

We have a long and proud history – and a bright future. Here is an account of how we started and how we got to where we are today.

Early Days

The company can trace its roots back to 1879, when 'The City of Oxford and District Tramways Company Limited' was formed: as the name implied, its objective was to construct a system of tramways in the city. The first section to be completed was from the stations to Cowley Road (a route which survives today as service 5), which started running on 1 December 1881. On the first day, almost 1,000 people used the new service.

Within six years, there was a line from the city to Leckford Road (on Walton Street), and a north-south line from Lake Street (on Abingdon Road) to St Margaret's Road (on Banbury Road) which was extended north to South Parade in 1898.

By the early years of the twentieth century, Oxford was one of the few systems not to be run by electricity. This was now proposed, but there was considerable opposition due to the need to suspend overhead electric cables from historic buildings, particularly in High Street. This opposition was sufficient for electric tramways never to be run in Oxford.

In 1905, Oxford City Council had the opportunity to buy the tramway: this was the trend elsewhere in Britain. However, local ratepayers were unhappy about paying for the operation of a tram service – a referendum in the *Oxford Times* showed a strong preference for the services to be provided by a private company. The council decided to take a compromise position: it exercised its option to take control of the system but then it would be leased out by public tender.

A bid from the National Electric Construction Company (NEC) was successful and they took over the system in 1907. As a condition of the tender, NEC was to investigate the provision of an electric tram system without the need for unsightly overhead wiring. There was a proposal to deliver the power by means of metal studs in the road but this proved unsafe in operation elsewhere and so Oxford never did get its electric trams.

Sweeping Away the Trams

The horse tram was becoming hopelessly old-fashioned and in the absence of a workable solution to providing electricity, the tramway company proposed to the city council that the tramway be replaced by motorbuses. The impasse was broken by William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) who, as a city taxpayer, was infuriated by the situation and so started up his own bus service competing against the trams in December 1913.

In response, the tramway company began its own motorbus services three weeks later, and so Morris withdrew in early 1914, selling his buses to the tramway company which now converted all its routes to motorbus operation.

In April 1914, 25 motorbuses were running on six routes in the city:

1. Cowley Road – Carfax – Stations
2. Cowley Road – Carfax – Summertown
3. Iffley Road – Broad Street – Stations

4. Walton Street – Carfax – Headington
5. Wolvercote – Carfax – Hinksey
6. Cowley Village – Carfax – Botley

The Great War

With the outbreak of war in 1914, twelve buses were requisitioned by the War Department: about half of the fleet. The vehicle shortage was compounded by restrictions on the supply of petrol, and so service levels were reduced. Once the war ended in 1918, restrictions were removed, city services were returned to normal and the company could expand.

Stretching Beyond the City

As motorbus operation became viable, services were started to outlying parts of the county: Abingdon was the first in 1914, followed quickly by Wantage, Wallingford, Woodstock, Chipping Norton, Witney and Burford by 1920. The Great War had placed restrictions on expansion until then, but in the 1920s there were regular services connecting just about all villages in the area with Oxford by 1926.

The 1930s: Higher Standards

The Road Traffic Act 1930 created a regulatory regime for the bus industry, under which all services, vehicles and personnel were licensed by a regional Traffic Commissioner. This Act was designed to improve minimum standards of safety and organisation to the industry. One effect of this new legislation was that many small operators were unable to meet the new standards and so were forced to cease trading. The company took over many of the services of these small firms.

With this increased activity outside the immediate Oxford area, depots were established at key points on the network, where buses, drivers and conductors could be based. The first was at Stokenchurch in 1924, followed by Thame, Witney, Bicester and Wantage.

Services within the city were also successively developed: the city has itself been extended in 1928, when the districts of Cowley, Headington, Marston and Iffley were incorporated. This led to dense housing being developed in these areas and as east Oxford expanded tremendously so did bus services to take residents to their place of work – in many cases the city centre.

The company also underwent its own change of ownership in the 1930s. First, the Great Western Railway bought a 49% share of the company in 1930, and then NEC (owner of the remaining 51%) was itself taken over by British Electric Traction (BET) in 1931. BET was one of two major bus operator groups (the other was Tilling) which, between them owned the majority of bus companies in Britain.

The Second World War

As in the First World War, resources such as buses and fuel were severely restricted between 1939 and 1945, at the same time as the requirement for public transport in the area grew. Part of the bus fleet was dispersed each night so that if the garage at Cowley Road was bombed, then at least some buses would survive! These points were Northern Bypass and Headington Hill; an anti-aircraft battery was positioned behind the depot in Cowley.

Peace and Prosperity

The shortage of fuel and materials continued from 1945, at a time when many people wanted to get 'out and about' after the privations of the war. Rationing of petrol for private cars, for example, was rationed until 1951. As peacetime industrial production got underway, the Morris works at Cowley was making itself felt in the local economy, for good and ill. Whilst the works brought economic prosperity to the city, it also placed pressure on the local jobs market, so that there were insufficient numbers of people wishing to be bus drivers or conductors.

People were therefore recruited from elsewhere in the country and accommodated in old double deck buses used as temporary 'caravans' before a purpose-built hostel was constructed as part of the Cowley Road depot complex.

