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The Campaign To Save the London Trams 1946-1952

Based on the Collected Papers
Of
The late Alan John Watkins

By

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THE LONDON TRAMS CAMPAIGN: 1946-1952

INTRODUCTION

The reason for writing an account of the campaign to save the London trams is that to my knowledge, little has been fully recorded or documented concerning the fact that a group of London tramway enthusiasts fought a long hard campaign with which my late husband, Alan J. Watkins, was closely involved, to retain the extensive tramway system of London which was threatened with extinction. Unfortunately, the campaign was unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, some forty or more years after this event, the need for the development of Light Rail Transit systems in our major towns and cities is growing. Transport planners are beginning to realise that there is a traffic congestion and pollution problem in our large conurbations.

Mr. Alan J. Watkins and his fellow enthusiasts foresaw this happening and argued against the destruction of a fine tramway system. They did not want to retain a decrepit system, but to develop a modern streamlined one akin to those of many continental and some American cities.

Having understood the significance of that campaign, I felt that it was important to research it in order to fill a gap in transport history. I have a collection of material relating to the campaign, which consists mainly of my late husband's correspondence and newspaper cuttings.

My aim is to use this material to document the campaign. As I do not possess any technical or engineering knowledge and, as I have a Humanities background, I shall write this account from a social and historical basis.

CHAPTER 1

REASONS FOR THE ABANDONMENT OF THE TRAMS IN LONDON

In this chapter, I aim to co-ordinate the various reasons for the withdrawal of trams from London. To the majority of tramway enthusiasts, the reasons for abandonment were all too commonplace, and the subsequent results were an anathema to them.

However, to portray a balanced background to the campaign of Alan J. Watkins and his fellow enthusiasts, the reasons for and against tramway withdrawal need to be stated.

It is apparent that the whole issue was determined by the political attitude of the London Transport Executive (LTE.) under Lord Latham and his predecessor Lord Ashfield. The tram was doomed in favour of the motorbus. The London Transport Executive would neither consider any opposing point of view, nor would they consider any form of compromise. The government of the day did nothing to prevent the abandonment of the trams either.

To substantiate this account, various sources of information have been consulted, the main source being "Modern Tramway" 1946-1952, in which lies a wealth of information from articles and correspondence.

Another useful source of information which gives a full account of tram scrapping is an excellent book by Mr. J. Joyce entitled: "Operation Tramaway." In his book, Mr Joyce states that *Operation Tramaway* was the code name for the conversion of trams to buses. In the book reference is made to the first post-war annual report wherein it is stated that it was an urgent necessity to replace the trams in South London by a more modern and attractive form of transport (i.e. the bus.) Mr Joyce also states that: "As late as 1948, the London Transport chairman, Lord Latham declared that the conversion of South London tramcars would have to wait probably five years because of slowing down of manufacture of new buses due to national requirements."

The ideas for scrapping the London tramway system came to fruition in 1933 with the formation of the London Passenger Transport Board (L.P.T.B.), which was the result of the London Passenger Transport Act of 1933. This Act stated:

"Subject to the provisions of this section The Executive' may abandon either in whole or in part any tramway forming part of their undertaking."

"Three months notice must be given to the highway authority responsible for the road on or above which the tramway is laid or erected."

"Once the tramway has been abandoned, the Executive ceases to be charged for any expenses incurred: and for the repairing of the roads."

This first part of the Act said it all. The London Transport Executive decided to abandon the whole system rather than any part of it.

In a speech entitled “Moving the Londoner” (which is quoted in full in “Modern Tramway” May 1949). Lord Latham stated that:

“The urgent problem for the future is the replacement of the tram in South London. Trams were to be substituted by another form of transport, namely buses. Buses would provide a service to the public, which, in the altered circumstances of today, would be no more costly than the trolleybus. The bus, not being attached to fixed wires, was completely mobile. A fixed form of transport would be unsuited to the changing plans and highway structure of London.”

In the “Journal ‘Passenger Transport’” of August 1949, it is mentioned that:

“The changeover from trams to buses in South London was much in accordance with the modern trend of thought regarding the most efficient mode of transport for street passengers.”

