

How the trams came — and went — in Cambridge

by ENID PORTER

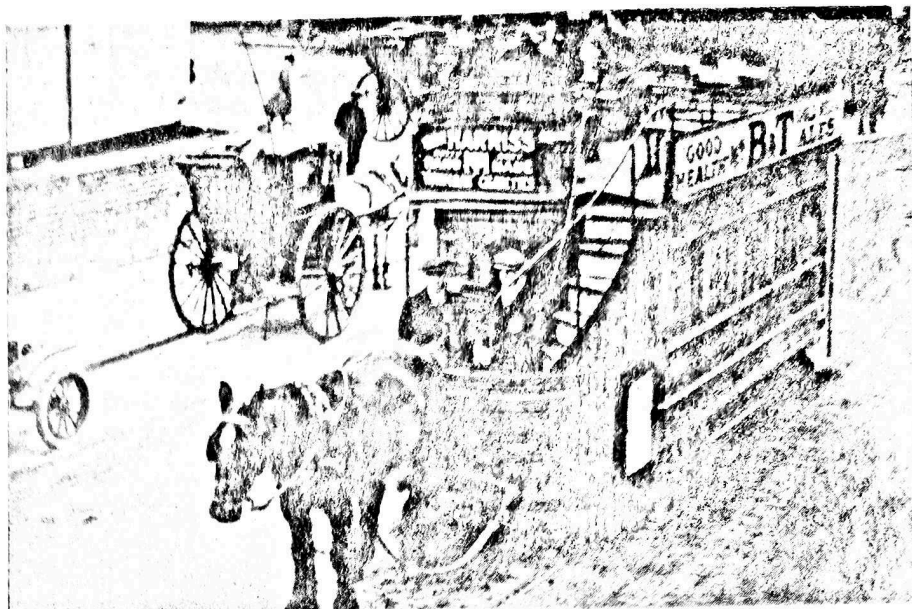
It was in November, 1878, that Cambridge people began to read in their local newspapers and on posters—waggishly referred to by journalists as “literary drapery”—displayed on lamp posts and elsewhere, of plans to have horse-drawn trams in the town.

Two Companies, each calling itself the Cambridge Tramways Company, proposed to apply for a Parliamentary Act to enable them to provide this increasingly popular mode of transport. One Company announced its plan to lay tram lines, with a gauge of 3 feet 6 inches, along Station Road, Hills Road, Regent Street, St. Andrew's Street, Bridge Street, Magdalene Street and Castle Street to a terminus on Huntingdon Road near Benson Street. A second main line was proposed to run from the first, at Hyde Park Corner, via East Road to a terminus near the Dog and Pheasant public house on Newmarket Road. From Route 1 a third line would be constructed along Jesus Lane and Newmarket Road to link up with Route 2.

The other Company was less ambitious. It proposed a line along Station Road, Hills Road and Regent Street to a terminus in St. Andrew's Street near Christ's College. From Hyde Park Corner a second tramway would be laid along Lensfield Road, Trumpington Street and King's Parade to Senate House Hill. The gauge of the rails would be 4 feet 8½ inches, and the tracks would be single ones except in Hills Road and Station Road where they would be double.

The majority of Cambridge people seem to have favoured the idea of a tramway system. As the “Cambridge Chronicle” pointed out:

“The popularity of the tramway over all other modes of street travelling . . . has now spread over



Horse drawn tram near Cambridge railway station.

almost every provincial town in the kingdom . . . In a very short time there will hardly remain any town of any importance at all which will be unsupplied with that accommodation, while those locomotive street cells called omnibuses, with their cramped area, suffocating atmosphere and peculiar odour will gradually become things of the past.”

The only omnibus service which Cambridge enjoyed, at that time, was provided by the leading hotels for the benefit of their customers arriving at or departing from the station.

Objections raised

There were objections raised, however, both by the public and at meetings of the Town Council, to the proposal of one Company to lay tram lines along such narrow streets as Bridge Street and Magdalene Street, and to the wide gauge of the rails proposed by the other Company. Further misgivings were expressed when, in January 1879, it was known that the first above-mentioned Company had arranged to apply to Parliament for additional provisions to their Bill, so that Trumpington Street, Trinity Street and St. John's Street could be included in their scheme. Tramways,

of whatever gauge, would, it was said, “almost stop the entire traffic in these streets where two carriages can hardly pass.” So both public opinion and the town authorities were in favour of the Company which proposed a line from the station to Christ's College with a second from Hyde Park Corner to Senate House Hill, provided that a narrower gauge be used than that first suggested.

On July 21st, 1879, the Cambridge Street Tramways Bill received the royal assent, and on August 7th the promoters of the successful Cambridge Street Tramways Company assembled at the Lion Hotel, Petty Cury, for a celebration dinner. Work then proceeded on the campaign to persuade local residents to take up £10 shares in the Company, and to advertise the advantages which the tramways would bring, especially to the 2,000 passengers who, it was estimated, travelled daily in the 119 trains which arrived at or departed from Cambridge station.

In the afternoon of July 8th, 1880, gangs of men, under the supervision of the contractor, Mr. J. F. Meston, began to take up the roads preparatory to laying down the rails. These rails, laid to a gauge of 4 feet, were fixed with double-ended spikes to wooden sleepers bedded into concrete.

Authorisation had been obtained by the Tramways Company, early in 1880, to extend their original line from Hyde Park Corner to Newmarket Road, via Gonville Place and

East Road, and from Senate House Hill on to Market Hill. In the event, the first extension never went beyond the junction of Fitzroy Street with East Road. A proposal, made at the same time, for another extension from St. Andrew's Street to Newmarket Road, by way of Emmanuel Street, Emmanuel Road and Maids Causeway, was never carried out. It was firmly opposed by the Master and Fellows of Emmanuel College.

