



Merseytravel



The Liverpool Overhead Railway

A brief history



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The Liverpool Overhead Railway

The beginning

The completion of the Liverpool dock network in the 1880's saw significant traffic growth along the Dock Road, where omnibuses, trains, carts, horse drawn carriages, drays and pedestrians congested the roads along with the numerous goods only railway crossings which connected the goods stations and docks. The extent of the congestion meant that a mass transit solution was needed to alleviate the problem.

As far back as 1853, plans had been proposed for a high level railway in the area, but were blocked by the dock's engineer Jesse Hartley, as these plans could potentially make his plans for extension of the docks too expensive.

In 1877, a ship owner, Alfred Holt, suggested an overhead tramway, similar to the New York Elevated Railroad (which used steam locomotives).

A plan was devised and eventually a fully double track line was proposed. The system was to run from Bootle to Herculaneum Dock, a distance of 6 miles. It was reported that the system would need the revenue from eight million passenger journeys per year to break even. Parliament refused to permit the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board to manage the railway, as concerns were expressed that MDHB was a non-profit making organisation.

In 1888 a group of local businessmen formed the Liverpool Overhead Railway Company and obtained the powers by an Act of Transfer to run the system from the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. Work commenced in October 1889 following the commission of leading engineers, Sir Douglas Fox and James Henry Greathead with JW Willans of Manchester, as the building contractor.

The works finished in January 1893 with a running trial and inspection on 13th of that month. The Liverpool Overhead Railway was officially opened on 4th February 1893, by the 3rd Marquis of Salisbury, and Prime Minister Lord Robert Cecil. It was the first electrically powered overhead railway in the world and the first to be protected by electric automatic signals.

The line had cost a staggering £3,466,000 (or £331 million by today's standards).

The track bed was made of rolled steel sheets to stop any unwanted debris falling upon unsuspecting passers-by or cargo. It also provided a welcome shelter from the rain, and hence was nicknamed the "Dockers Umbrella" by locals.

By 1897, the targeted eight million passenger journeys were reached and the system began to make a profit.



Stations

There were initially only eleven stations along the route, but after working hours, the system was barely used and the decision was soon taken to extend into the outlying residential areas.



Seaforth Sands - Opened in 1894 to take advantage of the residential areas, the line was extended from Alexandra Dock to Seaforth Sands. The station boasted Britain's second escalator (from 1901). However, this only lasted 5 years due to the number of compensation claims from women who had their long dresses torn!



Gladstone Dock - Opened in 1930 to serve the new Gladstone Dock complex.



Alexandra Dock - Opened 1893, was the original northern terminus.



Langton Dock - Opened in 1896 and closed 1906.



Brocklebank Dock - One of the original eleven stations



Canada Dock - One of the original eleven stations



Huskinson Dock - Opened 1896 as a replacement for Sandon Dock station

Sandon Dock - One of the original eleven stations but closed in 1896 when the dock was replaced by Huskinson and Nelson Docks.



Nelson Dock - Opened in 1886 as a replacement for Sandon Dock, and served Bramley-Moore Dock and Nelson Dock.



Clarence Dock - One of the original eleven stations also serving Trafalgar, Salisbury, Collingwood and Stanley Docks. Closed briefly in 1906.



Princes Dock - One of the original eleven stations. Badly damaged during the Blitz, repairs were unable to take place and the station closed.



Pier Head - One of the original eleven stations, and the busiest. Formed an interchange with Mersey Ferries and the tram terminus. Also the closest stop to the city centre.



James Street - One of the original eleven stations and formed an interchange with James Street underground rail station



Custom House - One of the original eleven stations, and renamed Canning in 1947 due to the destruction of the Customs House during the war.



Wapping Dock - One of the original eleven stations. Some of the iron support struts are still in existence on the ex warehouse in Challoner Street



Toxteth Dock - One of the original eleven stations



Herculaneum Dock - The original southern terminus between 1893 and 1896. Closed for the Dingle extension and a new station constructed a few hundred metres north on the side of Harrington Dock



Dingle - Opened in 1896 with completion of the extension. The extension was tunnelled a half mile into sandstone rock and can still be seen today. A disaster struck the station in 1901 when a train arrived on fire, and the tunnel airflow fanned the flames. Six people died as a result and the station was closed for a year. The entrance to the station is also still there and an engineering firm uses the station itself.

The post war years

At the end of the First World War, the carriages were in desperate need of replacement but despite the company making a profit, cost of actual replacement were too high. The existing 19 3 car carriages were therefore stripped down and refurbished (incorporating sliding doors). In 1919 the railway passenger figures had peaked to 19 million passenger journeys.

World War 2 brought extensive damage with the onslaught of the Blitz. Repairs were quickly dealt with to ensure the smooth running of the system.

In 1951, the railway was featured in the final scenes of the film "The Clouded Yellow" as one of the characters played by Jean Simmons, uses the railway to travel to one of the docks.

Closure of the Overhead

Numerous issues surrounded the closure of the Liverpool Overhead Railway starting with the change in the way the docks conducted business. The telephone was used more and more and less travelling messengers were needed; ships were larger than ever, carrying more cargo and so there were fewer; passengers were transferring to air travel and then there was the economic depression of the 1920's and 30's. The extensive tram service in Liverpool was subsidised by the Liverpool Corporation and fares were cheaper than those of the overhead and the system more far reaching to more popular destinations. The introduction of "route flexible" buses also added to the closure of the overhead.

In 1948, the British railway system was nationalised, but as this was a purely local undertaking, the Liverpool Overhead Railway was not.

As the railway was mainly carried on iron viaducts and with iron curved deck plates, which supported the track, the system was highly susceptible to corrosion. The rapidity of the corrosion was aided by the steam powered dock railway, which operated beneath some sections of the line.

Surveys were carried out and reported the infrastructure was in need of extensive repairs due to corrosion at a cost of £2m. Beyond the company's financial resources the Liverpool Overhead Railway Company looked to the Liverpool Corporation and MDHB to help. Unfortunately, they were unable to come up with a solution and the Liverpool Overhead Railway went into voluntary liquidation and closed on 30th December 1956, after 63 years of operation. Despite many public protests and attempts to rescue the system, on 23rd September 1957, the demolition team moved in (the George Cohen Dismantlers).



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