Surprise was expressed in this journal that there was a body calling itself ‘The Tramway Development Council’

Lord Latham advocated the scrapping of the trams in order to rid the London streets of traffic congestion. It was maintained that because trams ran on rails, thus fixing them to a route, other vehicles could not bypass them and, consequently, caused severe traffic congestion. (Stated in “Modern Tramway” May 1949).

Following on from this, in the same article, the Chairman of the British Transport Commission, Sir Cyril Hurcomb, expressed his thoughts on the abandonment of the South London trams.

“The decision for the replacement of the South London trams by buses was taken after prolonged consideration of the alternatives:

1. Buses would give greater co-ordination with existing bus routes.
2. Extension of the routes will serve better traffic objectives.

Sir Cyril stated that the problems of tram retention were as follows:

1. The necessity of expanding the electricity distribution system.
2. Expansion of the cable system would be needed.
3. Electrical equipment and cables were in short supply and delivery dates a long way ahead. (At the time when these ideas were being discussed a major war had just ended. There was extensive rationing and many goods were in short supply.)
4. The erection of trolley poles and overhead wires would have to include Westminster Bridge and the Embankment, which were both close to the Houses of Parliament. This would result in a loss of civic amenity in the heart of the capital. (That was the real piece de resistance).

Apparently, the Light Railway Transport League invited Sir Cyril Hurcomb for an interview to discuss these problems. He declined on the grounds that as the League’s views were already known, no useful purpose would be served.

There was also a strong financial reason why London Transport wanted to scrap the trams. It was alleged that the trams were losing about one million pounds per annum, and that both vehicles and track were worn out. The cost of replacement and renewal would be great.

As a result of correspondence in “The Kentish Independent” in 1949, Mr. Alan J. Watkins wrote several letters to one of the correspondents, a Mr B. Hichisson. This is Mr Hichisson’s first letter:

‘Whilst agreeing that trams are fast, they can only be silent when run on first-class tracks. However, most of the tracks in London are completely worn out, and I am afraid that if a modern vehicle were run on the Plumstead Road and High Street route the noise would be just as appalling as it is now. There must be many thousands of tons of good metal buried in the roads of our great cities, apart from the overhead wires and standards.

What a great opportunity to make good our shortage of scrap, and how much neater and tidier we shall be without all these hideous wires and etceteras. And lastly it will give us poor main road dwellers a good night’s sleep.’

In reply to this letter Mr Alan J. Watkins wrote

‘Dear Mr. Hichisson,

As the tramway correspondence in the “Kentish Independent” is now closed, I am taking the liberty of replying personally to your letter.

I quite agree that London’s tram tracks are in bad condition, but the logical thing is, surely to relay them. Even with the existing trams this would greatly reduce noise and the provision of reserved, sleeper tracks (quite possible in the Eltham area) would assist still more in this direction. Finally, new trams, similar to the Blackpool car, would eliminate all objectionable noise. Where reserved tracks can not be provided, the relaying could be part of a general scheme of road resurfacing and improvements. The fact that tramway equipment would yield much scrap metal should not be taken as a reason for abandoning the trams. All forms of transport use a considerable amount of steel, and if we carried the process of salvage to its ultimate conclusion we would have no transport left. Worn out tramway equipment should certainly be salvaged, but it must be replaced with new equipment.

With regard to overhead equipment, I would like to observe that standards (and often overhead span wires) are required for street lighting. Tramway overhead equipment should, of course, be supported by the same standards, and in this case there would not be a great deal of extra equipment.’

In reply to Mr. Watkins’ letter, Mr. Hichisson wrote:

‘Dear Mr. Watkins,

I thank you for your letter of 29th May 1949, and am glad that at least someone has read my letter to the press with obvious interest. The photos enclosed are very interesting. I do agree that these vehicles are excellent. They could be extremely useful if run, say on the Victoria Embankment but are far too unwieldy for the average London tracks. On the Plumstead route from the Ferry to Abbey Wood – for instance – there are many single tracks and there appears to be no hope of any road widening without terrific cost. I have often got on a tram preceded by a barrow-boy pushing his wares and before long a dozen cars were piled up waiting behind. This holds up valuable traffic and taken over the year must cost business firms much delay and incidentally loss of business.

