

**1900  
to  
1935**

# **The Days of the Norwich Trams**

## **Transforming Streets, Transforming Lives**



**Frances and Michael Holmes**



## The Days of the Norwich Trams

### Transforming Streets, Transforming Lives



*Gentleman's Walk, c.1930*

*Published by Norwich Heritage Projects, an independent non-profit-making organisation which simply aims to encourage an appreciation of the heritage of a wonderful city.*

# Contents

Contents	iii
Foreword	iv
Introduction	v
Good to Know	vi
<b>The Story of the Norwich Trams . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
Setting the Scene: The National Picture	2
The Trams Come to Norwich: Planning	6
The Trams Come to Norwich: Construction	13
1900 – 1911: Conflict and Reconciliation	22
1911 – 1925: The Rise of the Omnibus	35
1925 – 1935: Turmoil and Extinction	39
<b>Transforming Streets . . . . .</b>	<b>55</b>
Orford Place, Red Lion Street and Castle Meadow	56
St Stephen's Street	72
Guildhall Hill to the Market Place	78
Redwell Street to St Andrew's Plain	82
Tombland to Magdalen Street	86
<b>Transforming Lives . . . . .</b>	<b>93</b>
The Way We Lived	94
The Movers & Shakers & Policy Makers	107
<b>Every Picture Tells a Story . . . . .</b>	<b>113</b>
The Norwich Omnibus Company Ltd	114
Tramcars	117
Traction Columns and Wires	125
Uniforms and Equipment	129
<b>In Memoriam . . . . .</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Additional Information . . . . .</b>	<b>138</b>
Bibliography	138
Acknowledgements	140
Index	141



## Introduction

For more than 35 years trams trundled around Norwich; a time that also witnessed the remodelling of our streets, the growth of the suburbs and a shift in political power. The contribution that the trams made to this transformation should not be underestimated.

As the City's first comprehensive public transport system, they both affected and reflected much of what was happening. They heralded the start of a time when all citizens had access to a cheap mode of transport, one which gave them greater flexibility to organise their lives. For some, it allowed a move to better-quality housing, for others the opportunity to visit Mousehold Heath or just enjoy a day out. But, such improvements came at a cost. As buildings were demolished and streets congested with traffic there were those who decried this so-called progress. Others questioned their system of management and ownership. 'Surely such an important asset should be publicly run,' declared a growing and ever-expanding Labour Party, that eventually claimed control of the City Council.

Of course, as time moved on and technology improved the disadvantages of the tramways became painfully obvious, especially when compared to the motor omnibus. Thus, when the last trams ran in 1935, there were few that argued for them to be saved. Yet, despite this, they were still held in great affection. And so, fittingly, their last journey was almost triumphal, as cheering singing crowds lined the streets in a public show of appreciation.

The trams had revolutionised public transport, but now their job was done, and it was time to send them on their way.



*Orford Place, c.1905*



*Rampant Horse Street, c.1932*



## The Trams Come to Norwich: Construction

On 4 August 1897 the *Eastern Daily Press* carried a simple announcement: 'The Tramways Bill: Yesterday the Lords' amendments to the Norwich Electric Tramways Bill were considered and agreed in the House of Commons.'

The people of Norwich waited with bated breath expecting immediate action, or at least a proclamation of intent by the newly created Norwich Electric Tramways Company (NETC). However, apart from the appointment of three local directors to the board of seven (as decreed by the act) this was a period of inertia, partly explained by it being 'the holidays'. But, even now, this was seen as the lull before the storm. The local press prophesied (somewhat optimistically) that work was due to begin in September. The NETC was responsible for

operations, but the Corporation was accountable for overseeing the work and for miscellaneous jobs, including making good roadways affected by the installation.

In the months that followed the Council's newly formed Tramways Committee selected which routes would be constructed first. With the exception of Unthank Road, they had decided to give priority to sections which also incorporated road widenings, including Red Lion Street, Magdalen Street, Fye Bridge Street and Wensum Street, together with the new streets linking Castle Meadow to Orford Hill and St Andrew's Plain to Redwell Street.



*Isaac Moss (born 1876) was a teamster working with horses in the Alington area. In 1898 he came into Norwich to work on the tramways to earn extra money so that he could marry Lucy, which he did in May 1899. This picture shows him with his workmates taking a rest from laying the tramway on Newmarket Road. Isaac is sitting in the front row, third from the right, c.1898*

## Teething Problems



Chapel Field Road, c.1900

On 14 August 1900 the *Eastern Evening News* contained the following letter from a Candid Friend: 'Feeling sure the Tramways Company will welcome any respectful expression of public opinion I beg to suggest to them, through your columns, the desirability of forbidding their servants to accept drinks at the expense of passengers where a public house marks a terminus.'

