

Hetton-le-Hole Herald

The Newsletter for Hetton Local History Group

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Summary

Trams were an intermediary form of transport between railways and buses. This article looks at the spread and importance in and around Sunderland



Tram Transport in Sunderland & the Villages Beyond

It appears that the very first tram was one used on the Swansea and Mumbles railway in South Wales in 1807, following a specific Act in 1804.

The first street cars, known as horse cars were developed in the United States and were developed from city stagecoaches. The first streetcar line was in New York city

in 1832, followed in 1835 by a similar development in New Orleans, Louisiana.

In 1883, Magnus Volk constructed a 2-ft gauge [electric railway](#) along the eastern seafront at Brighton, England. This 2-km line, increased in gauge to 2 ft 9ins in 1884, remains in service to this day, and is the oldest operating electric tramway in the world.

This development set the pattern for the future and the electric tram soon became a feature. By September 1885 the Blackpool Electric Tramway was opened, Blackpool was an emerging holiday and visitor resort and it possessed a long and suitable promenade to exploit this form of travel.

Sunderland, in the meantime had been operating horse trams from April 1879. The first route from Monkwearmouth Royal Hotel along Roker Avenue to the sea front at Roker proved to be both successful and popular so that within a year additional routes were in operation across the river to the main part of the town as well as the dock area.

The system of horse-drawn trams was operated by the Sunderland Tramways Corporation. Within two years Sunderland Corporation was constructing further extensions which were then leased to the company.

By 1894, 33 tramcars were operating and further expansion was contemplated. However Sunderland Council decided to operate its own tramways and this decision was implemented in March 1900.



Sunderland horse-drawn tram

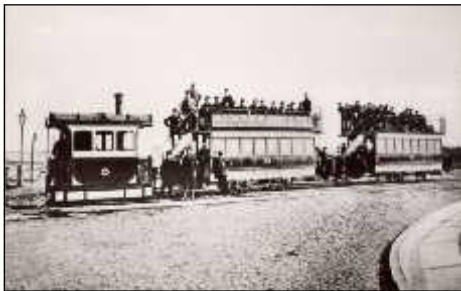
Prior to the introduction of electric trams there had been experimentation with steam driven trams. They had the disadvantage that they did not cope well with hills. It was also thought feasible that a steam engine could pull two or three trams at the same time and this proved to be unnecessary on a number of routes. In the early 1880s they were given a thorough trial and they were

eventually rejected as they interfered with other traffic and suffered from frequent breakdowns.

Eventually electrification of the system was started and many of the old horse-drawn lines were closed down. The first route from Roker to Christ Church was opened in July 1900 although the opening was not particularly auspicious. On the day that the first trams were put into service there was an embarrassing accident when two cars being driven by the chairman and vice-chairman of the Tramways Committee collided because of driver error. By 1904 there was a substantial number of lines in existence throughout the town. The following locations were linked, Southwick, Monkwearmouth, Roker, Fulwell, Seaburn, Hylton Road, Chester Road and the dock area at Hendon. These routes provided the basis for tram transport for the next 20 years.

The first electric trams for Sunderland were made at Preston. They were open topped and had two decks. In spite of their design the population of the town definitely benefitted from the trams.

By 1904 the Corporation was running seven single deck trams and 43 double deck trams throughout the network. With the growth of in-



A steam tram similar to those used in Sunderland

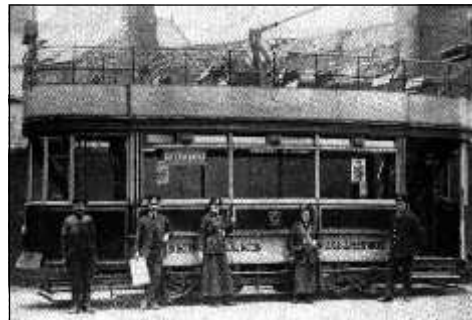
dustry in the town the population increased quickly, particularly during the years of the First World War.



A single deck tram in Fawcett Street 1910

As shortages of male labour became apparent during the war years consequently women were employed on the trams as conductresses.

The trams were popular with the people of Sunderland as they not only provided a regular service throughout the town but it was cheap to use them. The cars were basically wooden structures built on



An early open topped tram complete with conductresses. Photo taken during World War 1



An open topped tram in Hylton Road early 1920s

a metal chassis. The open tops did not provide cover on rainy and cold days and the seats were wooden slatted affairs without upholstery. There were two tram sheds where

modifications and repairs were carried out. The main one was at the Wheatsheaf while the other was in Hylton Road.