There are many places in London with single tracks which are a single nightmare to the police; and don't you agree that the overhead wires are an eyesore. Parts of Beresford Square and many other centres are covered with miles of these ugly overheads – which are constantly breaking and causing more traffic delays.

No sir, I think the day of the tram has finished and more vehicle traffic is needed. The modern bus is beautiful to travel in and is very much faster and more mobile.

Incidentally, I notice you live in a quiet road- 25 years in my house has nearly driven me deaf – we cannot sleep at nights with the windows open and at times we can hardly hear the wireless. So roll on the buses!'

In reply to this letter, Mr. Alan J. Watkins wrote on 19th June 1949:

Thank you for your letter of May 31st, which I read with interest, although I cannot agree with your views.

Firstly, there are many London roads suitable for street or reserved tramways, and I would mention, among others, Kennington Road, Blackfriars Road, Brixton Road (and most of the route hence to Croydon and Purley), New and Old Kent Roads, Bromley Road, Eltham Road, Westbourne Avenue and Well Hall Road. At bottle-necks and busy junctions (e.g. the Croydon main street, and Elephant and Castle) subways could be constructed. These methods would provide a rapid transit system at a fraction of the cost of tube railway (which I feel will become necessary if the trams are withdrawn) and would be more accessible. In addition, heavy passenger traffic would be largely removed from the roads, and accidents and congestion accordingly lessened. Incidentally, tramcars of the types shown in the photographs I sent you would not be unwieldy. Trams 40 feet long operate quite successfully on the routes from Embankment to Purley and from Victoria to Southcroft Road via Clapham and via Brixton.

There is not much single track in London. In pre LTPB days, the total single-track mileage in the County of London was about four. Some of this has since been abandoned, and with the addition of the Croydon area, the mileage cannot now exceed this figure. The only single-track routes are:

1. Plumstead
2. Lewisham to Greenwich
3. Brigstock Road
4. Thornton Heath.

The remaining sections are short, odd lengths here and there, but the above accounts for the greater part of the mileage. The last two sections mentioned are in fairly quiet roads, and, from personal observation, work quite well. The Plumstead route is, I agree, far from satisfactory, but, quite frankly, I feel that it is hopeless for any form of heavy public transport, and I think that one of the following courses should be adopted:

1. Widening, the objection being the heavy cost, although this course is most desirable.
2. Tram subway, possibly cheaper than the above.
3. Doubling the tram track. This could be done, and would establish a "clean" traffic flow. The road is a two-lane one, and overtaking is very undesirable.

I do not claim that overhead is beautiful, but if we are to have the superior electric traction, either from tram or trolleybus, I think it is worthwhile. Experience elsewhere has, however, shown me that London overhead appears to be unnecessarily heavy, especially that for trolleybuses.

Although I now live in a quiet road, I have had some experience of living on a bus route, and I can assure you that they do their best to drown the wireless. I have been very disappointed in the new London buses, and feel that they are little better than those they replaced. Frequent travelling between Bexley and Eltham has shown me that they have a peculiar and unpleasant motion, which I can best describe as “shuddering”. This view is held by several people I know, not all of them pro-tram. I can assure that the Blackpool type of tram would give no trouble due to noise, and I think that similar trams should replace the present London ones.’

In reply, to Mr Alan J. Watkins’ letter of 19th June 1949, Mr Hichisson wrote:

Thank you for your letter and I hope you will forgive me for continuing our little controversy. Evidently we have something in common – an argument – I should like to meet you at my club, Eltham Conservative Club, over a beer or two. The trams for years have been the pet of the LCC – a pet, however, which has been very expensive to the citizens of London as they have never paid (£100,000 down last year on revenue). They are my pet aversion and, believe me, I have cause for complaint. Outside my house there is a tram stop (downhill). Every tram that passes is braked hard (even when stopping for passengers) – there is a further stop 50 yards down the hill and every vehicle hurls down braking and re-braking until the full agony of the full stop is heard.

I have complained of this several times but to no effect. Every driver seems to look upon this stretch as a nice little spot to test out their brakes (at our expense – nerves and all). Heaven forbid one of your Glasgow monsters hurtling by and repeating the same performance – especially at 4 o’clock in the morning when one is supposed to be getting some sleep! I have taken the trouble to make a note of every tram that is noisy and report them to LPTB. Only recently I was travelling on tram No. 97 – the noise was so appalling that I had to get out and change to another car. How the conductors can stand it all day I do not know.

