

Buses and Trams in King's Heath

Celebrating 130 years of history

Introduction

The development of the public transport network in Birmingham provides a fascinating insight into the development and expansion of the city during the twentieth century. Between the world wars for example, over one hundred thousand new homes were built, with the creation of dozens of new municipal housing estates that extended the city's boundaries; and the people who lived in these new suburbs demanded good transport links to get them to work and to the shopping and leisure facilities that they were no longer close to.

King's Heath was a little different to many of these suburbs in that it had its own cluster of services, and not just one or two linking it with the city centre. This is a brief look at some of the major routes that have kept King's Heath connected with its neighbouring districts over the course of the last century or so.

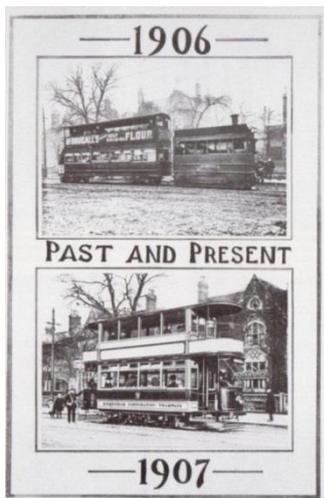
Steam Trams

The first steam tram arrived in King's Heath in 1887, operating from a newly-built depot in Silver Street (this building still stands today, structurally largely unaltered, home to International Stock). Designated K the service ran from the city centre, through the back streets of Balsall Heath to Moseley and then along the Alcester Road into King's Heath. The tramway ended near the junction of High Street and Silver Street.



Electric Trams

At the turn of the twentieth century the decision was taken to electrify Birmingham's growing tram network. Steam trams were noisy, dirty and smelly; electric trams were the opposite of all these. But environmental factors weren't at the forefront of the transport providers' minds - electric trams were cheaper to operate, and they were faster, meaning more revenue potential!



Preparation work began in King's Heath in 1905, and in January 1907 an electrified tramway along the Alcester Road was launched with a new extension up to the Vicarage Road junction. The electric trams operated from a new purpose-built depot on the Moseley Road in Balsall Heath, with the track extended later that year to Alcester Lanes End.

The trams grew in popularity, and by the mid-1920s there was a complex network of routes serving the corridor between the city and King's Heath - taking in Balsall Heath, Cannon Hill and Moseley.

In addition to ferrying thousands of passengers each year into the city as they headed to work, the trams also played a vital role in people's leisure pursuits - with the end of the tramway conveniently located within a mile of the popular Happy Valley, and then later with the opening of the Greyhound Stadium at Alcester Lanes End in 1927.

The network of services remained largely unchanged until the end finally came for the Alcester Road trams in 1949.

The End of the Line

The photograph to the right denotes *the end of the line* for two reasons - firstly, it was taken in the summer of 1949, only a few months before the demise of the Alcester Road trams in October; and secondly, it *was* literally the end of the line as the tramway terminated at Alcester Lanes End outside the King's Arms pub (always known locally as the Nob, for reasons that may or may not be related to trams!).



The success of trams running along the central reservation in the Bristol Road as they carried crowds towards the Lickey Hills was the inspiration for the plan in the 1930s to extend the tramway beyond Alcester Lanes End towards the Maypole, which is why there are such vast distances between the building lines on opposite sides of the road. Along with the proposed network of other dual carriageways across the city however, the plan was eventually dropped due to financial reasons and World War II.

Beyond Alcester Lanes End?

As demand grew in the 1920s for a public transport link beyond the terminus of the tramway, a motorbus service was introduced in 1928 - introducing the first direct link between the city centre and the southern boundary at the Maypole.

17 Maypole - King's Heath - Alcester Road - City - Chester Road - Erdington



The 17 was a semi-express cross-city service, serving the still largely rural areas in the extreme south of Birmingham as well as some of the more industrialised districts to the north. It inevitably offered competition to the Corporation's own trams along the Alcester Road, and so a protected fare of 4d was initially introduced to discourage passengers who didn't need to travel beyond Alcester Lanes End.

In 1936 a new one-way traffic system was introduced in the city centre. This meant that both northbound and southbound buses on the service used the same roads, and in an effort to avoid passenger confusion buses heading back towards the Maypole were renumbered 35 (the next available number in Birmingham's numbering scheme).

35 Erdington - Chester Road - City - Alcester Road - King's Heath - Maypole

Wartime austerity saw the portion of the route north of the city cut, never to be reinstated, and thus there was no need for separate route numbers; the City - Maypole service taking the number 35.

New housing now stretched southwards along the Alcester Road beyond the tramway's end with a municipal estate built at the Maypole in the 1930s, and the 35 became a major trunk route for many people.

