

Halifax Corporation Tramways 1898 -1939



A tram coming down the moor from the school in the 1910s has the road to itself apart from a distant pedestrian. The school and Wainhouse Tower dominate the skyline.

My interest in Halifax's tramways started in the 1960s when I bought some old picture postcards of the town showing trams running along Commercial Street. They looked so permanent with their rails fixed into the road and their overhead wires suspended from the ornate traction poles. It seemed surprising to me that, only 25 years after they had ended, there was so little evidence to show that they had ever been there. Some years later I found a photograph that showed both the school and a passing tram.

Halifax tramways opened in June 1898, to coincide with the golden jubilee of the town's incorporation as a municipal borough in 1848. Vast crowds gathered to watch the top-hatted gentry riding on the highly decorated first trams to leave Commercial Street.

The original routes ran from the General Post Office to King Cross and to Highroad Well, with a connecting service from the post office to the 'Old' railway station. Fares were 1d from terminus to terminus and the trams ran every ten minutes from 5am to 11pm. The trams were said to have doubled land prices at King Cross and Highroad Well and, within a short time, over 200 new houses had been built there.

The early trams were fairly basic con-

One of the first trams, No. 35, stands at Pellon Barracks in Spring Hall Lane before returning down Pellon Lane to town. The crew are smartly dressed and the driver's white cap top suggests that it is summer.

veyances with open top decks and no protection at all for the drivers, who had to stand at their controls in all weathers for shifts of nine hours and more without a meal break. Only after the tram crews complained about the lack of toilet facilities at the outer terminals did the Tramways Committee negotiate conveniences for them at pubs, shops and other suitable locations.

It took eight years before trams started to be equipped with top covers and over 20 years before the driving compartments were enclosed. Even then one side was always open as there were no doors fitted to where the passengers boarded and alighted. The unfortunate travellers to

Sowerby Bridge and Triangle never benefited from top covers, as only open-topped trams could fit under the low railway bridge at Station Road, Sowerby Bridge.

The original livery was Prussian blue and ivory with elaborate gold lining and a coat of arms on each side with 'HALIFAX CORPORATION TRAMWAYS' proudly displayed beneath. Advertisements were carried on the upper deck panels, as a useful source of income for the department and photographs show many claims including 'Fels Naphtha makes washday half' and 'Try Typhoo tea for indigestion' (to cure it or cause it?), as well as the more familiar Heinz 57, Bryant & May's Matches, Lipton's Tea,





Car 66 displays the early top cover, which it carried from 1906 to 1912. This still left the poor driver totally exposed to the Halifax elements. The tram is standing at College Terrace, the initial terminus of the Savile Park route, just above the school. In the background are King Cross Wesleyan Sunday School and Wainhouse Tower. Heinz already had 57 varieties over a hundred years ago.

Bovril and many others. One tram had the equivalent of today's buses' all-over advertising for Almond's Complete House Furnisher, 34 Northgate, on every upstairs panel and on each step up to the top deck.

The original car shed was built at Mile Cross, by the junction of Gibraltar Road and Gibbet Street. However, with the rapid growth of the tramway system and consequently the fleet of trams, it soon became too small to accommodate all the cars and a replacement depot was built on Skircoat Road, which continues to operate as a bus depot.

The hilly nature of the Halifax area presented considerable challenges to tramway operation and it was originally thought that trams could not safely work down Salterhebble Hill, with its gradient of 1 in 9.7 (10.3%). Plans were started for a cliff lift to carry the trams down the valley from Dudwell Lane to the end of Wakefield Road but these were not carried through and a conventional tramway ran on Salterhebble Hill without incident.

The route to Southowram went up Beacon Hill Road, which gave rise to the illusion of 'a tramcar in the sky', rather like Santa's sleigh. At night, the brightly-lit trams climbing up the hillside against a background of almost unbroken blackness appeared to be floating in mid-air.

The tramway system expanded rapidly and the tram routes extended to Hebden Bridge in the west, Triangle and Stainland to the south, Causeway Foot, Queensbury and Shelf to the north and Brighouse and Bailiff Bridge to the east. Halifax trams met Brad-

ford trams at Queensbury, Shelf and Bailiff Bridge; they also met Huddersfield trams at West Vale and Brighouse. However, there was never any through running into the neighbouring towns, as each system had a different track gauge. A proposal was made to equip trams with a mechanism to allow the wheels to slide on the axle to adjust to different track gauges (as worked for a time between Leeds and Bradford) so that trams could run from Halifax to Bradford. However, this was strongly opposed by the Halifax Chamber of Trade, who did not want Halifax folk to spend their money in the other town and the idea was dropped. The proximity of the other tramways came in useful on one occasion in 1924, when there was a fire at the Halifax power station and all the electrical power failed in Halifax, stranding the trams all over the system. Temporary electrical connections were made to the Huddersfield tramway at West Vale and Brighouse and, despite the considerable voltage drop due to the distance from the Huddersfield supply, the Halifax trams were gradually able to crawl back to their depot.