A tram with top deck half enclosed was introduced after 1910 and lasted for more than 30 years

By 1922 most of the open top trams had been roofed over, sometimes with the stairs at each end however open to the elements but with a closed central saloon.

As trams became very popular during the early years of the 20th century there was a demand to expand the service to include a number of the outlying villages. In 1905 the Sunderland District Tramways Company opened for business to satisfy earlier requests. However the company started off badly being short of working capital for the production of power supplies as well as trams.

Short of funds and lacking investment and experience the tram tracks were set up with Houghton-le-Spring as the centre. In Sunderland the line started at Grangetown close to the Corporation terminus then ran south to Ryhope and Silksworth. From Silksworth village it ran west to East Herrington, West Herrington, New Herrington, Philadelphia, Newbottle and down to Houghton. In 1906 further extensions were added from Houghton to Hetton-le-Hole and to the clock at Easington Lane as well as from Herrington Burn to Shiney Row and New Penshaw. A further extension ran from Houghton-le-Spring to Fence Houses. Altogether this extension amounted to 14 miles of single tram track and thirty eight passing loops throughout its length.



Tram lines looking north towards the 4 Lane Ends from the bottom of Pemberton's Bank near Easington Lane

Thirty two old double decker mixed trams were bought to service these extensions. Sixteen of the thirty two were French imports. The service opened on June 10th 1905. The service started with an inadequate power supply to run all of the lines, in fact only one third of the power needed was supplied at first. The trams being of light construction soon began to fall apart and the continuing problems of the power supply meant that often the trams failed on the numerous hill sections in the west.

To make matters worse only three days after the service started the number 8 tram ran out of control on Botcherby Bank outside of Silksworth. It derailed on the steep hill and hit a stone wall, crushing a boy to death as well as causing serious injuries to a number of people on the tram itself.



The tram shown going through the centre of Hetton in the adjacent column is the infamous No. 8 tram involved in the afore mentioned tragedy. In this picture it is shown as a renumbered No. 31 following a two year lay off in the Company sheds and a paint job carried out to disguise it and give it a new identity.

During winter times many of the trams failed to negotiate the steep hills particularly if there had been a snow fall. An extraordinary looking tram with a double cab was constructed with a rotating snow brush to assist with the snow clearance.



Station Road Hetton pre trams and shortly after the service started

In 1906 by a fortunate stroke of luck a power station was built next door to the main tram sheds for the District Tramways at Philadelphia. This building was sufficient to reduce the problems of lack of power for the whole service. The Durham Collieries Power Company used coal from the nearby Dorothea Pit at Philadelphia to generate the necessary electricity. This yellow brick building still exists even today as do the adjoining streets of workers' houses aptly named Voltage Terrace and Electric Crescent.

