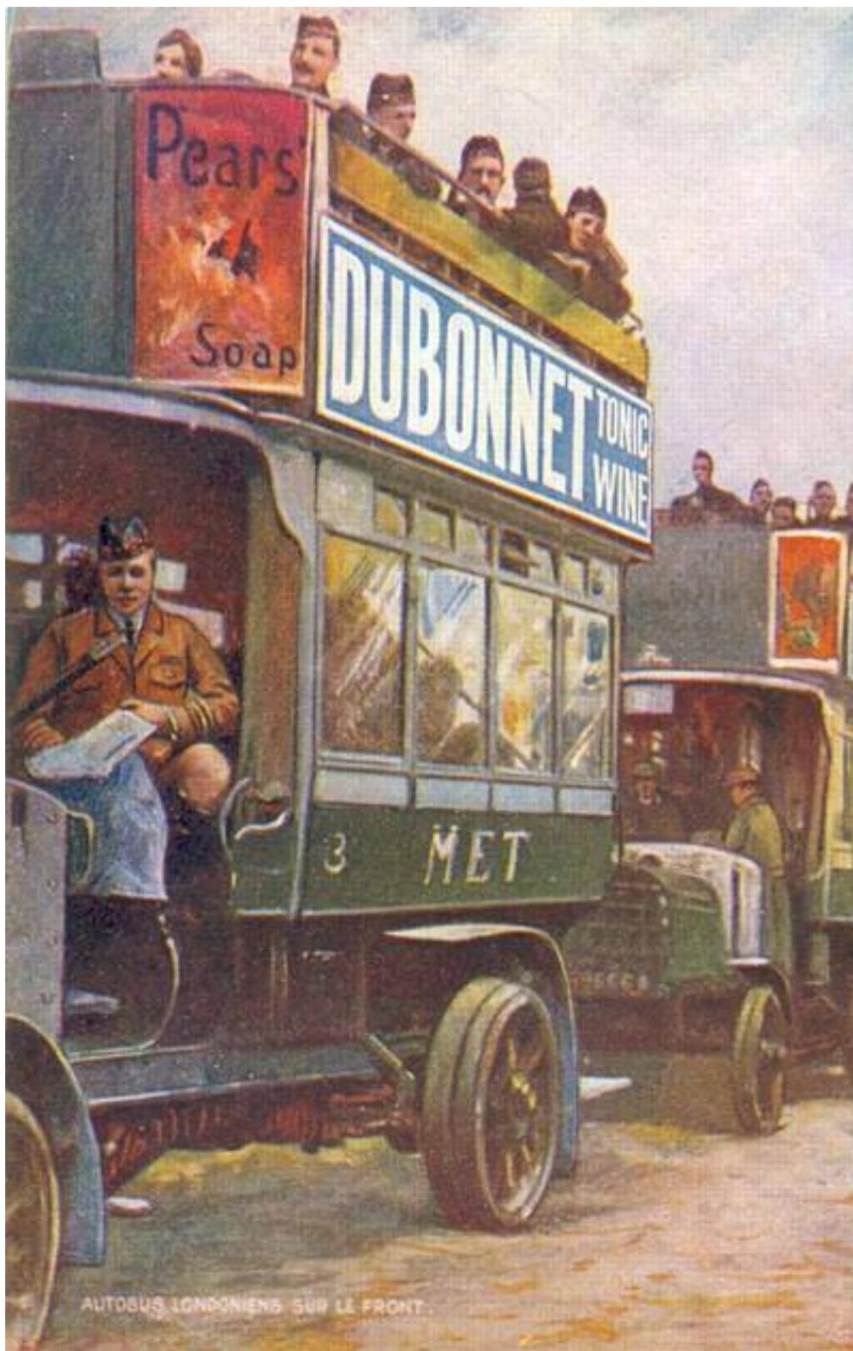


On English omnibus companies under First world War

Introduction

Inspired by the German Army's exercises in the summer and autumn of 1908, in which personnel and supplies were experimentally transported in lorries, the British Army held a similar trial on 21 December 1908. In 24 hired buses from the London General Omnibus Company (LGOC), accompanied of three workshop wagons, 500 men from the Territorial Army were moved. Two of the buses simulated medical vehicles, while a third acted as a mobile command post. Observers and referees followed the events from passenger cars. The experiment turned out to be successful and on 17 March 1910 another experiment was carried out, only on a larger scale; 411 vehicles of many different types participated. With this, a new era in the history of the British Army really started and during the First World War the motor vehicle really took its place in almost all units.



