

Last Stop Routemasters

by Travis Elborough

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Don't Miss the Last Bus.

London is a city with many ghosts. On the 9 December 2005, the Routemaster bus became another phantom of Oxford Street. After close to fifty year, it was famous the world over, it's image and name as synonymous with the capital as Big Ben, Trafalgar Square, pigeons and exorbitant house prices. In many respects, these roll-top baths in guardsmen's red had been living on borrowed time since day the last one filed off the production line in 1968. Their executions were stayed so often, that it came to seem as they could live forever. But now they have officially joined the ranks of the undead. The handful that linger, haunt the city, as if tethered by chains, on two heritage routes.

Unlike most spectres, however, these blood-red tykes are gone by dusk. And, like black cabs, not seen south of the river. But in London and beyond, the Routemaster is still a powerful talisman. Just a few months after their official retirement, the Routemaster was voted an Icon of England and competed against Concorde and the Chopper bicycle in something called the Great British Design Quest.

And to evoke its name is to call up powerful notions of classic style, indigenous engineering ingenuity, civic pride and the thrill of a hop on, hop off ride – the open-platform, a potent symbol of the liberties of the city itself.

Illustrating their currency, Boris Johnson, equipped as he is with the hair (and name) of a mad scientist in a James Whale film, launched his London mayoral campaign in 2007, promising to bring the Routemaster back to life again. The Son of the Routemaster was back on the slab in the political lab, at least.

Just how or why something as mundane as a bus came to occupy such an exalted position in London's emotional cum socio-cultural firmament isn't entirely easy to explain. Well, certainly not straightforward, anyway. One thing I'd like to suggest is that looking good in colour film didn't do it any harm. But before we get on to all of that, it's probably best if we start with the nuts and bolts.

The Routemaster was the last bus to be built for London, by Londoners, in London. It was the last bus to be staffed by both a driver and a conductor. And it was the last bus to go into service with the engine and half-cab for the driver at the front and an open platform for passengers to enter and exit at the rear.

To provide a little background, the Routemaster really represented the culmination in a line of similar vehicles made specifically for London dating back to 1910, when the London General Omnibus Company produced their rather dull-sounding B-type bus. As the final bus to be staffed by a conductor, its lineage can really be traced to Shillibeer's first horse omnibus in 1829. But, most significantly, it was the last bus to be wholly conceived for the capital – Savile Row tailored, if you like – by the once monolithic London Transport.

All public transport in London had come under the unified control of the London Passenger Transport Board in 1933. The largest transport organization on the planet, and a public corporation along the lines of the BBC, London Transport was able to use treasury funds to create a fully integrated network that was, for a time, without equal anywhere in the world. London Transport's guiding light, its conscious and its super ego, even after his death in 1941, was its chief executive Frank Pick.

Pick was a severe, cold and slightly intimidating man. Raised among devout Congregational Methodists, he was a dedicated administrator who possessed a visionary eye and zeal for good modern design. Believing that ordinary Londoners deserved the best and that their lives could be enriched by surrounding them, with in essence, simple, beautiful and well-made objects, Pick insisted on uniform levels of coherence and excellence across the board. The roundel of Underground logo; the distinct Johnston typeface of its signage, Harry Beck's diagrammatical tube map and Charles Holden's incomparable stations for the Piccadilly line were all commissioned under Pick's watch. In 1942, the architectural historian Nicholas Pevsner's dubbed him 'the Lorenzo the magnificent of our age.' And the standards and the culture that he established at London Transport, was central to the design of the Routemaster.

In the 1930s, the efforts of London Transport's Bus and Coach Division headed by the equally formidable and no less exacting Albert Arthur Durrant, had culminated in the creation of a flagship bus, the RT in 1939. For many the RT, in its post-war incarnations is *the* London bus. Nearly twice as many were built as its usurper the Routemaster and it tarried in the capital for forty years. It is also THE LONDON BUS that Cliff, Una and

gang rode Europe-wards for some sun in Summer Holiday. (Just to get that out of the way now.)

During the Second World War, the corporation's bus works at Chiswick were turned over to aircraft production and helped to build Handley Page Halifax Bombers. Through this work, LT engineers and designers came into contact with the latest innovations in aircraft manufacturing, including the use of lightweight aluminum and component construction. These ideas were soon put to good use on Civvy Street when bus building recommenced after the war.

In 1947, and in the spirit of a period when bold forward-thinking initiatives like the NHS and the Welfare State were coming into fruition, the very first memos about the need for a brand new alloy bus for London began circulating at London Transport. Though it would be four years of research work, and countless discussions with manufacturers and men from ministries before a final course for the Routemaster was steered, another three after that before a prototype was finished, and then another four before the bus entered production. Sputnik took less time to get into space. But the final bus would be a capacious fuel-efficient, highly advanced chassis-less construction. Tooled in lightweight aluminum, it was comprised, rather like a Mechano set, of completely interchangeable parts. Such ingenious engineering was partly, why the Routemaster, originally designed for just seventeen years service, lasted so long. As with the planks on the Ship of Theseus, they could be refurbished piece by piece over time.