At its meeting in May 1902 the Town Council agreed to ask the NETC to introduce a new regulation: 'The Tramways Company should show boards indicating when tramcars are full inside and outside. It is a cruelty on a wet day to allow a lady to run after a tramcar and when she caught it to be told by the conductor with a grin on his face that there is only room on the upper [uncovered] deck.'

On 13 October 1900 the *Norwich Mercury* reported on a case brought before the magistrates by the NETC: 'James Shingles was summoned for using obscene language whilst a passenger on a Norwich tram on 24 September. At the time mentioned there were several ladies about and they could not help hearing the defendant's bad language. A Mrs Barber gave evidence "that the language was most disgusting". The Chairman said he was glad that the company had brought the case before them ... and that the company was putting a stop to such behaviour at the outset. These tramcars were for all classes and such nuisances must be put down. The defendant was fined 20s and 9s costs.'

The following letter, from Alan Bannister (NETC manager) was printed in the *Eastern Evening News* on 2 April 1902:

'We have received a number of complaints that drivers of tramcars do not stop to take up passengers who are standing at the stopping poles. We have investigated a number of these and most of the drivers report that the passengers appear to think it sufficient if they stand by a stopping pole without giving any signal. I should like to point out to the public that it is impossible for a driver to tell whether a person wishes a tramcar to be stopped or not unless a signal is given.'

---

## The Relationship Improves

---

The reprisals threatened by Louis Tillett did not follow; neither did the shelter (or at least not until 1928). But what was the verdict in the court of public opinion? The position was summed up in the local press. Yes, the NETC were acting wrongly, but the City only had itself to blame. Having handed control of a public service to a private company they needed to accept that the company's actions would be driven by profit, not the convenience of its customers.

However, it soon became clear that enough was enough and the NETC discovered that public support and profits were inextricably linked. In May 1908 it was publicly acknowledged that the experimental changes in fares and services being carried out by the company were producing uncertainty, inconvenience and distrust, which in turn was reflected in falling income.

Accounts for 1908 made poor reading. The number of fares sold had fallen by a third of a million. Gross profit was down to £5,300 and the dividend a mere 1.5%. Tellingly, but unsurprisingly, returns were further adversely affected by the costs of lawsuits. Of particular note was the overall cost of the rancorous dispute relating to road repairs, which had racked up total costs in excess of £2,100, plus road repairs costing around £1,000 (remember that initially the Council merely asked the NETC to foot a bill for £53).

The NETC took action and in 1909 appointed a new local manager, a Mr Ketley. His predecessor, Mr Bannister, had run the company since its inception and over the years had often exhibited an aggressive stance. In contrast Ketley was less combative, and maybe more aware he could not afford to alienate the public, employees, other road users, the Town Council and the Corporation – in fact everyone!

The change in approach was both immediate and welcomed. At their October 1909 meeting councillors listed a range of improvements that had already been put in place by the new manager, including a new form of automatic signalling and new stops. Particularly welcome was the introduction of concessionary fares for children under nine and the extension of the workmen's half-fare tickets to shop assistants.

Simultaneously Ketley started to build bridges with the company's employees, and even went so far as to award drivers and conductors double pay when the trams were particularly busy during a visit from King Edward VII (25 October 1909). This encouraged them to appoint a deputation to ask him to suspend services from 6pm on Christmas night so that they could spend time with their families. In an inspired move, which not only resulted in much positive publicity but also ensured there would be no public backlash for cancelling services on what was always a very quiet night, Mr Ketley asked the *Eastern Evening News* to canvas its readers. There was resounding support for the workers' request, and by default for the NETC when they duly acquiesced.

As relationships between the NETC and all parties improved, so did their financial performance. By June 1911 the number of fares sold had increased to 8.5 million, a rise of some 1.4 million since 1908, whilst gross profit had increased by some 60% to £8,500. Press reports welcomed both the figures and the improved relationship between the NETC and the public.

---

## Municipalisation?

---

But 1911 marked more than a turnaround in the performance of the NETC, it was also the Corporation's first opportunity to purchase the tramways.

