well as dealing with such obvious topics as 'Early



Fig. 3: ST type motor bus of 1931, showing several advances over the earlier K type.

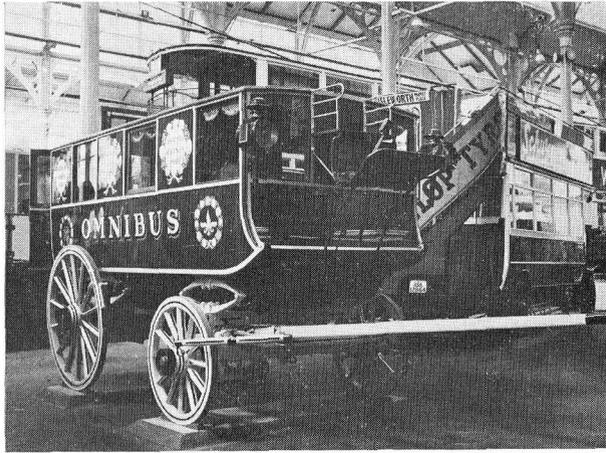


Fig. 4: Replica of the Shillibeer horse omnibus of 1829, built in 1929 for the Centenary celebrations.

Transport in London', 'The First Underground Railway' and 'Rolling Stock Development', branch out into wider historical themes like 'London's Transport at war', and 'Suburban development' and some less well known aspects like 'Architecture and Design'. There is a selection of the famous London Transport posters. But only in a secluded gallery above the coffee shop is one free from the dominating presence of the vehicles.

Other facilities include the coffee shop, with a limited range of food perhaps more suited to adult than childish tastes (but at least it's cheaper than the many eating houses nearby), the shop, with a fairly conventional range of souvenirs and some interesting books, and the loos, which are excellent. Aspects of the Museum which I was not able to sample include film shows in the lecture theatre,

the reference library, and rides around the London streets in a vintage bus.

What were my impressions? Firstly, as already mentioned, the dominance of the vehicles over the other display material. Secondly, the Museum is remarkably clean and tidy — almost antiseptic — and (probably related) there is relatively little one can do in it except *look*. One is denied access to the interior of the buses and coaches, doubtless in the interests of safety (of both exhibits and visitors), but nevertheless how frustrating. There are a few buttons to push, but not nearly enough, and how I longed for something to move. Even the model escalator refused to budge. The taped noises were effective, but those lovely evocative transport smells (soot, hot oil, ozone) were missing. But the Museum's first priority must be to house an inherited collection in an alien building, and doubtless developments will follow as funds become available. Thirdly, it made me feel quite old — look, there's the trolleybus I went to school on, and help, I can remember that bus when it was *brand new*, and here it is, a museum exhibit. Sic transit (sorry), but perhaps a function of museums is to remind us of the passing of time and our own mortality.

It is worth a visit? Transport enthusiasts will need no encouragement, and indeed will probably have already visited the Museum. Other readers will probably not want to make a special excursion just to visit the Museum — with fares, admission charges and a meal it could be an expensive outing — but if one is in London for the day it would make an interesting addition to one's programme. London Transport are to be congratulated for making these historic vehicles once again accessible to the public.

Local Societies - amendments

THE THIRD SET of amendments to the list of local societies (Vol. 3, No 12, 318-9) is as follows:

Camden History Society; Sec. Mrs. Jane Ramsay, Swiss Cottage Library, Avenue Road, London, N.W.3.

Eltham Society; Secretary's address not known. Please delete previous entry.

Enfield Archaeological Society; Sec. Mrs. G. Ivens, 120 Hedge Lane, London, N.13.

Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society; Sec. Miss V. D. Marchant, 135 Poplar Road South, Merton Park, S.W.19 3JZ.

Potters Bar and District Historical Society; Sec. C. T. Overall, 30 Deepden, Potters Bar.

Rickmansworth Historical Society; Sec. Mrs J. Woodward, 7 Scots Hill Close, Rickmansworth.

Ruslip, Northwood and Pinner Local History Society; Sec. Elizabeth Krause, 29 Eastern Avenue, Pinner, Middlesex.

Stanmore and Harrow Historical Society; Sec. Mrs I. Sheppard, 70 Old Church Lane, Stanmore, Middlesex.

Surrey Archaeological Society; Secs. Mr and Mrs H. Eames, 55 Anne Boleyn's Walk, Cheam, Surrey.