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History of the Bus

In the first quarter of the last century (says the "Daily Chronicle") a journey from Paddington to the City, by a short-stage-coach, usually occupied about three hours, in consequence of the frequent stoppages which had to be made for the collection and delivery of luggage. And as the fares were two shillings for an outside seat, and three shillings for an inside one, many men, when compelled to visit the City, preferred to make the journey on foot. The announcement, made in the summer of 1829, that a new vehicle, called the omnibus, was to run from Paddington to the Bank within the hour, charging only one shilling for the journey, created much excitement among the short-stage-coach proprietors, who declared that Shillibeer, the promoter of omnibuses, was a Frenchman, and ought not to be allowed to run his vehicles in England.

But George Shillibeer was not a Frenchman. He was born in London, and was for some time a midshipman in the British navy. Quitting the service, he studied coachbuilding in Long Acre, and, later, started business for himself in Paris. He was commissioned to build omnibuses for a Parisian proprietor, and while executing the order the idea of starting similar vehicles in London occurred to him. He sold his business and returned to England, and on July 4, 1829, placed two omnibuses on the London streets. Each was drawn by three horses harnessed abreast, and carried twenty-two passengers—all inside. Newspapers and magazines were provided free of charge. The conductors wore blue cloth uniforms, cut like a midshipman's. The crowd which gathered round the Yorkshire Stingo to see the omnibuses start was loud in its praise of the new vehicles, which quickly became popular. In less than nine months Shillibeer had twelve omnibuses at work, the majority of which were drawn by two horses, and carried fourteen passengers—twelve inside, and one either side of the driver. But a few years later Shillibeer did a very foolish thing. He disposed of his Metropolitan business and placed twenty new omnibuses on the London and Greenwich road, in opposition to a railway which had been planned. The railway was opened, and before long Shillibeer was ruined. In after years Shillibeer started business as an undertaker, patented a funeral coach, and became prosperous.

Towards the end of the forties the London omnibus proprietors, who hitherto worked in opposition to each other, formed themselves into associations, and ran their omnibuses at stated times. By so doing office and management expenses were reduced considerably. In 1847 Thomas Tilling started business with one solitary horse, but in 1851 he had prospered to an extent which enabled him to place on the streets his first omnibus, the "Times." It ran from Peckham to Oxford Circus. At the present day there are nearly thirty "Times" omnibuses on that road. In 1855 the "Compagnie Generale des Omnibus de Londres" was formed, with the working title of London General Omnibus Company. On January 7, 1856, Wilson's "Favourites," and omnibuses on many other routes, appeared with the new company's name on their panels. In November, 1857, The London General Omnibus Company possessed 595 omnibuses the majority of which it had purchased from old established proprietors. Some firms declined to sell their businesses, and with these the company has worked amicably throughout its existence. Towards the end of 1858 the London General Omnibus Company

was registered as a limited liability company, the first board of directors consisting of eight Englishmen and four Frenchmen. In August, 1880, the London and District Omnibus Company, Limited, was incorporated with a capital of £200,000, but on April 7, 1881, the name of the company was changed to the London Road Car Company, Limited. Six days later the company started work with three omnibuses each drawn by three horses, which ran between Hammersmith and Victoria. These omnibuses were rather ungainly, and were quickly superseded by the best that had appeared in London since the days of Shillibeer. The other companies and proprietors soon adopted the Road Car's "garden seats." The Road Car Company also introduced the ticket system, but on the London General Omnibus Company and associated proprietors adopting it the great strike of 1891 occurred.

Transcription: Kevin Graham, February 2021.