No traffic in these modern times should be allowed to run on the streets metal to metal. They may be fairly quiet at first but the tracks soon get worn by the other heavy traffic and we have all this racket over again. Railways are the only exception as their tracks are entirely used for one purpose and last many years. If we are going to pull up tracks let us pull them up for good and have modern travel on rubber tyres as all other traffic has these days. The buses will improve in time. I consider them to be most comfortable and very quiet and very fast moving and no doubt in a few years will be the perfect machine.

I work in Woolwich and am looking forward to retirement some day (if I am still alive and sane). A nice little cottage in the country will suit me – then I can sit down and think of the new owner listening to a Glasgow tram hurtling down the hill outside his house (heaven forbid). The buses can come as soon as they like (the sooner the better for my nerves and health)- and others too!’

Mr. Alan J. Watkins replied to this letter as follows:

‘Dear Mr. Hichisson,

Thank you very much for your letter received this weekend. I shall be very pleased to see you some time, and suggest one Saturday or possibly Friday evening. I leave you to suggest a time, but for your guidance, I am free on July 16th, or any Friday evening. The trams may have been a pet of the LCC, but they were certainly not expensive to the London public. Nearly every year they continued to make a profit until after the LPTB took over. In fact, they continued to make a profit until 1937/38, the present losses can be attributed to :-

1. Neglect of the system before the war, with consequent heavy maintenance. If a high standard of maintenance had been policy throughout, the present costs would be lower. This applies to tracks as well as cars.
2. The running of buses and trams together over the same route. This is very wasteful, as full use is not being made of the tramway assets. London transport is, in effect, competing with itself!
3. Payment, from tramway revenue, of outstanding charges on abandoned routes. This has happened in many towns, and is probably occurring in London at the present moment. Such charges should be paid by the replacing form of transport.

I would stress that, at the present day, it is very difficult to obtain financial figures with regard to London Transport. The tramway account is, in any case, incorporated with the trolleybus account, making comparisons very difficult. At the same time, I doubt whether any London Transport services are making a profit, and I have heard (unofficially, of course) that both the Underground and the Green line coaches are working at a loss. It may well be that the tramway loss is not as heavy as we think when compared with other services.

You will notice that the profits declined as routes were abandoned (as is to be expected), but the loss of 1938/39 can probably be attributed to the large number of trolleybus conversions during the previous year or so.

The trouble of which you complain concerning brakes is obviously due to the form of braking used on London trams (i.e. the magnetic track brake). On many modern systems, including Glasgow, air brakes are used, and they are almost silent in operation. They would certainly eliminate the trouble you mention. Modern trams are very quiet in operation, and experiments in Blackpool (and also the USA.) have shown this is so on worn track as well as on good. From personal experience, I have found that the latest Glasgow trams are more comfortable and smooth running than the latest London buses, and they are also fast. I certainly prefer them to anything we have in London, and I certainly think that they should be introduced down here.’

Looking forward to seeing you,

Yours sincerely,

A.J. Watkins

The result of the meeting between Mr. Hichisson and my late husband is Not known. It remains a mystery as to whether or not Mr Hichisson was convinced by Alan's arguments. They probably agreed to differ amicably.

There is an excellent essay on the subject of cost by Mr. Ian Yearsley in "Tramway London" by Martin Higginson and Ian Yearsley. Mr Yearsley expounds in great detail the economic and financial factors behind the decisions to scrap the trams.

There also appeared to be much apathy on the part of the Londoner regarding the scrapping of the trams. Little was done to oppose the change, yet the passing of the trams was mourned during the last tram week.

In the March issue of "Modern Tramway" 1950, it is written that only organised bodies, acting on legal advice, could make their objections known to a tribunal. Ordinary people did not have the wherewithal to do this.

The April issue of "Modern Tramway" 1950 quotes in abridged form correspondence between the Chairman of the LRTL and the Operating Manager (Trams and Trolleybuses) of the LTE. This correspondence shows the intransigent attitude of the LTE towards tramway development and the feasibility of having modern tramcars in London instead of the rundown vehicles now operating.