A London bus on its way to the front, approx. 1914.

Simultaneous French postcard, published as advertising by Dubonnet.

Auxiliary Omnibus Companies

The bus - a Daimler probably - comes from the Tramways (MET) Omnibus Company, which was associated with the LGOC.

The company was among the first to be asked to provide transport capacity for the English defence.

The fleet sets out...

The request came from the Admiralty to the Tramways (MET) Omnibus Company in September 1914, with the Ministry of the Navy bidding for 75 coaches and crew for use by Royal Naval Division [1](#)), which was sent to Antwerp on 5 October 1914.

Source 1 mentions that Navy Minister Winston S. Churchill's idea of the transport given was inspired by the exercises in 1908 and 1909.

It appeared from the crew's soldier books that they now belonged to the Royal Marines, but they were sent to France in civilian clothes.

The army follows suit...

In mid-October 1914, a similar request came from the Ministry of War, which requested 300 buses [2](#)) from the London General Omnibus Company (LGOC).

Buses and crews were quickly assembled at Grove Park in south-east London.

They were organized into four omnibus companies, designated 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Auxiliary Omnibus Company [3](#)), Army Service Corps (No. 90, 91, 92 and 93 Company respectively).

Among the new soldiers were drivers of all kinds, including a single tram driver, whose experience with buses, however, was purely theoretical. The LGOC preferred to employ ex-servicemen, and the most experienced of the drivers were now appointed NCOs. The officers came from the Army Service Corps, where they were trained on motor vehicles, but without any special knowledge of buses.

Each company consisted of 75 buses, 2 lorries, including a workshop van, as well as 4 passenger cars and a number of motorbikes.

The first omnibus companies



Seaforth Highlanders, ca. 1914.

Drawn by Harry Payne [5](#)).__

No. 1 Auxiliary Omnibus Company

The company left the depot at Grove Park on 17 October 1914 and arrived in France (Rouen) on 23 October 1914.

The company was attached to the 2nd Army [4](#)) in Blangy, where it carried out its first transport on 25 October 1914.

Here, 600 men from the 2nd Bn. Seaforth Highlanders, 1st Royal Warwickshire Regiment and 2nd Bn. Royal Dublin Fusiliers transported from St. Venant to Houplines (a trip of about 40 km). The units were part of the 10th Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division.

No. 2 Auxiliary Omnibus Company

The company left the depot at Grove Park on 22 October 1914 and arrived in France (Rouen) on 27-29 October 1914.

Here it was attached to the 1st Army in Bailleul.

Among the first transports were 1,000 French soldiers who were driven to Elverdinghe on 3 November and 1,800 French Alpine hunters who were transported on 12 November 1914.

No. 3 Auxiliary Omnibus Company

The company was formed on 26 October 1914 at Grove Park by staff from the LGOC. However, the company came to transport ammunition instead of soldiers, being converted into a special ammunition supply unit directly under the High Command in France (GHQ Ammunition Park).

No. 4 Auxiliary Omnibus Company

The number of lorries available was far less than the need, which is why 4. Kompagni's buses were converted to lorries.



AEC B-type bus converted to truck.

From Source 1.

The company was established on 28 October 1914 and consisted of personnel who were specially recruited for the driver jobs. The company's division of staff and workshop element did not work together with the transport company, but became No. 1 Mobile Repair Unit, Army Service Corps.

The website *The Long, Long trail - The British Army in the Great War, Land Forces of the British Empire* contains an overview of the total of 8 omnibus companies that were created during the war under the Army Service Corps.

See *The ASC Motor Transport Auxiliary (Omnibus) Companies*.

The buses



Army Service Corps Motor Transport, Grove Park.
From Source 2.

The buses from Tramways came from the car manufacturer *Daimler*, while the buses from LGOC were built by AEC (Associated Equipment Company), with the designation *B-Type bus*.

At first, the buses looked just like the streets of London. Source 3 even mentions that a soldier from the London Scottish [6](#)) experienced being driven to the front by the same driver who used to drive him to work in London!

Source 3 also mentions that the buses were allocated to the individual infantry brigades as a transport element, in a number of 30 buses per brigade.

Gradually, the windows, which were easily broken by the soldiers' equipment, were replaced by boards and the buses were painted in "the normal color of the army".



*Army Service Corps Motor Transport, Grove Park.
From Source 2.*



Auxiliary Omnibus Company - Indian soldiers on their way to the front, 1914.

