ERITH URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL TRAVELLING LIBRARY

HISTORY OF THE VEHICLE BUILT IN 1933

At the Council Library Committee meeting held on 3rd October 1932, discussions were held regarding the need for a "Travelling Library Van to meet the urgent needs of borrowers in the outlying parts of the district". The Chairman was empowered to "visit Manchester to inspect the van in use there and gain full information regarding the scheme".

The plans for the proposed vehicle are dated December 1932 and signed off by the Borough Engineer & Surveyor. They show the details of the proposed travelling library, to be mounted on a 2-ton 6-wheel Fordson chassis.

The body measured 24' 8" in length, was 7' 1" wide and 6' 9" in height above the driving axles. Shelving was provided along three sides of the vehicle, with an attendant's desk at the rear. Folding steps and rear doors provided access from ground level. A sliding sun roof and roof lights were provided, with linoleum flooring.

The plans state that "All lights and heaters are arranged for plugging in to the Council's mains at suitable points fixed for this purpose".

Council minutes show that on 10th January 1933, a tender from W.G. Hampton was accepted, to build and deliver the travelling library vehicle at a cost of £685 18s 10d. This was considered to be possibly the first purpose built travelling library vehicle in the country.

The following photographs show the vehicle under construction, in early 1933. The location is unknown [LS 149_03 & 149_01]

After some debate and delay, driving instruction for the "Library Porter" was arranged on 7th April 1933, to be given by a Mr. Burke of the Kent Engineering Company, at a cost of £2.

It was proposed that the vehicle should enter into service on 24th April 1933 and as a temporary measure be garaged in the “Council Power Station”.

By 1st May, Mr. Burke’s driving lessons had concluded, but the “Library Attendant” was still not yet proficient to drive the vehicle. It was recommended that a qualified driver be hired at 12/- per week in the meantime.

On 8th June 1933 more driving instruction for the “Library Attendant” was authorised; there were to be two sessions per week for one month. By 9th September 1933 the “Library Attendant” was finally declared proficient to drive the travelling library. The Attendant’s pay was duly increased to £3 15s 0d per week.

Throughout 1933 there were various repairs and modifications, including the fitting of springs to provide automatic closing of the rear doors.

At the end of 1933 the road licence was renewed for 1934, at a cost of £38.

In early 1934 the vehicle was damaged whilst undergoing maintenance for engine trouble. An insurance claim for £6 10s ensued.

The service failed to run on a couple of days due to mechanical problems and sometimes due to fog in early 1934.

The following photographs show the interior layout and facilities:

Looking towards the attendant’s desk and entrance & exit doors at the rear of the vehicle in 1933 [LS 149_11]

A similar view, with the library open for service, around 1933 [LS 149_09]

Looking towards the front of the vehicle, again around 1933 [LS 149_10]

The library on the road in 1933, registered as AKK 521 [LS 149_04]

Outside Erith library in Walnut Tree Road [LS149_06]

The driver’s cab and the rear doors [LS149_08 & 149_07]

In its final days, showing a revised livery, again outside Erith library, probably in the early 1960s [LS149_13]

Council minutes of the early 1960s report increasingly frequent difficulties with the vehicle, causing restrictions to the service on occasions. This was exacerbated by the extremely severe weather in the winter of 1962/63. In March 1964, the Council was considering three expressions of interest from parties wanting to acquire the vehicle. Finally, in June 1964 the Finance & General Purposes Committee approved the donation of the vehicle to the “West of England Transport Museum at Exeter”. We believe this is now known as the West of England Transport Collection, at Winkleigh in Devon, which was set up by Colin Shears in the 1960s

The travelling library vehicle eventually became part of the Science Museum collection in 1981, having been purchased from a C.T.Shears. The vehicle is now part of their reserve collection and has been housed at Wroughton in Wiltshire since 1990. [Note it is not normally on view to the public].

The three images below were taken on 20th July 2017 at Wroughton ***and are credited to the Science Museum***. The marks on the side of the vehicle seem unchanged from the photograph above, so it has apparently survived in “as withdrawn” condition, although the licence plates have been removed.

Hence, after 31 years in service and 53 years retirement, the 84 year old Erith Travelling Library has survived and is now in the care of the Science Museum.

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Sources **Plans LAER/DC/7/1/20 (i) (ii) (iii) dated December 1932**
Erith UDC Council Minutes 1931/32/33/34/64
LS Photograph collection
Science Museum, Wroughton Collection