'The League suggests, therefore, that a preliminary demonstration of the modern tramcar be made soon and a frank discussion be obtained for Londoners and that the most suitable routes be reprieved...and a final decision be made after discussion between the Executive and the public.

The Chief Public Relations Officer LTE said in his reply:

"As you know the decision to replace the London trams by another form of transport was taken as long ago as 1935, when a large proportion of the trams and of the tracks and ancillary equipment were nearing the end of their useful life. The completion of the replacement plans was delayed by the war and it was in 1946 that the decision was finally reached to substitute oil-fuelled buses for the trams that then remained. The reasons that led to this decision were explained in the report of the LPTB for that year. It was a decision that was reached only after very careful consideration of all the factors that were involved affecting, as they do, not only the operation of the London Transport Road Services, but also every type of traffic that uses the London streets..... You will see, therefore, that the Executive is committed to the policy, which they consider to be right and proper. In these circumstances, the Executive regrets that they cannot avail themselves of the offer you have made.'

In "Modern Tramway" November 1950, a letter was published from "Transport World" 5th August 1950 which stated:

'.... The travelling public of London will miss their trams, which for 80 years have served them well and faithfully. Nevertheless, even the most hardened tramophile must admit that they have had their day, and if their departure is tinged with a little sadness, then there is consolation that progress cannot be stayed.'

By August 1950, the outlook for trams all over the country was a bleak one. Tramway systems were abandoned without recourse to the scope and possibilities of the type of public transport advocated by the LRTL. The decision to abandon the trams was made upon the advice of managers and consultants. Operation Tramaway was announced by Lord Latham in July 1950. The abandonment of the trams was to commence in October 1950 and to be completed by October 1952. In fact, the entire system was withdrawn by 5th July 1952.

The December edition of “Modern Tramway” 1950 reported that London would become an ‘All bus city.’ The London Transport Executive regarded the Light Railway Transport League as a ‘ bunch of cranks.’

The London Transport Executive stated that the cost of track maintenance was a strong reason for the abandonment of trams and that many roads were too narrow to take them.

A Mr. Valentine of the London Transport Executive stated that buses easily deserve first prize for the relief of traffic congestion.

Therefore the main reasons for tramway abandonment can be summarised as follows:

1. Road congestion.
2. Flexibility of the bus.
3. Environmental aesthetics, such as overhead wires.
4. Economic/Financial – cost of replacing tracks and vehicles.
5. Cheap petrol and diesel fuel.
6. Road safety – very often, passengers had to board trams in the middle of the road.

Regarding the demise of the tram, “Modern Tramway” July 1950, stated that:

“Tramways have not failed – it is the regulations governing their use which have caused them to fail.”

In a personal statement, Mr. J.W. Fowler, the chairman of the LRTL, said:

‘ July 5th 1952 was the blackest day in the transport history of London.’

Mr. Fowler thanked the members who rallied around the original cause. The attempt to save London trams had failed, but the efforts were worthwhile. Mr. Fowler referred to the 1870 Tramway Act and the Royal Commission Report of 1930. Both these documents had been damning to trams.

The 1870 Act stated that the local authorities had to maintain the road between the track and 18 inches of road either side of the track. The Royal Commission did not recommend that the tramway operators be relieved of this operation. The Commission recommended that no new tramways be constructed and that although no definite time limit be laid down the trams would gradually disappear and give way to other forms of transport of equal capacity without the disadvantage of the tram. These recommendations were doom for the tram.’

Originally, the LPTB did not want to abandon the trams: it was a change of mind on the part of the Board and nothing else.

It seemed at one time that London Transport wanted to replace trams with trolleybuses but did not have the courage to say so outright. The whole tramway abandonment scheme was a political contrivance on the part of London Transport, who would not countenance any form of suggestion or compromise. Forty years later, it can be seen how wrong and misguided they were.

CHAPTER 2

THE LIGHT RAILWAY TRANSPORT LEAGUE'S REASONS FOR RETAINING THE LONDON TRAMS

Prior to analysing Mr. Alan J. Watkins' material relating to the campaign to save the London tramway system, it is important to outline the general reasons the Light Railway Transport League gave for the retention of the network. As in the previous chapter, the main source of information is "Modern Tramway" 1949-1952, where good documentary accounts can be found concerning the pros and cons of the situation. This chapter aims to co-ordinate the various accounts dealing with tramway retention.

