

Reading “William”



BRIEF HISTORY

“William” is a horse drawn tower wagon which was supplied by contractor Robert W. Blackwell & Co. of London in 1902, together with a quantity of overhead equipment for conversion of Reading’s tramway system from horse to electric traction. Despite carrying Blackwell’s name on his three remaining hub caps, it was probably brought-in rather than made by Blackwell’s themselves. Horse-power was at that time the only realistic means for propulsion for a tower wagon, as petrol engines were in

their infancy, though William was probably towed by a motor vehicle once this mode of traction had superseded the horse.

William was owned by Reading Corporation Transport Department until 1967, although in later years used only in connection with trolleybus traction pole painting (acquiring a coat of traction pole green in place of his former maroon livery), and also for internal wiring work within Mill Lane depot. Upon withdrawal, it was presented to the Reading Transport Society (now British Trolleybus Society), at this time acquiring the name. At some time, many years previously, the Corporation’s legal lettering had been applied to the body. The lettering would have read Reading Corporation Transport, Mill Lane, Reading – William John Evans, Transport Manager. So ancient was the paintwork, however, that the only word still visible was William!

When taken into preservation, William was in desperate need of attention – indeed, the tower was declared to be ‘in a dangerous state’. It resided for many years at Smith’s Coaches depot at Rose Kiln Lane and much restoration work was done by the Bilbé family of Reading. Various new parts were manufactured (some during woodwork and metalwork classes at Reading School! and in August 1976 William was paraded through the town on a low-loader as part of Reading Transport’s 75th Anniversary. At this time, the vehicle was in full working order although the decline and subsequent sale of the Smith’s Coaches business meant that it could no longer reside at their depot. William was therefore moved to the trolleybus Museum at Sandtoft where it is stored in the back of the depot. Work has now commenced on the restoration of the wheels and springs.