

Memories of a Tram Conductress During World War I

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Taken from the Joe Harman Archive

Born in 1895, May Archer wrote this letter to Joe Harman in 1985 aged 90.

In 1914 the war had just broken out and I wanted to help in some way. I thought of joining the Women's Land Army, but my brother was a tram conductor and had been called up for war service, so I thought why not try for a conductresses job. I went to see the manager to see if any help was wanted. It was, but only for the duration of the war as servicemen had been promised their jobs back at the end of the war. I can't remember any staff recruitment process and I started work early in 1915 and was demobbed in the middle of 1920.

It meant working out of doors in all weathers and taking turns to take the first tram out in the morning, clocking on at 5am and helping to run the tramcar out of the shed ready to take the shore men to the Crosswall terminus ready for work at 5.15am. Then we waited to take the night shift home. We worked long hours for 18 shillings a week; boy conductors got 15 shillings at 14 years old. We had one half day a week off and alternate Sundays with overtime paid for Sundays.

Children in those days were up to all sorts of pranks, but they did not go round pinching goods from shop counters. Near the entrance to the Grand Shaft in Snargate Street there was a sort of tram signal box with another one halfway down Northampton Street to control the single-track stretch. Children would watch the two sets of signals. If the signal arm was up, it meant that a tram was coming, if

down the way was clear. If boys found the signal arm was up, they would put it down; this meant that two trams would face each other at Bethel corner, leading to an argument between the drivers as to who was going to back up with both drivers painting the sky blue before one or the other gave way, watched by the hiding boys.

When it rained, we had to wear oilskins and sou'westers like fishermen with one bag slung over the shoulder for tickets in rounds as large as dinner plates and a bag for the money. We were well loaded. There were no ticket machines in those days, tickets were hand punched. Wellington boots were only just coming on the market then so in wet weather we wore clumped sole boots and black gaiters up to the knees.

Sometime after I joined the tramways there was a bad accident. A tram car lost control going down the Chute into River (Crabble Road). Being a nice, warm,



*Dover Tram Conductress Lottie Scrase Centre Front
(died in River Tram Accident)*

summer's day the car was full of passengers; it left the rails and crashed into the Crabble Mill wall at the bottom of the Chute. The car overturned throwing most of the top deck passengers into the mill yard. The conductress, Miss Scrase, and several passengers were killed and some badly injured.

The River route was closed for a few days and when it reopened only one car ran on the route for quite a time. We all took our turn on that route, which was rather tedious because we went from the tram shed (at Buckland Bridge) to River terminus and back to Buckland Bridge, roughly 10 minutes each way. There was an army guard just outside the Athletic Ground gate who used to send out two basins of tea – one for the driver and one for the conductor or conductress. It was very welcome on cold, wet nights. I expect we looked a bit funny going along Lewisham Road drinking tea out of basins. Lewisham Road was not like it is today, but just a track from the Athletic Ground to near the school and then tarmac to the end of the route. There were only a few houses then with fields on both sides of the track.

The war dragged on and there was a shortage of drivers for a few weeks. Two of the conductresses, Miss Kay and Miss Lawrence, volunteered as drivers and were accepted, but I was told I was too short. Neither of them drove for long; Miss Kay left to get married and Miss Lawrence had an accident when a lorry ran into her car and she was squashed between the controller and the stairs. After being on the sick list for quite some time she went back to conducting.

We had some very bad winters during the war. On one particular day, with deep snow, I went up on the top deck to collect fares and noticed some children making

snowballs on the high terrace in London Road. A few minutes later a snowball caught me right in the earhole; I looked round, but all the children had disappeared.

One job I did not like was fishing about in freezing puddles to find the point iron. This happened when the dummy point was worn and the driver had to put down the point iron to help get over the points. It was the conductor or conductress who had to pick up the point iron – alright in good weather but not on cold, winter nights.

One day I was pulled up into the air when I jumped to pull the trolley arm down, but it pulled me up and swung me round the car; there wasn't enough tension in the trolley arm.

One night we were the last car finishing at 10.59 and ran the car into the tram shed. I cashed up and my driver and another driver and I started for home. As we neared Eric Road my driver said, if you hear a plonk and a splash it will only be my mate falling in a puddle. Would you believe it, as we got to Eric Road I stumbled and went plonk right in the middle of a puddle and my billycan went one way and its lid the other. There we were on a cold, wet night fishing for the billycan and lid. A window opened and somebody called out, "Can't you tram people make less noise at this time of night?" We found the billycan and I used it next day.

I still remember that special day in November 1918. We left the Pier Terminus at 10.50am and arrived at the Town Hall at 11am where there was the largest crowd I'd ever seen. A policeman told us that the war had ended. Everybody started cheering and we loaded up with excited

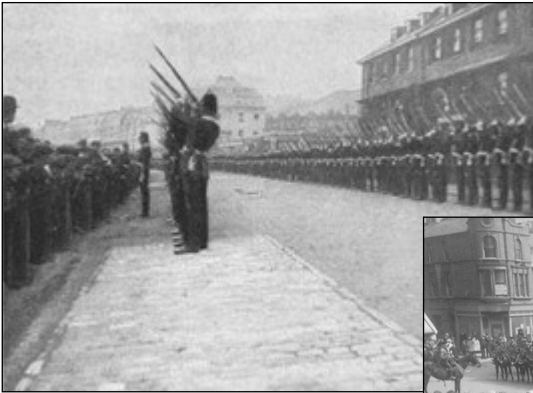
passengers; I could hardly get round to collect the fares. By that time there were only two conductresses left, Miss Brewster and myself.

In the summer of 1920, the tramways had its first staff outing and both of us had a nice day. Soon after that I was demobbed and went to work in the Scottish Laundry and Miss Brewster went to work in the

tramway's office. I must say that it was a rough sort of life sometimes, but I enjoyed it and I saw a good many dawns shooting through the sky from the Pier Terminus.

Wartime conductresses that May remembers: Miss Kelly, 2 Miss Perrins, 2 Miss Edwards, 2 Miss Gansdens, Miss Lawrence, Miss Lenton, Miss Smith, Miss Genge, Miss Reagan, Miss Brewster and May Archer.

Post Card Memories



*Suffolk Regt Firing the Feu-de-Joie 25 May 1899
Queen Victoria Birthday Military Tattoo*



*Dover's only cavalry unit: Dover Troop,
(Duke of Connaught's Own) Royal East
Kent Mounted Rifles, on parade in the
Market Square, probably around 1907.*



*March Past of Royal Artillery,
King's Birthday Parade, Dover Seafront*