Having read these interesting articles, it is apparent to me that a kind of 'trench warfare' existed between the Light Railway Transport League and the London Transport Executive.

The Light Railway Transport League proposed sensible and valid reasons for the retention of the London Tramway System in a modern form, not the run down system in being at that time. Notwithstanding any arguments, the London Transport Executive was determined to close down the tramway system in its entirety, and refused to listen to the proposals of the League.

It is ironic that over forty years after the demise of the tram in our major cities, some of these cities have brought back light rail rapid transit systems, similar to those on the continent. The reasons for doing so are the same as those advocated by the League over forty years ago and are as follows:

1. Light Rail is a good method of moving large numbers of people in an urban environment quickly and efficiently.
2. Light Rail is beneficial to the environment as there is no pollution from vehicle exhaust.
3. Provided that the tram is modern, the track well maintained and it is operated in a manner to maximise its potential, there is no substitute for it.

The League wanted the London Transport Executive to adopt a style of vehicle similar to an American vehicle known as the President's Conference Committee tram or PCC which was efficient, comfortable and quiet. It was light in weight, modular in design and very smooth running.

An article in “Modern Tramway” June 1951 entitled ‘The Case for the Tramcar,’ by Elmer C. Wrausman, discusses the merits of the modern PCC tram. The excellent characteristics are listed as follows:

1. The modern PCC car provides a quality of ride and passenger capacity unmatched by any other surface transit vehicle.
2. Due to its smooth but rapid acceleration and deceleration, it has the ability to command its place in traffic.
3. Unquestionably, it has by far the longest life of any existing surface transit vehicle – at least three times the life of some..
4. Due to its acknowledged reliability, the PCC car record for availability is very high. Hence the number of spare vehicles necessary to maintain peak hour schedules is less with this proven unit.
5. PCC car maintenance and operating costs are low.
6. The PCC car can be stored outside throughout the year. It cannot freeze up.
7. This modern car not only serves more people per unit than any other surface transit vehicle but serves them with superior comfort, convenience and safety.
8. The PCC car is clean. No combustible fuels are used, hence no obnoxious fumes or oily smoke is encountered.

This was the type of vehicle the LRTL enthusiasts had in mind. This vehicle would have wide aisles with large double doors at the front and centre, which would facilitate the smooth flow of passengers. Some PCC cars had three door openings, front, rear and centre. For these operations, the PCC car equipment in proper applications has definitely proved its ability to provide pleasing and profitable service.

One of the complaints about the London tram was that it was bone shaking and noisy. This was because the vehicles and track were very run down, especially after the last war.

Mr Charles Klapper in an article in “The Journal of the Institute of Transport” November 1953, called ‘The Decline and Fall of the London Tramways’, wrote:

“It has sometimes been argued that Londoners never had the opportunity of seeing modern type trams for themselves. That is not altogether so, for when the London United Tramways Uxbridge Road cars were re-seated and re-motored the revenue increased. Similarly, with the introduction of the handsome 64 seat Feltham cars which had been designed by the Underground Group with a view to using reserved track light railway to Uxbridge, revenue rose again. Revenue rose still further when trolleybuses replaced the trams.”

The tramway enthusiasts believed that a modern vehicle running on reserved tracks could play a vital role in the transport system of London. Their battle cry was:

“Let them try a modern tram on an efficient line.”

In "Modern Tramway" July 1950, there is an article written by Mr. F.K. Farrell entitled 'A Future for London Tramways.' The salient points of this article are:

1. Most of the London lines can be modernised.
2. The most suitable lines can be retained in order to operate them as an express service to compensate for the lack of tube service in some areas.
3. The single track in Lewisham Road could be an express way.
4. There could be separate lines in an up direction in Lewisham.
5. On Lewisham, Lee Green, Woolwich routes, the roads are wide enough for a reserved track.
6. The North London line could be modernised
7. Junction layouts could be simplified
8. In conclusion, this could be a short-term experimental programme to lead to a future development of rapid transit transport.