The image was found on the Internet, but the source is lost in the unknown; the quality may not be the best, but the motif is unique.

It must have been a new experience in every way for these Indian soldiers to be transported to the front by bus.

Several of the soldiers had perhaps heard of - and even fewer seen - motor vehicles, and the majority had never tried anything like that before.



An LGOC B-type bus converted to a mobile dovecote.

From Source 1.

Special tasks

In addition to the aforementioned conversion to trucks, buses were also used for medical transport and mobile command stations.

Another function that the buses later came to fulfill was the role of the carrier pigeon service's mobile pigeon range. Here they worked side by side with horse-drawn pigeons.

Read more about the carrier pigeon service in my article [About the English carrier pigeon service during the First World War](#).

After the war



An LGOC B-type bus has been preserved for posterity and is today on display at the Imperial War Museum in London.

It was handed over to King George V in 1920.

The image on the left comes from the London Transport Museum website.

The more contemporary image from the Imperial War Museum has also been found on the Internet, on a website belonging to a gentleman called Ian Fuller.

After the First World War, the buses were returned to the owners. After being restored to their original appearance, they were soon back in service on the streets of London.

Closing

The bus at the Imperial War Museum is named "Old Bill's Bus" after a character in Bruce Bairnsfather's humorous cartoons from the war. For a number of years, you could get an Airfix building kit in scale 1:32 which depicted a B-type bus - the building kit was available in a military version (Old Bill's Bus) and a civilian version (B-type Bus). In the 1960s, i.a. these buses subject to extensive conversions by collectors of the time, e.g. Roy Dilley and Henry Harris.



LGOC B-type bus in truck version.

An example of a Roy Dilley conversion from Source 4.

In addition to old issues of Airfix Magazine, there are pictures of d'herrer's exciting conversions in, among others:

1. *How to go Collecting Model Soldiers* of Henry Harris, Patrick Stephens, London 1969, ISBN 85059- 036-1.
2. *Scale Model Soldiers* of Roy Dilley, Almark Publications, London 1972, ISBN 0-85524- 062-8.

You may be lucky to find these old building sets for sale, but otherwise you are today referred to companies such as e.g. Tommy Atkins, if you want 1:32 models of the old buses in military dress.

Sources

1. *Military Transport of World War I* of C. Ellis, Blandford Press, London 1970, ISBN 0- 7137-0701-1.
2. *Army Service Corps 1902-1918* of Michael Young, Leo Cooper, London 2000, ISBN 085052- 730-9.
3. *First Ypres 1914* of David Lomax, Osprey Campaign Series Nr. 58, London 1999, ISBN 1- 85532-573-X

4. *B Type service van, Airfix bus conversion* by Roy Dilley, *Airfix Magazine*, Volume 8, Number 5, January 1967 7)

5. *British Military Transport 1829-1956* by David Fletcher, published by The Tank Museum, HMSO Books, London 1998, ISBN 011-2950570-6.

Per Finsted



An omnibus company photographed at Ypres, c. 1917.

From Source 5.

To note:

1) For a mention of the Royal Naval Division see e.g. my review of the book *Command in the Royal Naval Division as well as Uniforms - Royal Naval Division, 1914-1918*.

2) See also my review of the book *Army Service Corps 1902-1918* (Source 2).

3) Source 2 alternately refers to an omnibus company as *Auxiliary Omnibus Company* and *Auxiliary Bus Company*.

4) The information about the armies comes from Source 2. The term *army* was first used by the English Expeditionary Force per 26 December 1914, when the expeditionary force was divided into First Army and Second Army. In this way, organizationally, they came to match the structure of the French army. Until then, the corps was the largest organizational unit. 4th Infantry Division, from which 10th Brigade came, was part of III Cor

5) Postcard from Series II of "Regimental badges and their Wearer", No. 8491, published by Raphael Tuck & Sons "Oilette". Despite the similarity in headgear - *the glengarry* hat - the soldiers on the Dubonnet card are not from the Seaforth Highlanders. Given the officer's light breeches, it must be a Lowland regiment, rather than a Highland regiment. The Dubonnet map also shows the drivers' civilian attire, incl. sixpence.

6) The London Scottish were one of the first Territorial Army units to be sent to France in 1914. See more in my review of the book *The London Scottish in The Great War*.

7) It happens that you need to track down an article in the defunct Airfix Magazine. Fortunately, good people have indexed all years (1960-1993). See the index on the website [Aeroflight - The Website for Aviation Enthusiasts](#).