Having already re-activated pre-war plans to scrap the remaining trams (the last ran on 5 July 1952), LT decided to do away with the city's electric trolleybuses as well. Pollution-free and practically silent, the trolleybuses were a safe and environmentally sound means of transport. In retrospect, this was a dreadful mistake. But at a point when car ownership was rising in the capital -parking restrictions (yellow lines) had already been introduced on some central roads by 1947 - the wire-borne trolleys were thought an obstruction to traffic.

Acutely aware that they were facing increasing competition from motorists, London Transport went out of their way to ensure that their new bus (now to replace the trolleys too) matched - and even surpassed - levels of comfort found in your average Austin or Morris. The more luxurious their bus, so the reasoning went, the greater chance they stood of luring people from their cars. To that end, the Routemaster was fitted with a heating system - a rarity on all but the top of the range motors then. Independent suspension and a fully automatic gearbox were

installed to provide a smoother ride and make the bus easier to drive. And for safety, power hydraulic brakes, previously developed for aircraft that virtually eliminated failure in icy conditions, were fitted as standard.

A prevailing stipulation at London Transport was that the bus must be an attractive piece of street furniture (a phrase, incidentally, favoured by Frank Pick), and one of the few industrial design consultants, Douglas Scott, was engaged to style the Routemaster for them.

From his Potterton Boiler to his GPO call box K8 and his Rediffusion radio sets, Scott's product designs are models of practical, restrained style. In 1930s, Scott had been employed in the London office of Raymond Loewy, the great American pioneer of 'streamlining' and the man who supplied Lucky Strike cigarettes with their logo and Shell Petrol with their, well, shell.

And the shapely body that Scott sculpted for the Routemaster attests to a mastery of the undulating curve he acquired during his stint with Loewy.

With the interiors, Scott also excelled himself. The final colour scheme, 'Burgundy lining panels, Chinese green window surrounds and Sung Yellow Ceilings' as the official description rather fancifully had it, was chic, heartening and durable. While the tartan mocquette of dark red and yellow he created for the leather trimmed seats exuded a debonair Aberdeen Angus air but hid dirt and proved immensely hardwearing.

The prototype Routemaster was officially unveiled at the Commercial Motor Show in Earl's Court on 24 September 1954 under the banner 'London's Bus of the Future'. The name Routemaster was chosen in preference to Roadmaster only a couple of weeks before the show. 'Masters' seem to have been in vogue that season; a Rowe Hillmaster truck was another vehicle at Earl's Court, while cinema-goers that year watched an apartment-bound Jimmy Stewart trim his stubble with a Sunbeam Shavemaster in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.

For all of its interchangeable aluminum, some commentators felt it was rather old-fashioned looking, a tad trad. Which could explain its longevity; free from the more obvious 1950s gimcracks it, perhaps, aged better than its peers.

Sharing its birthday with that other stylish baby boomer the Stratocaster guitar, the Routemaster's lifespan in effect mirrors the rock and roll years. (Between 1954 and 1968, a total of 2875 were built.) Like the new breed of teenagers, it was a child of austerity that came of age in an era defined by unprecedented levels of affluence. The downside of this for a bus, at least, was that those who could afford it were increasingly

choosing to travel under their own steam. By 1960, the number of cars registered in London had doubled since the war. Rising home ownership, suburbanization and television were also reducing the quantities of bus journeys taken, with Londoners choosing to spend a greater part of their leisure time at home.

With almost full employment, London Transport also found it difficult to obtain staff for jobs with relatively low rates of pay and often long and antisocial hours. This combination of falling passenger numbers and staff shortages would ultimately prove fatal for the Routemaster. Off-the-shelf one-person operated vehicles would come to be seen as the panacea to London Transport's ills.

But just a few months after this last two-person bus had made her maiden voyage on 2 February 1956 on Route 2 from Golders Green to Crystal Palace, London Transport began to recruit employees directly from Barbados. This scheme was extended to Malta, Jamaica and Trinidad in the 1960s. Playing its own part in the re-peopling of London, the Routemaster arrived at the moment when the city was becoming a far more polychromatic place.

Returning to London from the Spanish Civil War in 1939, George Orwell had been heartened to find that 'the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen' were all still intact. But the colour most people associate with London (and Britain for that matter) after the war and into the 1950s was bomb dust, austerity grey. When the Zurich-born photographer Robert Frank reached London from Paris in 1951, he was astonished to find it 'black, white and gray.' His own snaps of fog-shrouded London double deckers and Magritte-like city gents from this period mine the drear beauty of those three shades for all they're worth. But the arrival of the Clean Air Act in 1956 and Kodacolor film the year afterwards, not only transformed how London *actually* was but also the image that the city now presented of itself. By the 1960s, the black and white of the Picture Post and the *Lavender Hill Mob* had been superseded by colour – Technicolour, Kodak Instamatic, Sunday Times Colour Section, James Bond movie colour. Although it is the WRONG BUS, Summer Holiday exemplifies the phenomenon. The film, pointedly begins in black and white and *a la* The Wizard of Oz bursts into colour the instant Cliff Richard, driving a red RT bus, arrives on screen.

