

Erith tramways

Plans for the Erith Tramways were first proposed at the start of the twentieth century.

Proposals for the construction of an electric tramway in the district of Erith caused the council to call a report from a Mr. Hawtayne, which was submitted in November 1901 and early in 1902 the council agreed upon the laying of the following lines.

1. From a junction with the proposed Bexley tramways at Northumberland Heath via Bexley Road, Queens Road, Crayford Road and South Road to a terminus at Northend.
2. Along Pier Road, High Street and Crayford to join the Northend line.
3. Along High Street, West Street and Lower Road to Abbey Wood (Station Road) via Belvedere.
4. Along Fraser Road to Bostall Heath via Upper Belvedere.
5. From Station Road Belvedere via Picardy Road to All Saints' Church Belvedere.

It was decided to replace the level crossing over the South Eastern Railway in Lower Road between Erith and Belvedere by a girder skew bridge.

There was to be an elaborate double track three way junction at the Wheatley Hotel Erith and points laid in at both ends of the High Street. Owing to the narrowness of the road and proximity to the pier it was decided not to lay tramways in the High Street but to build a new road through Walnut Tree House Estate complete with a double track tramway which would also include the site for the depot. Tramways 4 and 5 were not proceeded with, and the line in Queens Road was not built although junctions were laid at either end.

The Council decided to give priority to the lines between Abbey Wood and Northumberland Heath (via Walnut Tree Road) and the Pier Road to Northend section. The bridge in Lower Road had to be built before anything could be done and the work on this and the new road through Walnut Tree Estate began in January 1904. Bexley Council Tramways had been opened in 1903 and agreed that the Erith line

might be brought to an end-junction with its own terminus at Northumberland Heath.

Construction of the tracks were entrusted to R.W. Blackwell & Co. Limited, the rolling stock was settled by the acceptance of a tender from the British Westinghouse Ltd., for fourteen double deck wheeled cars with bodies by the Brush Electrical Co. Trucks were to be made by Mountain and Gibson Ltd., while the Westinghouse Company supplied the equipment. Half the cars were to be of the open top type while the remaining seven were to be of the open balcony type. All side windows were of the drop sash type and could be opened independently of each other. Interiors were finished in maple panels and oak mouldings. "Old Gold" curtains were fitted to the lower deck windows. External livery was of apple green and primrose, handsomely lined out in gold on the green parts and the darker green lines on the primrose. "Erith Council Tramways" appeared in green and gold on the rocker panels. There was also one water car used generally for rail grinding and cleaning out the rails.

The existing power station had to be doubled in size to accommodate the extra equipment needed to work the tramway. It was decided not to install D.C. sets for the traction power supply but to transform and convert the three-phase lighting current to D.C. and build up existing generators to an output of 1350 KW. The depot for 16 cars was built to the West side of Walnut Tree Road opposite the powerhouse. It had four roads and each entrance doorway gave 19 feet clearance.

Track laying by local labour was begun in November 1904 and the centres of all double tracks were laid at 8'6" apart in anticipation of the through running with the L.C.C. bogie cars and the whole of the track between Abbey Wood and Erith was double. The steepest grade was 1:20 and the sharpest curve 40 feet radius. The overhead was supplied and erected by the Brush Electrical Engineering Co., and was mostly of the bracket arm type.

Mr Arthur Coveney was appointed Tramway Engineer and Manager in July 1905 at a salary of £250 p.a. The Board of Trade Inspection took place on 21 August, and the Erith tramways were opened on Saturday 26 August 1905. There were 4.7 route miles in operation. The routes opened were from Northend to Abbey Wood and Northend to Northumberland Heath. Early in 1906 it was discovered that the section between Northend and Erith was unremunerative and the

manager recommended the purchase of two demi cars which would operate this short section of line, while the main service would be Abbey Wood to Northumberland Heath. Thus in September 1906 two cars arrived these becoming Nos. 15 and 16. The bodies were supplied by Milnes Voss of Birkenhead, trucks by Mountain and Gibson and the electrical equipment by Westinghouse and Raworth Traction Patents Ltd. These small cars were one-man operated, the driver taking the fares as passengers alighted and they seated 20 passengers only. However, losses were still being sustained on this short section and after various experiments it was decided to close the line down. Thus the two demi cars became redundant and were used for a while on short rush hour shuttle services until finally disposed, one to Dartford in 1916 and the other to Doncaster in 1917. An agreement was finally reached in July 1908 for Erith cars to run over the Bexley tracks from Northumberland Heath to Market Place Bexleyheath but in 1909 due to a dispute in current charges the service ceased for about 12 months. Through cars were resumed again in 1910 and continued until the end of the system.

The 1914/18 war had brought increased traffic to the Erith system and their complement of 14 cars was insufficient to meet the demand. In consequence they hired two cars from the Leyton system in 1915 but these were recalled a year later. As a result four open top bogie cars of the W type were hired from the London United Tramways and a further double deck covered bogie car was purchased from Hull. This was a large vehicle and was brought down from Hull on a barge and landed at Erith pier, from whence it was dragged into the depot only a few yards away. Arrangements were made with the L.U.T. for suitable sets of wheels to be prepared since those used at Hull were made of the centre groove type. This car remained in service until the end almost unaltered except for the number being changed to 19 and the Erith coat of arms replacing the Hull one. After the war the four L.U.T. cars were purchased and, after some rebuilding and the fitting of magnetic brakes and repainting in the Erith livery which had now changed to maroon and cream, became Nos. 15-18 in the Erith series.

In 1933 the undertaking passed to the London Passenger Transport Board and the original seven top covered cars were overhauled at Charlton Works and fitted with Brill 21E trucks removed from scrapped Croydon cars which had higher powered motors. This together with the transfer of a number of L.C.C. Class M cars enabled the service to be speeded up. Meanwhile all the open top cars

including No. 19 were sent to Brixton Hill depot for scrapping. The Erith cars continued running until November 1935 when the services were replaced by trolleybuses.