Tramcar design developed during the early years of the twentieth century and Halifax was a pioneer of one-man operation in 1904 with two short trams ('demi-cars') acquired to run a shuttle service between the Old Station and the Post Office, for connection with the many tram services starting on Commercial Street. However, their initial novelty was short-lived, only eleven days in fact, when one ran away down Horton Street and collided with the other one near the bottom of the hill. Following a public inquiry and extensive repairs to the trams, they returned to service seven months later

without further trouble. Apart from three long single-deck trams that were built in the 1920s, all of Halifax's trams were of double-deck construction. Many of them were built, or rebuilt, in the Skircoat Road workshops.

There were a number of more serious accidents over the years. In 1906, the newest tram in the fleet, returning from Shelf, skidded down New Bank on slippery rails at high speed, lurched onto North Bridge and overturned, killing two and injuring twelve. One of the dead men was never identified (it was thought that he was an Irish labourer in England for the hay harvest) and five local women came forward to claim compensation as his widow. The driver of the tram was found to be at fault and he was sacked, triggering the first tram strike that dragged on for several months.

The worst tram accident occurred in the following year, when a tram from Sowerby Bridge lost power towards the top of Pye Nest Road and careered back down the hill into Bolton Brow, smashing into a shop. The tram broke into two halves and five died, including the conductor; many more were injured. The Tramways Manager and his Rolling Stock Engineer both had to resign. Several trams blew over at Catherine Slack on the exposed Queensbury route in high winds. Subsequently, a wind gauge was installed and top-covered cars were replaced by open-top ones when the wind reached 70mph and an alarm sounded at the depot.

You could post a letter on the trams, as they carried post boxes in the front dash panel in the evenings. Parcels were also carried on the cars, to be collected and delivered by smartly uniformed parcel boys employed by the department. Even milk churns were carried on the driver's platform of the trams.

The Crossley & Porter Orphanage was served by a tram route travelling from Commercial Street, along Skircoat Road, up Free School Lane and past the north side of Savile Park for over 30 years, although we can only speculate how many of the staff, day pupils and boarders made use of it. The route opened in June 1899 as far as College Terrace, opposite the back of school, and was then extended to King Cross. Later it continued to West End, Pellon, and back to Commercial Street, to form the 'Outer Circle' that we knew as the number 5 and 6 West End bus routes in the 1960s.

We do know of at least two boarders who were tram travellers. The distinguished playwright and poet R.C. Scriven and his brother used the trams between the school and the station at the beginning and end of terms. Ronald Scriven has described his

first sight of Halifax and his first tram ride up from the station when he started at Crossleys in 1918, towards the end of the First World War:

“Halifax was all hills. Our tram jerked and lurched and whined up one of the steepest. From the open, toast-racked upper deck I looked out on hump-backed black hills. We passed terraces of black stone houses and, wherever I looked, there rose tall chimneys. They were all pouring out great trailing plumes of black smoke.”

“There are two sounds which all who knew Halifax as it used to be will never forget. One is the sound of iron-rimmed clogs battering the pavements. The other is the deep, whining sounds of the Halifax trams. No trams in the world could match the trams of Halifax. They rolled, they lurched, they swayed and they bucked like bronchos. ‘Ee-whine, ee-whine, ee-whine’ they droned and sang. Ours, like all the others, climbed implacably upwards.”

Ronald’s brother Neville joined him at Crossleys the following year and they travelled together to their home and back again each holiday.

“Mouldy old Halifax” said Neville cheerfully as we got out of the train. The winter term of 1922 held no problems for him. At eleven-minus he was vigorously a-swim in the third form. I’d be fifteen in April and I knew I must do some hard spadework, for the School Certificate was rather more than a year away and I knew my weaknesses now. I said “You bung off on the tram, Nev. You can take my suitcase too. I’ll walk up. I’ve a lot to think about.”

