

Derby Day, 1949

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Neither this nor its companion piece “Wimbledon, 1951-53” lays claim to any particular literary or other merit; they are merely pieces of first-hand reportage which may perhaps be of interest to future transport historians.

In 1948, we moved to north Surrey, and a friend introduced me to the delights of collecting bus numbers. We lived fairly close to the A24 road, which in those days took the 93 bus route (which then ran from Putney Bridge alternately to North Cheam and Epsom, with an extension to Dorking on summer Sundays), and also the 712/713 Green Line coach routes (from Dorking right across London to St Albans, Luton, or Dunstable). The 93 was run mostly by D class buses of the D182 to D281 batch from Sutton garage (a post-war batch taking advantage of some relaxation of wartime “utility” restrictions), though there were some RT buses from Putney Bridge garage (an immediately pre-war design which developed into the standard bus of the period 1947-1958); the Green Lines were mainly single-decker T coaches of the immediately pre-war period, though there were some TF coaches, also pre-war, which foreshadowed and may even have pioneered modern single-decker designs with a flat engine under the floor. But all this was routine, and the procession on Derby Day, 1949, was a different matter.

On Derby Day, London Transport ran (and may still run) a special service from Morden station (the southern terminus of the Underground Northern Line) up to Epsom Downs, and every spare bus that was available was assigned to it. In practice, this no doubt meant that the garages involved kept their best buses for their regular routes, and sent their oldest serviceable buses to run the special service. This would seem to have been not without risk; the rise from Morden Station to the Downs is little short of four hundred feet (over a hundred metres in modern money), which is no problem if you are young and fit but not so good if you are an elderly bus with a heart problem, and the consequences of a breakdown would not have been amusing (even then, the traffic was nose to tail all along the way). However, to a nine-year-old collector of bus numbers it was a delight.

A typical pre-war London bus had a metal chassis, a wood framed body, and an intended life of ten years. A body took longer to overhaul than a chassis, so a small float of spare bodies was built, chassis and body were separated for a major overhaul and dealt with separately, and the bus emerging almost certainly sported a different body from that which it had borne on entry (a fact of which juvenile collectors of bus numbers were wholly unaware). In the late 1920s, some experimental designs were tried out which resulted in the two standard double-deckers of the period 1930-32: the LT, which was a six-wheeler seating 56 or in some cases 60, and the ST, which was a four-wheeler seating 48. Then there was apparently a relaxation of some regulation or other, because both were superseded by the STL, which seated 56 on a four-wheel chassis, and this became the standard bus of the period 1933-39. We small boys believed that these initials stood for Long Type, Short Type, and Short Type Lengthened, and this may even have been the truth.

The buses built in 1930-32 would therefore have been scheduled for withdrawal and replacement in 1940-42, but there was a war, and they had to soldier on. Many were still in operation in 1949, and some were naturally assigned to this special service. The first 150 of the LT series and a batch of the ST series even had outside staircases, making them look incredibly ancient to our eyes (some years later, an elderly aunt who had lived in London in the 1920s told me that the combination of young ladies with short skirts and buses with outside staircases had been greatly appreciated by the gentleman connoisseurs of the period). LT20, LT34, LT59, other numbers equally far outside our normal acquaintance: sheer bliss.

I went back the next year looking forward to more of the same, but the very old buses had all gone and we had a boring procession of STLs. We didn't know it, but in one or two cases the return journey from the Downs to Morden in 1949 may have been the last revenue-earning journey by that particular bus.