Since their inception there had been numerous demands and arguments put forward to 'municipalise' the service. But despite there being much support for the move, particularly from Liberal and Labour Councillors, there was a problem: the cost. This had been set in the 1897 Tramways Act, at the value of the company as a going concern plus a premium equal to three times the average net annual profits of the preceding five years. This resulted in even Louis Tillett, an ardent supporter of municipalisation in theory, to the reluctant conclusion, that yes public ownership was a good thing, but not at any cost. After all, the Council would have the opportunity to purchase the enterprise at more beneficial rates in the future.

But, would they ever avail themselves of this option?



## In Conclusion

The last day of the trams was almost as triumphal as the first. In 1900 they had been greeted with awe: a technological wonder of the age.

The trams played an important part in the City's history. They opened up a host of possibilities to a population whose activities had been severely restricted by the lack of cheap, speedy public transport. But, as time moved on their shortcomings were cruelly exposed.

It must not be forgotten that in their time trams revolutionised travel in and around Norwich. But in 1935 their job was done, and it was time to wave goodbye.

Feelings at the time were summed up wonderfully by the journalist writing as Whiffler in the *Eastern Evening News*:

*'Like many other people I travelled for the sake of Auld Lang Syne on the last tram that covered the last route to be abandoned. It was over a track more familiar to me than any other. Its rough points and smooth stretches were all as well known to me as the official stopping place. There were moments in recent times when I had inwardly and outwardly grumbled at the rattling, the bumping and the screeching which a tramcar ride through St Stephen's Street in particular often occasioned. But last night I was prepared to excuse almost any discomfort short of accident to life or limb. The vehicle I rode in seemed like an old friend and parting with old friends is never a thing to be lightly regarded.'*



*Agricultural Hall Plain, c.1900*



## Section 2

### Transforming Streets

*In the years leading up to July 1900 buildings across Norwich were demolished, roads widened and tracks laid: all in the name of progress. Even now there are those who decry the devastating effect of the trams, others argue that in the face of an expanding population and increasing traffic such change was inevitable.*



*West side of Wensum Street, 1898*

## The Creation and Development of Orford Place



*'Goose & Gridiron Corner', Little Orford Street (l) and Rampant Horse Back Street (r), c.1895*

The tram centre (later christened Orford Place) was created by the simple expedient of tearing down buildings located on a 'central island' bound by Red Lion Street, Little Orford Street and Rampant Horse Back Street. Additionally, to enable access for trams arriving from the direction of the Market Place, the corner leading from Little Orford Street onto the Haymarket was 'softened', and the road widened.

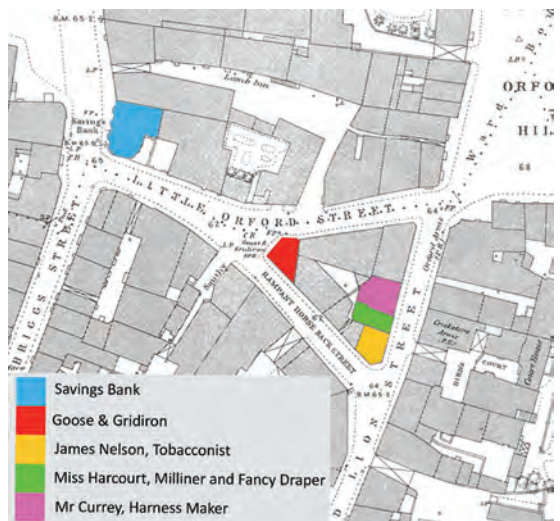
The area was changed beyond recognition, as planners ruthlessly destroyed buildings which today would be described as picturesque but were then considered 'ramshackle'. But what did it look like before it was razed to the ground? When combined, maps and photographs allow us to picture the scene from more than 100 years ago.

Above, we see the block looking back towards Red Lion Street. At the apex stands the former Goose & Gridiron public house (highlighted in red on the map) which lost its licence in 1891 following a series of complaints by the Chief Constable. These included a claim that: 'The house was frequented by a large number of girls, young women of low character, and soldiers... and at closing time there is a great deal of riotous conduct'.

Travelling down Rampant Horse Back Street, (following the road to the right of the former hostelry) we would have arrived at James Nelson's

tobacco shop (yellow on map). This establishment stood on the corner with Red Lion Street. Standing outside the shop looking back towards the Haymarket we would have been able to pick out the 'Savings Bank' on the corner of Little Orford Street (blue on map). Whilst in the distance, we would have just been able to see St Peter Mancroft's tower.