As the country became more prosperous in the 1950s, the use of private cars grew and rural services in particular became difficult to operate economically. In a number of cases, services were converted to 'driver only' operation so that cost savings were achieved through not having to pay for conductors. This principle was extended to double deck buses in urban areas from 1966, and all services were run in this way from 1978.

Ownership Changes

In 1968, British Electric Traction (owner of The City of Oxford Motor Services) sold its bus business to the Government, which combined this with the Tilling Group, which it already owned, to become the National Bus Company (NBC). City of Oxford continued as a subsidiary company of NBC, with its own identity, although the familiar colours of maroon and duck egg green changed to red and white.

With the creation of NBC, there was a general tidying up of activities between the former Tilling and BET companies. One consequence of this was that City of Oxford took over operation of the Oxford to London express services. For a number of years, the company traded under the "Oxford – South Midland" name.

Balanced Transport Strategy

By the late 1960s, transport in cities had become a strategic issue, and the government and local authorities were looking closely at how this could be addressed. Oxford is a prime example for the need for close attention to be paid to transport: it has a restricted central area with many historic buildings, and a river crossing between the central area and the main residential areas in the city. As the use of private transport grew through the 1960s, it was accepted that some way of managing this transport demand had to be found.

A consultant's report was received by both city and county councils in 1968 and after due consultation and deliberation, both authorities formulated a Balanced Transport Plan (BTP) from 1973. This plan sought to contain and reduce the use of private transport within the Oxford ring road, by encouraging the use of public transport, cycling and walking. Importantly, the strategy contained measures to discourage car use, mainly by the pricing and availability of car parking. Specific public transport improvements were the creation of the first permanent 'Park & Ride' site in the UK, at Redbridge to the south of the city. Here, car users would park and then take a bus into central Oxford. To give buses an advantage over cars in traffic flow, bus only lanes were created on roads leading to Park & Ride sites. Finally, the two main central shopping streets, Cornmarket Street and Queen Street were closed to traffic other than buses.

Eventually, a further four Park & Ride sites were created at Pear Tree (north of city), Thornhill (east), Seacourt (west) and Water Eaton (north east). The Oxford Park & Ride system is now the largest of its type in the UK.

Deregulation

In the 1980s, the government privatised and deregulated a number of industries, including the bus industry. This process affected the company in three phases:

- long distance services were opened up to competition in 1980;
- local services were similarly 'deregulated' in 1986;
- The National Bus Company was privatised.

These changes effectively swept away the system of ownership and control which had existed since 1930, and each of these phases had a distinct effect on the business. The regional Traffic Commissioner was still in charge of regulating bus services, but the responsibilities now changed: the Commissioner no longer had powers to dictate the route of services or fares or timetables.

Instead, the emphasis was on ensuring that operators were of sufficiently high quality, and this was measured in terms of finance, professional competence and vehicle maintenance standards. Once these criteria had been satisfied then operators are free to design and operate services as they wish: these are 'commercial' services' which attract no subsidy.

If a local authority perceives that a service is required but is not provided by a commercial service then it can pay a subsidy for its operation. Around 15% of the UK's bus service mileage is contracted in this way. In the Oxford area, about 95% of services are run commercially.

The first effects of this new, 'deregulated' system were that in many parts of the UK, competition occurred between bus operators. Oxford was no exception to this, and a new operator, Thames Transit challenged us on a number of long-established services in the city and between Oxford and London.

Privatisation

The National Bus Company in the 1980s was the largest bus company in the world. The government decided that the most appropriate method of privatisation was to create local business units which would be attractive to as many potential buyers as possible. Some of its subsidiary companies already fitted this model, but others were sub-divided, and Oxford – South Midland was split into two units: one covering the city of Oxford and its immediate areas (which adopted the 'Oxford Bus Company' name) and a new company (South Midland) which took over the remaining services surrounding Abingdon, Bicester, Witney and Wantage.

Both Oxford Bus and South Midland were then offered for sale, and were bought by their respective management teams. However, South Midland was then quickly resold to Thames Transit, which amalgamated this with its own competitive services in Oxford.

On 1 March 1994, Oxford Bus was sold to The Go-Ahead Group, and in 1997 Thames Transit was sold to Stagecoach Holdings, which branded the company 'Stagecoach in Oxford'

Oxford Transport Strategy

The Balanced Transport Plan which had been introduced by both Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council (see above) in 1973 had been successful in containing the growth of car use within the ring road. By the early 1990s there was a feeling that the traffic situation in central Oxford needed to be addressed, changing the principle from containment to restraint.

The Oxford Transport Strategy (OTS) was therefore developed – like the Balanced Transport Plan of twenty years earlier, this was a policy joint between city and county councils. The aim was to improve the quality of central area shopping streets, and to achieve this Cornmarket Street was closed to buses and High Street closed to general traffic.

To compensate for the loss of Cornmarket Street to buses, a 'Bus Priority Route' was created around the central area.

As a result of OTS and other pro-public transport measures, 44% of people travelling into central Oxford now do so by bus.

Oxford Bus Today

Today, we operate 160 buses and coaches on a range of activities:

- a network of high frequency services in Oxford city, Kidlington to the north and Abingdon and Didcot to the south.
- Express services link Oxford with Heathrow and Gatwick airports.
- The country's largest Park&Ride system, with 4,800 parking spaces linked to central Oxford by our services.