

The Bexley tramways

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, public street transport in the area was very limited.

There was an occasional horse bus plying between Plumstead and Bexleyheath with a rather spasmodic service. On 4 June 1811 the Woolwich and Southeast London Tramways Co. Ltd. opened a horse drawn car service from the 'Plume of Feathers' Plumstead and the 'William IV' at Greenwich via Woolwich and Charlton, to a gauge of 3' 6", due to the narrow streets especially around the Woolwich Dockyard Area.

Bexley Council talked of a scheme to operate a 3' 6" gauge tramway to link Old Bexley and Plumstead to connect with the horse car line. However, when it was learned that the London County Council proposed taking over this line and electrifying it to connect with the other London systems to a gauge of 4' 8½", Bexley Council promoted a Bill before Parliament to build a tramway of the latter gauge from Plumstead through Welling and Bexleyheath to their boundary to the east of Bexleyheath and a branch line to the Erith boundary at Northumberland Heath. The Bill received the Royal assent and work was put in hand in 1902. The line was ceremoniously opened on 1st October 1903 by Mr. Will Crooks, MP for Woolwich but public services did not start until 3 October 1903 due to the non-arrival of the necessary Stage Carriage Licences.

The route ran from the 'Plume of Feathers', Plumstead, through Welling and Bexleyheath to the Erith boundary at Northumberland Heath, with a short branch to the west side of the junction of Gravel Hill and Erith Road. This branch was mostly only used for runs to the depot in the Council yard about 400 yards east of the Market Place.

On 26 August 1905 Erith Council opened their line from Abbey Wood through Erith to Northumberland Heath to connect with Bexley Council, although no through-running was undertaken, passengers having to change cars at the boundary. On 14 February 1906 Dartford Council opened their line from Horns Cross through Dartford and Crayford to the east side of Gravel Hill/Erith Road junction with no physical connection. Bexley, although allowing Erith tracks to meet head-on, refused this concession to Dartford. Dartford laid their tracks

as near as they could, artfully making sure that the tracks were in line in case Bexley changed their mind. This did indeed come about after complaints from passengers who, having to change cars at the boundary in the wet and cold, saw their objective of Bexleyheath Market Place 500 yards away. On 27 August 1906 Dartford cars ran through to the Market Place.

The cars of Bexley Council Tramways were open-top four wheelers. A large oil lamp with parabolic reflector was hung from the front dash at night and a smaller one showing red at the rear in case of power failure. No indicator boxes were carried at first; destinations were shown on a white board affixed to the canopy. But in 1911 all cars were fitted with one-line indicators attached just below the upper deck rail. There were two long inward-facing seats for 22 passengers inside the cars, while the upper deck had turn-over 'garden' type seats for 30 passengers.

In the meantime the London County Council had converted the horse car line to electric operation to a gauge of 4'8½" after extensive street widenings and had purchased a site for a depot at Abbey Wood. They now needed to rent or purchase the 8.69 chains of track operated by Bexley (although in the L.C.C. area) from the 'Plume of Feathers' to Wickham Lane. They chose the latter course and when Bexley Council asked about through running to Woolwich, the L.C.C. could hardly refuse as Bexley had sold their track without a murmur. From 26 July 1908, Bexley ran its cars to Woolwich and, being in a happy frame of mind about this, permitted Erith cars to work through from Abbey Wood to Bexleyheath. In any case Bexley needed the rolling stock used on the Northumberland Heath branch to cover the extended route to Woolwich.

As Dartford Council Tramways ran into Bexleyheath, it will be as well to explore this system. As mentioned previously the line opened on 14 February 1906 with twelve open top four wheeled cars. The seating arrangements were the same as for Bexley except that the Dartford cars seated 54. Electric lights and indicators were carried from the outset. The route was from Bexleyheath Market Place to Horns Cross via Crayford and Dartford. There were two short branches, one to Wilmington (Oakfield Lane) via Lowfield Street, and the other to the depot in Burnham Road. The line was operated by Messrs. J.G. White as Dartford Council had no wish to do so but on 12 January 1909 Messrs. Balfour Beatty & Co. took over the operating of the system

until the night of 6 and 7 August 1917, when the depot and all the rolling stock were destroyed by fire.

After the fire Bexley and Erith helped out as best they could with rolling stock, bearing in mind their own commitments to carry munitions workers to Woolwich and Erith respectively. Bexley Council hired twelve 'B' class cars, which had recently become obsolete, from the L.C.C. These were immediately sent to Dartford. They were top covered four wheeled and seemed strange to Dartford people used to seeing open toppers. Balfour Beatty & Co. continued to operate the system until 1921 when a new agreement was signed by a committee known as "Bexley Council Tramways and Dartford Light Railways". (The "Light Railways" means that Dartford tramways were constructed under a Light Railways order and not under a Tramways orders as in the case of Bexley). This committee operated the joint systems until 1 July 1933 when the two systems together with Erith and eleven other undertakings formed the new London Passenger Transport Board based at 55, Broadway, SW1.

Under the new London Transport Board, the three systems in the Bexley area underwent a drastic change. The rolling stock had deteriorated since the 1914-18 war, as had the track. Ex-L.C.C. Class 'M' cars with cushion seats were sent to the area. They were a vast improvement. After rail-grinding machines were put to work, a smoother and quieter track was a boon to frontagers living on the tram route. The Woolwich-Horns Cross route was numbered 96 and the Bexleyheath-Abbey Wood route was numbered 98. Operation by the L.P.T.B. made quite a difference to service with slightly cheaper fares. A 6d evening Tourist ticket after 6p.m. was available for the whole of the trams South or North of the Thames. To tour both sides would only cost a shilling (5p). On 23 November 1935 the very last tram ran in to Bexleyheath depot and the next day the route was taken over by trolleybuses and numbered 696.

The routes were slightly altered on the advent of the trolleybuses. The route was extended at Woolwich from Beresford Square to Market Hill and a turning circle was erected to enable the trolleybuses to turn. At the Dartford end the route was curtailed at Market Street and the route to Horns Cross was covered by strengthening motorbus route 480 and the Wilmington route along Lowfield Street was covered by motorbus route 407 (now 467) to Horton Kirby.