10 *King's Heath - Selly Oak - Bearwood*

Introduced in 1923, this was actually the first bus service to operate into King's Heath. It was one of two new outer suburban routes that linked many of the outlying villages that had been recently incorporated into the City of Birmingham. Whilst the 10 served south and west its sister service the 11 visited north and east, with regular revisions and extensions over the next few years leading to the creation of a new route in 1926 that provided a full circuit of the city. Numbered 11 and known as the Outer Circle, this route has been the backbone of public transport in King's Heath for almost a century.

11 *Outer Circle*



The original 10 and 11 had been operated by single-deck vehicles but such was the demand for the new Outer Circle that new double-deckers had to be ordered, with a number of buses hastily drafted in from London General in the meantime.

The Outer Circle was popular because it offered an alternative for those wishing to travel to different areas of Birmingham, eliminating the need to go in and out of the city centre on the trams, but initially the new service drew the crowds because it was regarded as something of a tourist attraction. Indeed in the early 1930s it was actually marketed as such, with passengers urged to hop aboard for a two-and-a-half hour journey around the picturesque suburbs of Birmingham. It ought to be remembered that particularly in the northern reaches of the city the Outer Circle would still be passing through large areas of open countryside.

The Outer Circle was always numbered simply 11, with no indication of direction of travel; passengers being credited with the intelligence (or psychic ability!) to work out where a bus was going. This was a common theme with Birmingham City Transport, as we'll see later...

As BCT passed into the new combined West Midlands fleet by government edict in 1969, it was decided to retain the iconic nature of the Outer Circle for as long as possible. Therefore the 11 was the final route to be operated by traditional open-platform Birmingham 'Standards' with conductors, until their sad withdrawal in 1977.

1975 saw a massive shake-up in the bus network across the county, and the service was finally renumbered 11A and 11C (denoting anti-clockwise and clockwise journeys respectively).

The Outer Circle has actually changed very little over the course of almost a century; barring a few minor diversions as new road layouts have developed it still visits the same suburbs, although of course many of these are now not that suburban in nature and the 11 definitely doesn't venture out into open countryside!



26 *King's Heath - Dads Lane - Bournbrook*

27 *King's Heath - Bournville - Hay Green*

These two routes were introduced in 1935 in response to the growing urbanisation of south-west Birmingham, as new housing developments sprung up around Pineapple Road in King's Heath and in areas of Selly Park and Stirchley. The 26 offered a more direct route to the Bristol Road than the Outer Circle and passed through some key industrial districts; while the 27 is of course probably one of King's Heath's most famous bus routes because of its Bournville connection. At the time of the 27's introduction the Cadbury's chocolate factory in Bournville was one of the major employers of people living in King's Heath.



Both routes were initially operated by single-deck vehicles (as was customary with new inter-suburban services) but due to its popularity the 26 was converted to double-deckers a few years later. It ran alongside the 2B for many years, a service introduced in 1939 that duplicated much of its route, and was withdrawn in 1956.

The 27 however is still operated today, and still with single-deckers, due to a couple of low bridges close to the gates of the Bournville factory. In 1952 the phased replacement of the tram network across the city saw the withdrawal of the Bristol Road services, and the 27 was extended from Hay Green to Northfield. Passenger demand led to it being further extended into West Heath a few years later.



The service continued to run from King's Heath to West Heath for many years until it was altered in the early 1990s to create the South Circle, running from King's Heath - Bournville - Northfield - Hawkesley - King's Heath (with 27A and 27C variants).

This service was withdrawn in 1994 when the 35 received a major reworking, and the 27 disappeared from the streets for around a decade. In 2005 the 35 reverted back to its previous form and the 27 returned, its new and improved route snaking through much of south Birmingham but still linking King's Heath to Bournville and Northfield.

2B King's Heath - Queen Elizabeth Hospital - Ivy Bush

The 2B has a strange history. It has its roots in one of the oldest bus services in Birmingham, established in 1916 when a portion of an even older route was numbered 2. Originally running from Handsworth Wood - Hockley - Ivy Bush in north Birmingham, the route snaked south with a new route variation taking it to King's Heath in 1939. The 2B took in the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital which opened at the beginning of that year, just in time for it to become a military hospital during World War II.

In 1957 it lost its B suffix when the Ivy Bush portion of the route was dropped, the 2 now becoming a purely south Birmingham service! During the 1960s it was subjected to a number of alterations until WMPTE finally settled on Weoley Castle as its ultimate destination after it had passed through Selly Park and Selly Oak. In 1986 the 2 was briefly extended beyond King's Heath to Yardley Wood when its new operator West Midlands Travel combined it with a daytime shoppers' service, but the route was withdrawn in the summer of the following year and replaced with a new sprawling service numbered 69.