As London's pendulum began to swing, these red open-platform double-deckers became an essential, if unavoidable component in any representation of the city's giddy 'happening' scene in print or on film. The bus seeming to sum up, the free and easy, catch me if you can, hop on, hop off, optimism of those days.

The notion of actually using a London bus to promote the nation can be dated to the Festival of Britain in 1951. Four double deckers toured around Europe in the months leading up to the festival. But in the 1960s, the Routemaster acted as a kind of perpetual diesel-powered Beefeater for Blighty across the globe. In November 1962, one of the first major exhibitions of British Pop Art in America opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. 'British Art Today', including work by Patrick Heron and Patrick Wall, was trailed by 'London Week'; a trade/cultural jamboree replete with a Routemaster shipped over for the event. The Routemaster internationally and locally, therefore, became the ace face at a time when London was becoming the place to be. Quintessentially, classically British and yet modern, it was the Avengers on Wheels.

Still, by 1971, while John Lennon was breezily telling Rolling Stone that 'the dream was over' and Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep was storming up the charts, London Transport was confidently predicting that they'd all be gone before 1978. Somehow in 1981 most of them were still about. By the 1990s, only 600 or so lingered in the capital. But, in the words of Tennyson, 'boldly they rode and well' and life in London without them seemed almost as unthinkable as evicting the ravens from the Tower. In the horror film *28 Days Later*, an overturned and abandoned Routemaster provided the most potent symbol of London's ravaging by zombies. *Time Out* magazine put Duke Baysee, the harmonica-playing conductor of the 38 bus, at number 66 in their Top 100 Reasons to Live in the Capital.

In 2002, however, Transport for London announced that the Routemasters, failing to meet European legislation on disabled access, would be phased out. Before the last Routemaster made its final journey on route 159 from Marble Arch to Streatham, questions had been asked in the House of Commons. The *Evening Standard* newspaper had a campaign devoted to their preservation. 10,000 people had signed a petition against their scrapping. Cliff Richard had vowed never to record again. And the majority of the photographs that fill this book had been taken.

I first met Ralf while I was out chasing after those ever-diminishing shadows, as Routemaster route after Routemaster route was gradually spirited away. We were both convinced something quite unique was being lost, and were trying to document that in our own different ways. And for my part, I still remain rather envious of how his photographs capture something that (naturally) evades prose. Or my prose, anyway. For you can write all you like about the design, the engineering, Frank Pick, Douglas Scott, Cliff Richard, and how it fits into London's story – all of which *is* important and relevant – but the Routemaster earned its place in

most Londoners hearts by simply doing its job. And it's those daily interactions, the attrition of little experiences, the everyday glimpses on the streets, the chances to hop aboard, the scrambles for the top deck, the nods to the conductor, that Ralf's photographs nail so well. The Routemaster in London has, of course, long since come to its last stop. The heritage routes, thankfully, provide the opportunity to experience them in their natural habitat but not as essential components of the living and breathing, city. What was once everyday is now extraordinary, and we need photographs like these to remind us of that. Far spookier for its proximity, the day before is still yesterday, and that *is* history. And long after the memories have faded, these images will continue to bring the ghosts of the past back to life again.

Last Stops: The Routemaster's Final Journeys

- 159 Marble Arch – Streatham Station 9 December 2005
- 38 Victoria Station– Clapton Pond 28 October 2005
- 13 Golders Green Station – Aldwych 21 October 2005
- 14 Putney Heath – Tottenham Road Station 22 July 2005
- 22 Putney Common – Piccadilly Circus 2 July 2005
- 19 Finsbury Park Station – Battersea Bridge 1 April 2005
- 36 Queens Park Station – New Cross 28 January 2005
- 12 Notting Hill Gate – Dulwich Plough 5 November 2004
- 9 Hammersmith Bus Station – Aldwych 3 September 2004
- 73 Victoria Station – Stoke Newington Common 3 September 2004
- 390 Marble Arch – Archway 3 September 2004
- 137 Streatham Hill – Oxford Circus 9 July 2004
- 7 Russell Square – East Action Station 2 July 2004
- 8 Bow Church – Victoria 4 June 2004
- 98 Willesden – Holborn Red Lion Square 22 March 2004
- 6 Aldwych – Kensal Rise 22 March 2004
- 94 Acton Green – Trafalgar Square 23 January 2004
- 23 Liverpool Street Station – Westbourne Park 2 November 2003
- 11 Liverpool Street Station – Fulham Broadway 31 October 2003
- 15 Paddington Station – East Ham 29 August 2003

Since 15 November 2005 Heritage Routemaster have been running on

- 15 Trafalgar Square – Tower Hill
- 9 Royal Albert Hall – Aldwych