The London Transport Executive stated that the bus would provide a smooth comfortable and efficient service. However, it was pointed out that more buses would be needed to replace the tram because the tram had a greater passenger carrying capacity. For example, on the Catford to Camberwell route, 109 buses replaced 99 trams. This constituted a wasteful use of resources.

The closing of the Kingsway subway was another folly. This route could have become a fast link connecting North and South London. The route was put forward as a prototype for an express way. The Light Railway Transport League said about this closure:

"The closing of the subway to trams was the crowning folly of London Transport policy.

It was during this time of arguments and counter-arguments that Mr. Alan J. Watkins was active. He spoke at the meetings of the South London Group where he put forward various enthusiastic proposals for tramway retention. He gave one lecture on the possible local applications of trams in the Brixton area. He was always in favour of a balanced integrated public transport system, as his campaign literature shows.

In "Modern Tramway" December 1950, there is a report of the South London Committee of the LRTL, of which, Mr. Alan J. Watkins was the Chairman. He said that:

"The public campaign had included meetings at Streatham, Brixton and Lewisham. These meetings were preceded by handbill and leaflet distribution as well as postal distribution of literature. The activity of the few members who had distributed leaflets was appreciated. The Press Campaign in the local papers had been reasonably successful, but less successful in the national and evening papers. In general, the Committee received less support from League members than might be expected and hoped that the position might be improved in this respect."

In the Chairman's opening address at the LRTL annual general meeting reported in "Modern Tramway" December 1950, it is stated that:

"The London situation is pretty grim. It has long been threatened and now looks as though we shall be fated to be an all-bus town, in spite of the warning of Manchester (to choose a place of considerable size as an example). We are asked from time to time what we are going to do about it. What can we do? We have put in our protests several times, we have sent out many thousands of circulars, we have had an enormous expression of support for our efforts from citizens in South London and we know that thousands of people are dissatisfied with the decision of the London Transport Executive.

I am afraid that the London Transport Executive are inclined to look upon us as a body of cranks, whereas all we want to do is to obtain a fair hearing and to represent the views of a considerable body of their "customers", who are totally unrepresented at 55, Broadway. The select body of the Executive have such power that it is impossible to find a parallel anywhere.

I will say no more on the subject, but I feel, as you all do, furious that there will not be even one tramline in London in a few years time. Even the Kingsway subway and the Embankment routes will go."

Another reason for the abandonment of the London trams was the cost of running the system. London Transport stated that the system was losing one million pounds per annum (pre-decimal currency). However, there was no forthcoming information about the cost of track maintenance. An independent transport officer stated that the total cost of providing new track was in the region of £40,000-£45,000 (at 1950 prices). The accepted figure was £60,000. As the amount given by the independent officer was much less than the acceptable figure, a new tramway system would have been a viable proposition for London.

In the long term, a replacement bus service could be more costly as more vehicles would be required to move the same number of people and more crew would be needed to man them. The LRTL proposed a single deck tramcar with a pay as you enter system. A letter by Mr. Gerald Druce (now Dr. Gerald Druce), advocating this idea, was published in "Modern Tramway" in February 1952.

Sir,

I congratulate you on the leading article published in the January issue of "Modern Tramway" suggesting the introduction of high-capacity single-deck cars on British tramways, with which I am in full agreement. Whilst the design of car would have been modified to suit the needs of each individual system, it would be a great advantage if a standard design could be evolved which would be capable of running on the majority of the existing systems. Since this design would then be required in relatively large numbers the initial cost of each car could be kept to a minimum.

Whilst the pay-as-you-pass system of fare collection would not present many difficulties for a system with a simple fare structure, such as Edinburgh, some delays might be caused through the slow collection of fares on systems that have a large range of different fares. On such systems the introduction of season tickets and the provision at busy points of ticket machines (similar to those in use on the London Underground) might be desirable.

When considering the economics of single-deck operation, the reduction in track maintenance costs due to the better riding qualities of these cars compared with a double-deck car, and the reduced cost of any future subway construction, should be borne in mind.

Yours faithfully,
Gerald Druce.'

In a similar vein, the late Mr. John Walton, also a close friend of Mr. Alan J. Watkins wrote a letter to "Modern Tramway" in April 1952.