- 48 City - Balsall Heath - King's Heath - Maypole**
49 City - Leopold Street - Moseley - King's Heath
50 City - Bradford Street - Moseley - Maypole

During August and September 1949 the tram depot on the Moseley Road was being converted in readiness for motorbus operation, and on 1 October the Alcester Road trams and the 35 bus service were replaced by the new trunk routes 48, 49 and 50.

The 48 replaced the trams that had crawled through Balsall Heath, heading up Salisbury Road to Moseley Village before following the Alcester Road to the Maypole; while the 50 serviced the entirety of the Alcester Road, leaving the city via Bradford Street and then passing through Balsall Heath, Moseley and King's Heath to also terminate at the Maypole.

In 1964 the 48 was extended by around a mile when the Druids Heath estate was redeveloped.

The 49 was the lesser of the three routes, operating its full route at peak times only and serving to supplement its mainline sisters. For the majority of the time it operated a short working of its route from the city to Moseley as 49F (later 49B).



The convention of adding suffixes to route numbers was a sometimes confusing method to identify buses that weren't travelling along the whole of their designated routes, as the bus operators attempted to cater for additional demand at specific points along the route. For example a 50 only running from city to St Martin's Circus was numbered 50A, to Rea Street 50B, and so on. The 48F, 49F and 50F ran through to Moseley, with Kings Heath having the suffix J. In 1963 an inexplicable change in policy reversed this order, with the result that a 49 terminating close to its terminus became 49B.



To add to the confusion many buses on short workings failed to disclose exactly where they were going, showing only the unhelpful SERVICE EXTRA. Even buses on full journeys displayed the outer terminus only, regardless of direction of travel; the 50 in the photograph is actually *leaving* the Maypole. Bus stops bore the legends TO CITY or FROM CITY, but those unfamiliar to the city must have been sorely confused by Birmingham's buses!

Fortunately later bus designs meant that from the 1960s it was easier for buses' displays to be changed at each terminus to accurately indicate their immediate destination; and as part of its review in 1975 WMPTC dropped the convention of suffixes for short workings in favour of a simple E (for EXTRA), wherever the terminus. No more SERVICE EXTRA either!

The 49 was retired in the same year when it was merged with the 35, and 1982 saw the demise of 48 with the 50 being extended from the Maypole to Druids Heath. Often cited as one of Europe's busiest bus routes the 50 became the flagship route of its operators, with new buses being regularly purchased for the specific purpose of moving passengers along the Alcester Road. Most notably in 1999 the service became the first in Britain to be operated by new-generation low-emission, low-floor buses.

35 King's Heath - Vicarage Road - Brandwood Park Road

Introduced in 1965 this route was little more than a mile long. It served primarily as a feeder service, linking Brandwood End and the developing estates around Dawberry Fields with King's Heath, where of course passengers could travel on into the city. The 35 was significant too in that was one of the new breed of shoppers' services, as King's Heath developed into a major shopping centre in the 1960s. Operated mainly by single deckers, the route proved so popular that it was given a dramatic overhaul in the famous shake-up of 1975 when it was merged with the 49, additionally being given an extension beyond Brandwood Park Road to Pool Farm - thus bringing another of Birmingham's new estates a direct link to the city.



Originally leaving the city by the 49's original route of Leopold Street, the 35 was re-routed in 1982 to serve Balsall Heath before heading into Moseley - a different example of the bus network responding to the social needs of the city, with the area around Leopold Street becoming less significant at the time.



Operated by double-decker buses the 35 joined the 50 as a major trunk route for King's Heath.

From the mid-1980s onwards the whole situation with public transport and buses in particular became a little crazy, with increased private car ownership and privatisation of the networks leading to some quite dramatic consolidations of routes across south Birmingham. The 35 was subject to one such alteration in 1994 when it was extended to replace the 27, looping through Northfield and Bournville to visit King's Heath for a second time! Happily though it eventually reverted to its original City - Pool Farm, albeit with a minor extension to Hawkesley.

Author's Note

This has been a brief look at some of the most significant public transport services that have served King's Heath over the years. Of course there are many more routes that have operated in the area, but those discussed above are the ones that I think give the greatest insight into the development of King's Heath from a small village in Worcestershire into a thriving, bustling district of Birmingham.

All of the services above have been 'inherited' by the major operator in the city, as dictated by government policy:

- 1887 Birmingham Central Tramways Company

- 1899 Birmingham Corporation Tramways Department
- 1928 Birmingham Corporation Tramways and Omnibus Department
- 1937 Birmingham City Transport (BCT)

- 1969 West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive (WMPTE)

- 1986 West Midlands Travel
- 1996 Travel West Midlands
- 2008 National Express West Midlands

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