The trams had been operating for 20 years when the 11-year old Ronald Scriven first



The soup kitchen built into demi-car No. 96 in 1918 builds up a head of steam in Skircoat Depot yard before embarking on a journey to nourish the population of Halifax. It promises to visit Salterhebble on Friday and Highroad Well on Monday.

experienced them but they had suffered four years of neglect and lack of maintenance during the war and were in a poor state. Working on the trams was exclusively a male occupation until the numbers of men enlisting into the army or transferring to munitions work left the service depleted. Ten women were taken on as ‘Lady Tram Conductors’ in 1915, with more being employed as the war progressed.

Another wartime facility was the mobile food kitchen built in one of the demi-cars. This travelled around the district offering soup, dumplings, vegetable pie, rice pudding and ginger pudding. The overhead line voltage dropped towards the outer fringes of the system and tram drivers were told not to use too much power when the kitchen was nearby, or the soup went cold.

A short video of this tram at King Cross can be seen on the Pathé News website.

Trams were often decorated for important occasions, such as the 1911 and 1937 coronations, the 1935 Silver Jubilee, local festivals and as recruiting stations in the First World War.

In the 1920s, Halifax experimented briefly with trolleybuses (powered by overhead electric wires but running on conventional wheels, without rails in the road). The one route went from Pellon New Road to Wainstalls but it did not last long and the service soon reverted to motorbuses. The poor state of the road inflicted heavy wear on the solid-tyred vehicles (and on the unfortunate passengers!).

The final new (‘de luxe’) trams to enter service between 1928 and 1931 were much more sophisticated and comfortable than their predecessors. Some were ordered from the English Electric Company and some were built in the Skircoat Road workshops. They had transverse seats downstairs, upholstered in moquette, rather than the longitudinal hard wooden benches of the early trams. They had eight independent braking systems, with the result that none ever ran away out of control on the hills of Halifax. From the late 1920s, the trams were painted Indian red and ivory (they never carried the orange, green and cream livery of the buses).

From the mid-1920s, increased competition from bus operators, including Hebble and several private concerns, put pressure on the tramway’s finances. The extra costs of maintaining the tracks, the roadway and overhead wires meant that trams could only compete with buses on the busiest routes. Halifax Corporation had also built up a bus



A tram, decorated for King George V’s Silver Jubilee on the throne in 1935, picks up passengers at the end of Queens Road in Pellon Lane. The lower panels wished “Long live the King” but that was not to come to pass; he died in January 1936.

fleet from 1912 and were conscious of the relative economics of each mode of transport when considering new routes or extensions.

The maximum size of the tram fleet was 107 cars in 1930 but by this time their operation had already become unprofitable and many sections of track were worn out and required renewal. The Halifax Borough Council adopted a policy of scrapping the trams in 1931, after which a steady programme of replacing trams with buses was carried out for the rest of the decade. The renaming of the Halifax Corporation Tramways Department in 1937 to the Halifax Passenger Transport Department indicated the changed emphasis at Skircoat Road and the Town Hall.

The tram service past Savile Park and the school was withdrawn in 1931, after 32 years' operation, leaving future Crossleys scholars and staff to make their journeys by motor bus.

The very last tram ran from Mason's Green, Ovenden into town and on to the Skircoat Road depot in February 1939. A total of 820 million passengers had been carried by the trams, which ran 95 million miles in their 40 years of service.

Some tram bodies survived as holiday homes, bus shelters and allotment sheds but time and the weather have seen most of these disintegrate, with the exception of the lower deck of one of the de-luxe cars, which somehow has come through the last



The last word in tramcar design in 1928 – a de-luxe car when brand new, with a revised coat of arms on the side exhorting people to "Travel by Tram". The hand on the dash panel warns passengers to "Stop and Look" before crossing the road behind the tram.

75 years remarkably unscathed.

I am fortunate to have four hand-built scale models of Halifax trams that the late Lyndon Reeve made. I painted one of them for him 50 years ago – it has lasted well. Now that I have retired, I hope to build others to go with them.

I would very much like to hear from anyone who has any old photographs of Halifax that show the trams or their tracks and is willing to lend them for copying.

For further reading, I can recommend: *Edge of Darkness, Edge of Light*; R.C. Scriven; Souvenir Press; 1977 (for his account of his time at Crossleys), *Halifax Corporation Tramways*; Eric Thornton & Stanley King; LRTA; 2005, *Halifax Passenger Transport*; Geoffrey Hilditch; Oakwood Press; 2006.

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June 1898 and the gathered civic dignitaries and guests await their first official journey on the highly decorated trams. Dozens of policemen are in place to control the massive crowds of onlookers at the bottom of St George's Square.