The turn from Senate House Hill on to Market Hill, by Great St. Mary's Church, occasioned some alarm, for many people thought that tram lines laid on so steep a curve would be unsafe. A petition of protest was drawn up and signed by a number of residents, but they were assured that their fears were groundless.

In July, 1880, a site was obtained in East Road for the building of a depot for the trams, stables for the horses and a house for the traffic manager. These were not all completed until March, 1881, although the stables and tram sheds were in use from the January. Until then, the horses and cars were kept in the Great Northern goods yard.

The first two tram cars, built by the Starbeck Car and Wagon Company of Birkenhead, arrived in Cambridge on October 9th, 1880. One was a double-decker, seating 18 passengers inside and 23 outside; the other was a single car which was later converted to a double. This single car was tried out on October 13th and experienced some difficulty in negotiating the curve by Great St. Mary's Church, because the gauge of the temporarily-laid rails was not correct. A second trial, two days later, was more successful.

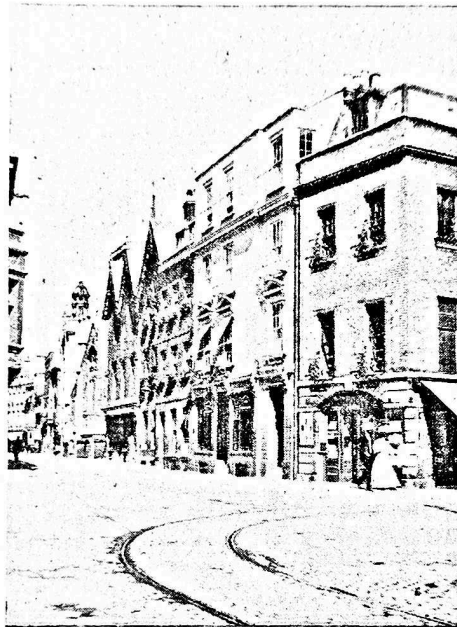
The official Board of Trade inspection of the tramway track was made on October 25th, and on October 28th the tram service between the station and the town centre was opened to the public. The service to Market Hill began in December, but the East Road track was not put into public use until late February, 1881.

On that first day, 636 passengers travelled in the one car which ran, at 30 minute intervals, between the station and Christ's College. On October 30th, two cars ran every 15 minutes until 10 o'clock at night, and carried a total of 1,750 passengers. The number of cars, out of the total of six, put into service was daily increased, despite several of the

horses falling ill, and more and more people travelled in them. On the first Christmas Eve, 2,150 took advantage of the new means of transport.

The fare from the station to Hyde Park Corner was 1d.; to Market Hill or Christ's College, 2d. But books of tickets could be bought at a small discount, and season tickets at £2 10s. for a year, £1 8s. for 6 months and 15/- for 3 months were also available. A monthly season cost 6/-.

At first, the trams had no rivals except the hotel omnibuses. In 1896,



The "notorious" curve from Senate House Hill to Market Hill by Great St. Mary's Church.

however, the Tramways Company heard that a newly-formed Cambridge Omnibus Company proposed to run horse-drawn 'buses between the station and the town centre, at a fare of 1d. against the 2d. charged on the trams. At once, the Tramways Company bought four horse 'buses of their own and put them into service, reducing the fare to 1d., on February 1st, 1896, thus forestalling their rivals whose vehicles did not appear on the roads until April 29th. Moreover, the "tram buses" ran, also, on their rivals' routes to Mill Road, Huntingdon and Chesterton Roads.

Neither Company profited by the competition, and in 1900 an agreement was made that the Omnibus Company would cease to operate on the tram routes and the Tramways Company would cease to run 'buses.

The Omnibus Company went out of business in 1902.

In 1899, the British Electrical Traction Company bought shares in the Tramways Company and began negotiations to electrify the line. The Corporation of Cambridge also planned to apply for an Act enabling them to acquire the tramways and electrify them. Neither scheme came to fruition, nor again, in 1904, when the Cambridge Electric Tramways Syndicate bought the B.E.T. Company's shares and planned electrification. There was considerable opposition to the idea of having electric trams in Cambridge, and Professor George Darwin obtained a number of objectors' signatures to the petition which he presented to the Mayor, when it was realised that the trams might go along Silver Street and the Backs.

So the horse trams continued, to be faced, in 1905, by opposition from the light and dark blue motor 'buses which appeared on the streets on April 9th of that year. The light blue vehicles survived for six months; in 1906 the licences of the dark blue ones, owned by the Cambridge Motor Omnibus Company, were withdrawn because of the accidents in which they had been involved.

Again the trams reigned supreme until August 19th, 1907, when four motor 'buses, owned by Mr. Walford's Ortona Company, came on the scene. These were so safely and efficiently run that more and more passengers ventured on them, and by 1912 the trams were barely paying their way. In 1913, the Company, pressed by the Corporation for the payment of the sum due, following an agreement made in 1892, for the repair of the roads where the trams ran, went into liquidation. On February 18th, 1914, the trams made their last journeys. Two days later, the Company's eight cars were sold by auction at prices ranging from £7 15s. to £15 each. At the same time, "Blossom", "Corporal", "Punch", "Daisy" and 20 other horses and mares were auctioned, along with sets of harness and various items of equipment. On May 13th, the East Road tram depot and the traffic manager's house were sold.

For cheap transport to and from the station, and for short journeys in the town, the trams had their uses. But they were very slow, so slow that, it was said, it was quicker to walk if one was in a hurry.