Londons urban transport from the victorian era

History, Middle Ages

Over the past 200 years the geography of London has changed dramatically. No better has this change been reflected than in London’s urban transport systems. The Victorian era saw mass migration to the capital as industrial progress both at home and abroad, and by 1800 London was the grandest city in the West and probably the world, with almost a million inhabitants. By 1881 the population has soared to 4. 5 million and by 1911 to over 7 million [Porter 1994, pp 220].

To deal with these patterns of population growth London has seen large changes within its urban transport systems, on both land and water, and some have even attributed the growth of London itself to increased migration promoted by changes to public transport [Roberts, 1996 pp 322]. London is a scattered city, its past not attributed to coherent Government led development (as with other global cities such as New York or Paris). Instead, the most significant technical development which affected the size and functioning of London was the development of mass public transport, which was dictated not only by technological advances, but also the ways in which firms invested in the new forms of conveyance and competed with each other and alternative forms of travel [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 227].

When looking at urban transport, it is important to consider that, during the 19th Century the most common form of travel remained on foot. A traffic survey of the city in 1854 showed that almost 70 per cent of people travelling in and out of the City daily were doing so on foot. Even as late as 1897, when extensive public transport systems had been developed, less than a quarter of South London trade unionists were regular users of these

systems as prices remained fairly high for other forms of commuter transport [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 228]. In a scattered and geographically condensed city (in 1825 the built up area of London still only stretched for four miles north to south and six miles east to west) it remained the best way to get quickly and efficiently from a to b. As today, traffic congestion was a problem for London during the Victorian era, and walking was often the most rapid form of travel.

Pedestrian travel was also aided by new technologies that improved road safety for those travelling on foot. Road conditions began to show improvements (with drainage improved), street lighting was introduced through the 1830's, and the extension of the police force made travelling alone safer. The development of London's road systems throughout the century also reduced journey times [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 229].

Changes in Water Transport:

At the start of the Victorian era, the River Thames provided a faster and often more desirable way to travel across the city with Watermen offering to taxi people in small rowing boats known as ' wherries'.

The development of paddle steamers would displace these wherries, and by 1850 they were carrying several million passengers a year. These steamboats began offering services down the River Thames in 1815, unburdened by mileage duty and able to carry hundreds of passengers at a time – in 1830 a regular service operated between London and Gravesend, Woolwich and Richmond [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 234]. Despite this,

they remained unable to operate in bad light or weather, difficult and dangerous to board and leave and were involved in regular collisions. Water transport thrived during this time, dependent on the influence of the powerful river-using industries, which had restricted river bridges. During the early part of the 19th Century, however, their influence began to decrease, and new bridge crossings were. Vauxhall (1816), Waterloo (1817), Southwark (1819) and London (1824-31) all reduced the need for river transport on a commuter level, and also stimulated further road constructions south of the river through the latter half of the century [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 229]. By 1890, the development of the road and railway networks had all but decimated the steamboat trade.

The Horse and Carriage

The Horse and Carriage as a means of transport was indelible throughout the Victorian era, and despite growing congestion throughout the 19th Century (along with the escalating costs of keeping and feeding horses in London) there were still 23, 000 private carriages travelling through the city in 1891 [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 229]. Road network developments and improvements were implemented throughout the Victorian era, all of which had to take into account the very particular needs of horse and carriage transport. The avoidance of steep gradients and limitations in the manoeuvrability of the carriages may have contributed to the levels of congestion seen throughout London throughout the Victorian era, and perhaps even up to today (with the maintenance of many of the road networks from the past century).

This reliance on forms of horse drawn transport, not only encouraged walking in the lower classes (who couldn’t afford the maintenance of a horse and carriage), but was also perhaps responsible for maintaining the compactness of London and restraining the outward movement of industry. Though gradually replaced by other means of public transport up to the First World War, the horse and carriage has remained the dominant means of road transport for a very long time.

The upper classes had their own carriages, hackney carriages

The rich had their own carriages, hackneys were available, and hansom cabs were introduced in 1834. Some got to work by short-stage coaches (four or six passengers inside and a handful outside).

Horse and Carriage also remained the main form of transport in the movement of good around London (on the eve of the First World War most of London’s good vechicles were still horse drawn) [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 229].

The Omnibus and Commuter Transport

One thing that has defined patterns of social change within a transport context in London over the past two centuries has been the establishment and growth of the commuter and associated public transport. The very term ‘ commuter’ came into being during the 1850’s as more and more people were able to travel to work from greater distances, and the average Londoner’s journeys on public transport increased from 20 in the late 1860’s to almost 140 in 1902 [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 230]. In the early 18th

Century, short-distance stagecoaches, known as short-stagers appeared throughout London’s streets. These coaches carried four to six passengers inside and up to seven outside on the roof, and were used to provide regular services from the centre of London to the outskirts. This means of transport was introduced to serve the better-off when they moved out to the then desirable suburbs. By 1825, stagers had become commonplace, with probably around 600 such vehicles making around 1, 800 journeys a day [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 233]. These most popular of these coaches was the Hackney Carriage, which had a monopoly on the central areas of London up to 1832.