'Sir,
Regarding single or double –decked trams, I believe that any attempt to foist on the travelling public in this country a street vehicle with a high –standing capacity is doomed to failure. While they will put up with the overcrowding which occurs on the London Underground and on most suburban railways, I very much doubt if they would put up with it on trams and buses.

As single deckers are usually cheaper to construct and maintain, I suggest that a type could be evolved to seat about the same number as the existing London double-decked trams, with a standing capacity of about 25 which would bring the total capacity to 100. The dimensions of this type would have to be those of the PCC type, i.e. 51 feet overall (50 feet body) and 9 feet wide with 3 and 2 seating. The conductor's position would be fixed, and as the design I have in mind would be double-ended, the conductor's desk itself could be made so as to be easily transported from one end of the car to the other, the seat at the end not in use could be used for passengers.

Trusting this suggestion will make a good compromise between those who believe in single-deckers, and those who, like myself, believe in high seating capacity.

Yours sincerely,

John E Walton
London 19th February 1952.'

On the political front, the LRTL contacted all the political parties. Although the main political parties expressed some interest, the result was still a negative one.

The Department of Transport examined the situation and the reasons for and against tramways; because of the highly complex legislation concerning tramways, it could not recommend the extension of tramway transport.

An address given by Mr Sinclair of the LTE at a Passenger Transport Association conference was published in "Modern Tramway" June 1949, in which he stated:

`What was needed was a broad system of transport with a close affinity to the lives of the people.

There should be a functionally sound relationship between transport and town planning.

Roads should be on two levels. Upper level for buses, lower level for a subsurface railway, plus high speed motor roads.

He continued to say that the size of the bus was inadequate to carry large numbers of people and what was required was a longer traffic unit to bridge the gap between the double-decker bus and the multiple unit stock train`.

The tramway enthusiasts argued that the tram was the very vehicle to do this. The enthusiasts also maintained that a tram running on rails took up no more lateral space than its own overall width, whereas any large steered vehicle needed a considerable margin of safety on each side.

The arguments and ideas for tramway retention in London of the late Mr. Alan J. Watkins and his contemporaries, some of whom are still with us, were ahead of their time. Like many visionaries of previous centuries, they were not taken seriously. They were "Voices crying in the wilderness".

However, the ideals and principles held by Mr. Alan J. Watkins and his fellow enthusiasts are alive today and are beginning to bear fruit.

CHAPTER 3

CONGESTION, SAFETY, POLLUTION

The main reasons the enthusiasts had for tramway retention were:

- Many people could be carried safely by tram.
- The air was not polluted by petrol and diesel fumes.

In a letter to “The Reveille” newspaper on 20th June 1949, Mr. Alan J. Watkins wrote: ‘Unrationed petrol will bring severe road congestion, especially in big cities. To ban private motorists from central city areas would help, but it is obviously unfair.

Another solution is to remove heavy public transport from the roads. This can best be done by a system of electric light railways, operating in shallow subways or on reserved tracks along main roads. In addition, such lines, operated by fast, silent electric rail coaches at cheap fares would greatly benefit travellers’.

There is a valuable informative book dealing with this subject entitled “Towards Ideal Transport” by CR Bizeray

The argument of the LTE for abandoning trams was that they caused traffic congestion in so much as they run on tracks, other vehicles could not swerve to avoid them, thus resulting in a traffic jam.

The supporters of the tram argued that as trams ran along parallel lines, they would impose road discipline onto other vehicles.

There was much concern about the overall safety of tram travel, especially for cyclists because the front wheel of the cycle would catch the edge of the track and the cyclists would be thrown off.

In a letter to the “CTC Gazette”, May 1949, Mr. Smallwood, referring to the Birmingham system, wrote:

‘Leeds has tram tracks wide enough to allow cyclists that extra bit of scope for cutting across the lines and straightening up; but in Birmingham, there are narrow gauge tracks. and in most places, wood setts. That makes a great deal of difference, and in wet foggy weather a cycle requires a great deal of careful handling when braking on wood blocks and crossing tram lines, though travelling in a straight line. Moreover, in wet weather, the tramlines collect water after a storm, as every car passes it splashes water on to you. I shall therefore be glad to see the tramlines removed.

As for buses, in Birmingham, we have some bad drivers, but a large proportion of good ones.’

