

CHESTER CORPORATION TRAMWAYS

1903-1930



Car number 4 picks up passengers at the junction of Bridge St and Grosvenor St, c 1905
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History

Chester Corporation Tramways commenced the electric tramway service from Saltney to Chester General Railway Station, on 6th April 1903. The first tramcar to enter public service was number 4, driven by the Mayor, Mr Frank Brown. Initially, 12 identical double deck trams were purchased for the service.

The new line had replaced the horse drawn tramway, opened in 1879 along the same route. The horse tramway had been built to the standard railway track gauge of 4' 8½" (1.435m) and was mostly single track with passing places, which was a major limiting factor in expanding the service. Therefore, it was decided that the new electric tramway would be mostly double track. However, due to Chester's narrow streets, the new track was constructed to a narrow gauge of 3' 6" (1.067m).

The City Council's Tramway Committee, at the time, required that "the new tramcars must be the least cumbersome possible". As a result the cars, built by G F Milne in Hadley Shropshire, are the smallest double deck tramcars ever built for public service in the UK. The cars measured only 24' (7.315m) long by 6'3" (1.905m), with a main saloon body length of 14' (4.267m). Seating was provided for 43 passengers, 20 on the lower deck (inside) on inward facing longitudinal bench seats and 23 (outside) on the upper deck on slatted garden style seats. One feature of the upper deck seats, was that the back was hinged so it could be moved over to face the direction of travel.

The cars were considered old fashioned, even by 1903 standards, in being double ended open top cars without any canopy or screens at the ends and mounted on 4 wheel trucks. The tram crew and outside passengers would have to face the elements in all weathers. Therefore the Tramways Committee considered enclosing the upper decks, but was refused permission by the Board of Trade, who at the time was responsible for railway safety. The main concern was the risk of an enclosed narrow car being blown over while crossing the Grosvenor Bridge in high winds.

The trams were painted in an attractive apple green and ivory livery, with joining strips being picked out in royal blue. At first the panels were lined with a thin painted strip near the edges, gold on the green panels, and green on the ivory panels. The fleet name was displayed in large plain gold letters along the full length of the ivory lower rocker panel of the body, with the city coat of arms in the centre of the green upper rocker panel. The gold car numbers were displayed on the ends of the car dashes. On subsequent repaints, the lining was lost as was the gold fleet name.

As an experiment in 1906, a single deck tram, known as a “demi-car” was added to the fleet. The 20 seat car, built by Brush of Loughborough, had a front entrance, which allowed the driver to collect the fares and was mainly used at quiet times.

In 1907 a new line was opened from the Bars Junction along Boughton to the fountain, with two branches along Christleton Road, as far as Chapel Lane, and along Tarvin Road, to the Canal Bridge. To provide the service, 5 new double deck tramcars, similar to the 12 initial cars, were built by the United Electric Company (which later became English Electric) in Preston.

Chester Corporation Tramways operated until 1930 when the lines were abandoned in favour of motor buses, the last tram leaving Saltney at 4:30pm on 15th February 1930.

What Might Have Been

The decision to abandon the tramways was controversial. The matter was debated at length and even put to a referendum of rate payers in 1928. Around this time, many other towns and cities in the UK were modernising and extending their tramways, and Chester also considered this option. Various new lines had been planned:

- From Eastgate Street, via Northgate St with branches along Liverpool Rd to Bache and Cheyney Road to the Canal Bridge.
- From General Railway Station, via Brook Street and George Street, to serve Northgate Railway Station connecting to the proposed Northgate Street line.
- From the proposed line along Brook Street, via Hoole Road to Canadian Avenue.
- From the Christleton Road Line, via Chapel Lane and Filkins Lane, to connect with the Tarvin Road line.
- An extension of the Tarvin Road line to serve new housing development in Vicars Cross.

One of the main issues facing the Council, at the time, was the state of the tramcar fleet. The early cars were, by now, 27 years old and in very poor condition. Also as standards of comfort on other forms of transport improved, the trams were considered very austere and dated. As the Board of Trade remained disinclined to allow enclosed double deck tram cars to operate on gauges narrower than 4' 8½" (1.435m), the Tramways Committee considered purchasing longer single deck cars.

In 1927 the Borough of Burnley, which also operated a narrow gauge tram system, purchased a fleet of new long single deck cars from English Electric, which were mounted on two pivoted bogie trucks at each end of the car. The use of such trucks allowed a longer vehicle to get round tight corners comfortably. Trams like this were already commonplace throughout Europe and North America, where many still operate to this day. Councillors from Chester visited Burnley to inspect these cars and were favourably impressed so it was proposed that Chester should replace and expand its fleet by purchasing 32 similar vehicles.

The Discovery of Chester Tramcar Number 4

In April 2004, two Chester transport enthusiasts, Nick Jones and John Murray, learned that a section of the body, and other parts, of Chester car number 4 still survived, in a derelict condition, at a railway preservation site at Taly-y-Cafn in the Conwy Valley in North Wales.



The remains of Chester Car number 4 at Taly-y-Cafn in 2004
© Photographs John Murray

The site is shortly due to be re-developed and the remains of Chester Car number 4 were to be destroyed if they were not removed. John and Nick organised a rescue plan with the help of members of the Merseyside Tramway Preservation Society.

Owing to the condition of the car, a complete restoration was not considered feasible. However the plan was to recover all surviving remains and preserve as much as possible. The saloon end, known as the bulkhead, has been repaired and restored by the Merseyside Tramway Preservation Society for static display in the Wirral Transport Museum at Taylor Street in Birkenhead along with other tram exhibits from other local towns.

Tramway Renaissance

In 1992, Cheshire County Council commissioned a study to examine the feasibility of building a modern generation tramway in Chester.

A track gauge of 1 metre, narrower than Chester's original system but commonplace in continental Europe, was proposed with modern articulated single deck trams. The initial proposal was for a line from the City Centre to the Zoo Park and Ride site using the former trackbed of the Cheshire Lines railway to Chester Northgate Station.



Artist impression of Trac21 trams at Chester Station
© Cheshire County Council (obtained under Freedom of Information Act)

The long term proposal for the scheme, known as Trac21, was for further lines to Chester Business Park and Deeside.



A modern 1 metre gauge tram passes through the old centre of Darmstadt in Germany
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The scheme was dropped in favour of a guided busway along the same route, which was eventually scrapped following considerable local opposition.

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