Another idea developing at the time was the idea of the omnibus, which many believe single handed began the commuter revolution. The service was first established in July 1829 by George Shillibeer, running from the Stingo public house, Paddington, to the Bank, along to the New Road. Shillibeer’s omnibuses were long three-horse vehicles with benches for twenty passengers [Porter 1994, pp 237]. The idea was to increase the numbers of passengers that were able to travel by stage-coach, thus lowering the fares for the daily commuter. Because of the Hackney carriage monopoly of the central areas of London, however, the venture failed by 1831. This stimulated the Stage Carriages Act of 1832 which allowed the omnibuses and all other types of vehicle into the central areas, freely plying the streets for trade. The Stage Carriages Act also stimulated the advent of the omnibus back into the world of commuter travel as they could now access the central areas. The cheaper fares (they were nearly half the price

of the Hackney Carriages) and their increased speed made them more convenient for the middle class commuter.

There were also considerable negative impacts associated with the development of London’s public transport during this period. A paradox quickly arose as thousands of extra vehicles took to the streets improving public transport, whilst simultaneously exacerbating congestion issues in the city. It should also be noted that despite this rise in use of these services, the fares of public transport remained fairly high and prohibitive for most working-class people until the introduction of subsidised services towards the end of the century [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 228]. As a result of this, combined with the service hours (they generally ran from eight in the morning when the majority of the working class workers were in work), the service remained, like the stagers before them, a largely middle class service. They proved effective, however, in permitting suburban living among tradesmen and clerks, and gave the inner suburbs a crucial boost during the 1830’s and 1840’s [Porter 1994, pp 240].

The success of the omnibus continued and was encouraged by low taxation (taxes on public transport were cut by up to a half in 1839) and competition and 1851, the year of the great exhibition, omnibuses carried around 20, 000 passengers daily [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 236]. The closure of this however brought rapid growth to an end and fares plummeted as many firms went bankrupt. One success story however was the London General Omnibus Company, which, by 1900 owned nearly half of the 3, 000 horse-drawn buses and trams, carrying some 500 million passengers a year [Porter 1994, pp

240] stimulated by rising incomes and a suburban migration during the late 1800’s. The loss of monopoly during the 1832 Act had also led to a doubling of the number of hackneys and investment in new equipment and innovations, with the hansom cab eventually becoming the norm [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 234]. Eventually competition from other means of transport put an end to the days of horse drawn public transport with the last known service in 1914.

Railways

The great material transformations of the 1800’s, combined with the physical and social geographies of the city led to a major transformation in the railways of London. From the 1830’s the cuttings ploughed into the northern suburban areas on their routes into Euston, then Kings Cross and St Pancreas [Porter 1994, pp 230]. These developments reinforced east/west social divides, devastating some areas while bettering others, however London’s traffic problems were becoming ominous, as a result of the vast increase of traffic and the absence of any policy. For these reasons, the coming of rail transport, overground and underground was critical in keeping the metropolis moving and in permitting the city to expand. But if the railways brought benefits these were purchased at a high cost.

The downwards shift of some of these neighbourhoods is mainly attributable to later railway building that destroyed many inner-urban neighbourhood environments and made it possible for their more prosperous residents to move further out [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 233].

Underground

Road Improvements

In 1800 London’s road infrastructure was generally main thoroughfares running from east to west above the River Thames. These were often narrow, poorly maintained and blocked by street markets and other local activity, and little inner city road improvement was undertaken before the Commercial Road development in 1810 which sped transport to the dockland areas [Porter, 1994, pp 235], which seemed to stimulate a spurt of road networks. Major developments in the central area included Regent Street (1817-23) and Moorgate, cutting north-south thoroughfares through the traditional east- west pattern, and the major trunk routes constructed to the north of the built-up area – including New North Road (1812), Archway Road (1813), Caledonian Road (1826) and Finchley Road (1826-35) [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 231]. There were also a number of new river crossings introduced during this period including Vauxhall (1816), Waterloo (1817), Southwark (1819) and London (1824-31).

This period also saw road conditions beginning to be improved via increased expenditure on widening, paving and drainage, and on new routes [Ball and Sunderland, 2001, pp 240].

Cycling

Cars and Buses

As previously discussed, the horse and carriage remained the dominant form of road transport throughout the Victorian era. Despite the many drawbacks of motorised transport, it has been rightly quipped that the invention of the motor car saved large cities in the nick of time from being engulfed in mountains of horse dung [Ball and Sunderland, 2001 pp 229].

Hackney motor cabs were first introduced in 1903 and proved immensely popular, particularly after the 1907 introduction of the taximeter. Ball pp 233.

The growth of the bus use amongst the middle classes preceded the major change in motive power, from the horse to the petrol engine and the emergence of underground and electrified tram services and it was the petrol-driven motor buses that were to revolutionise public transport from their first introduction in 1899. The first bus service was operated by Motor Traction Co, who, for a short while ran two double-deckers between Kensington and Victoria. Cumberson, uncomfortable and generally unreliable they were initially unsuccessful. However, their advantages quickly became apparent – they had greater carrying capacity than their horse-driven counterparts and travelled at somewhat higher speeds (though these were restricted by legislation), enabling routes to be longer. Running costs were lower and less variable and their success encouraged further investment in 1905 with the establishment of the London Motor Omnibus Company and Vanguard [Ball and Sunderland 2001, pp 239]. In the 1900’s competition grew (from 1906 to 1907 the number of buses nearly quadrupled from 242 to 808) and many services saw a period of consolidation as congestion grew.

New regulations lead to the development of the B-type bus in 1910 and by 1914 the public had taken the new motorised bus to heart with 757 million passengers.

Today cities are designed on the premise of the car, on an ‘ autologic’ which underlines policy and planning in large parts of the world [Brudett, 2008].

Overview of Victorian Era:

After centuries that had brought little alteration in ways of getting about, the Victorians created a transport revolution that changed not just the face of the town but the status map of the metropolis [Porter 1994, pp 235].