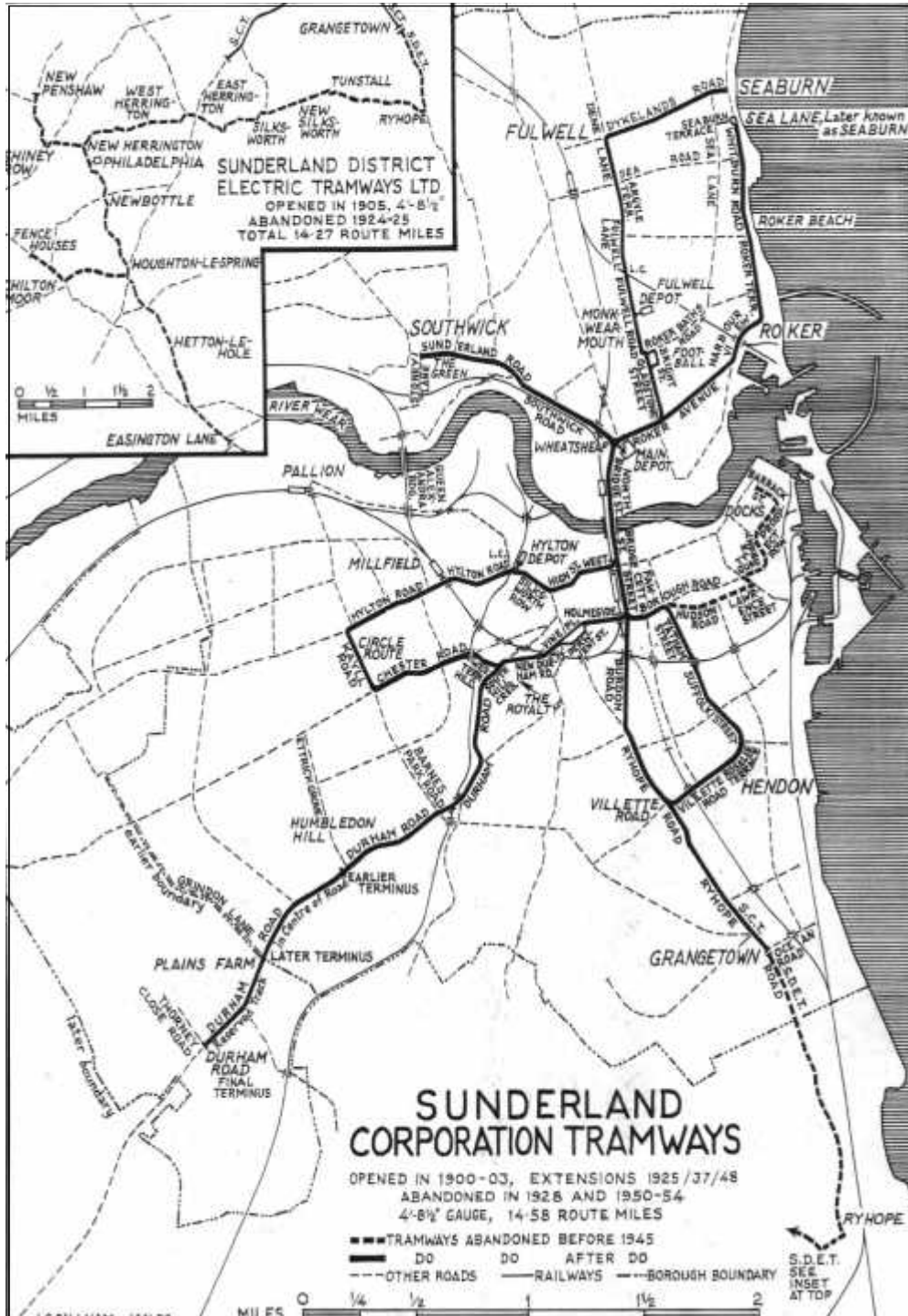


The power station today is being used as a storage area for commercial premises. It is a grade 2 listed building.

By 1911 the power station was owned by the Newcastle-upon Tyne Electric Supply Company. The parts which survive today are the large generating hall and two smaller

buildings. The adjacent tram depot eventually passed to the Sunderland District Omnibus Company as this venture gradually replaced the trams in the surrounding area. Today this building has a variety of small commercial units working within the framework of the much larger building.

Although the tram system in this area reached its heyday in the years prior to the first World War the system was never strong enough economically to be a roaring success. Running through rural areas with intermittent passenger demand proved to be as expensive as running the horse system some 25 years earlier. Additionally road surfaces were gradually improving and modern, for the time, and more comfortable buses were making their mark. Flexibility and reliability also improved the system and by 1925 the District Tramways were abandoned and the re-named Sunderland District Omnibus Company took over from the previous Sunderland District Transport Company. The new company in its royal blue livery and gold SDO badge dominated the next 30 years of Sunderland Transport.



The tram lines were lifted through Hetton and Easington Lane in 1925 so ending roughly 20 years of service to the communities. They did play a valuable part in increasing and improving the communications throughout the local villages but inevitably they had to give way to changes in technology. With the increase in motor transport there were increasing traffic problems for the tram system as well as expensive maintenance costs.



Photograph taken in 1923, two years before closure, of a tram at the clock terminus at Easington Lane.

Throughout the country many tram systems were being replaced by motor buses, however Sunderland's tram system continued in business throughout the 1930s and the following war years in spite of serious bomb damage to the streets of the town. When peace came the future of the trams once again became a hot potato politically but as Sun-

derland was increasing in size with expansion at Thorney Close and Grangetown as well as areas north of the river the system was expanded to serve the new estates into 1949. This proved to be a last gasp effort as the decision to run down the trams was taken that year. The final tram network consisted of 7 routes totalling 14 miles and in 1948 this system had carried 54 million passengers. Thus the changeover to buses was a mammoth task which took more than 5 years to complete. Finally in October 1954 the last route from the centre to Seaburn was closed with a cavalcade of seven trams finally arriving at the tram sheds at the Wheatsheaf, thus ending 75 years of tram transport in Sunderland.



Last section of tramway to be built to Thorney Close in 1949. It was also the first to have a dedicated tram track rather than use the existing road system.