Our next image shows the premises of James' neighbour Miss Harcourt, a 'milliner and fancy







*Work underway on the Maid's Head extension, corner of Tombland and Wensum Street c.1898*



*Tracks are laid from Tombland along Wensum Street in front of the reconfigured Maids Head, c.1899*



## Section 3

### Transforming Lives

*The tramways played an important role in the social, economic and political development of Norwich. Now, for the first time, citizens had access to cheap public transport, which in turn gave them greater choice in how they organised their lives. Additionally, the planning and running of the tramways interacted with the careers of some of the City's leading politicians and businessmen, influencing their careers and beliefs. As such, the trams were much more than a form of transport they were also a catalyst for change.*



*All dressed up on Mousehold Heath, c.1900*



## George V's Silver Jubilee Celebrations: May 1935

Although the role of the trams was gradually being taken over by motor buses they continued carrying visitors to events. Even in May 1935, just a month before Royal Assent was given for the City to abandon trams, they carried hordes to Mousehold Heath to celebrate George V's silver jubilee.

One wonders whether the revellers watching military displays and a huge bonfire spared a passing thought for the trams which had served them for 35 years but would soon play no further part in their lives.



*Bonfire, Silver Jubilee celebrations, Mousehold, 1935*



*Silver Jubilee celebrations, Mousehold, 1935*



## The Movers & Shakers & Policy Makers

The lives and careers of some of Norwich's most prominent citizens were intertwined with the trams. Characters who are still honoured today in the names of our streets and schools, or remembered as outstanding business and civic leaders.

This reflects the importance of the trams to the social and economic development of the City. After all it was Norwich's first comprehensive public transport system, and as such it impacted on all aspects of life. More than this, the municipalisation of public utilities was a political 'hot potato' which generated extensive debate and controversy, and split local government down party lines. The effect was magnified as the 'days of the trams' coincided with a cataclysmic shift in Norwich's political landscape – which saw Tory and Liberal business leaders lost their grip on the Town Council and Labour emerge as the dominant party.

### Sir George White (1840 – 1912)



*Sir George White, 1904*

Take Sir George White, who led much of the early discussion and debate about the trams within the Town Council. Sir George was a Liberal Councillor and MP for North-West Norfolk (1900-1912). He was also the director of the shoe manufacturer Howlett & White Ltd (later the Norvic Shoe Company Ltd) and a renowned and respected businessman. Alongside these duties he was a church deacon and even held the presidency of the Baptists Union. He believed that: 'Temperance, education, industrial relations and municipalisation were all to be utilised to modernise industry, the labour force and the urban environment.' (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) Yet, although he strongly supported the installation of trams as a means of improving the living standards of the City's workers, he did not advocate the municipalisation of the trams, and in 1897 effectively argued against their public ownership. Why? Ever the businessmen, he did not support municipalisation at all costs, and considered the risks just too high.

### The Opposing View

Sir George's view was not one shared by emerging socialist politicians, these candidates believed that the principle of human life was more important than financial considerations. They typically differed from Liberal and Conservative

councillors, not only in their political convictions but also in their backgrounds and lack of wealth. Their number included Fred Henderson and Herbert Witard.

## Time and Place



*Orford Place, c.1910*



In 1900 the first trams ran in Norwich. They were greeted with awe, as a technological wonder of the age. Their arrival not only revolutionised travel, but also radically changed streets, as buildings were demolished, roads widened, and tracks installed.

This book combines newspaper articles, anecdotes, atmospheric photographs and contemporary documents to vividly illustrate the pivotal role trams played in both the development of Norwich and the lives of its people. It is the story about so much more than a vehicle; it is the story about how that vehicle transformed a city.

## NORWICH ELECTRIC TRAMWAYS COMPANY



**WORLD  
LAND  
TRUST™**

[www.carbonbalancedpaper.com](http://www.carbonbalancedpaper.com)  
© 2010 WLT 00223061110005

**Carbon Balanced Paper.** One of the most sustainable forms of communication that will reduce your carbon footprint and promote CSR. [www.carbonbalancedpaper.com](http://www.carbonbalancedpaper.com)

By using Carbon Balanced Paper through the World Land Trust on this publication we have saved 2310kg of Carbon & preserved 455sqm of critically threatened tropical forests.

‘The Days of the Norwich Trams’ is published by Norwich Heritage Projects, an independent, non-profit-making organisation.

ISBN 978-0-9566272-8-5

