

## **‘MIDLAND RED’ OMNIBUSES IN THE BOROUGH** local motor bus services from 1913 to the early 1920s

*By Roy Billingham*

The photograph reproduced below of a stationary Midland Red omnibus on the Lichfield Road at Mere Green is a favourite choice of illustration in many of the local history books of Sutton Coldfield published in recent years and is part of the local Reference Library’s photographic collection. What has often intrigued me is what type of vehicle is depicted and what was the likely date of the photograph.

Having located the original picture in the Sutton Coldfield archives and studied it in detail with the aid of a magnifying glass, I can reveal that the registration number displayed on the top of the roof of the omnibus is OA4557. This vehicle was a Tilling-Stevens TS3 chassis with a Tilling B29F type body and was operated by the Birmingham and Midland Motor Omnibus Company (BMMO) sometime between 1914 and 1923.

Although one cannot appreciate the livery in this monochrome photograph, the bodywork would have been painted ‘Midland’ red with black mudguards and would have had a silver roof. The distinctive black lining-out would have been edged with gold and there would have been a white destination board with route number along the waist on each side and a central route destination board at both front and rear.



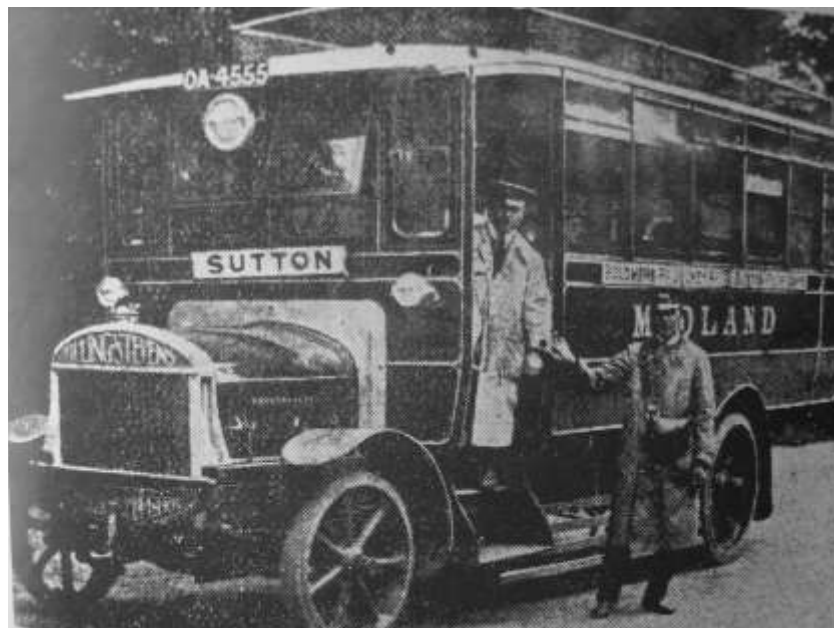
**Fig. 1 - Midland “Red” Tilling-Stevens TS3 omnibus, OA4557, at Mere Green, c.1920**

Deliveries of Tilling-Stevens TS3 vehicles began in 1914 and this style of body, known as the No. 1 type, with a 14ft.-6¼in. wheelbase was adopted as a standard for the company’s fleet. This particular vehicle, OA4557, had received BMMO standard modifications like the centrally mounted acetylene gas lamp and the roof rack. The route board had been moved from its original central position on the front of the roof to a position above the bonnet and it displays ‘Birmingham & Mere Green’. The TS3

single-deck buses had heavily framed opening drop-windows with over-light windows at the cantrail and a passenger entrance at the front opposite the driver. It had accommodation for 27 passengers and an emergency exit at the rear as well as a partitioned smoking area at the rear. OA4557 was subject to a body change in 1919 and would have received either a Tilling or a Brush B29F body. This vehicle was disposed of in 1923 so our photograph was probably taken sometime before 1920.

The Tilling-designed petrol engine drove through a dynamo and electric traction motor to an overhead worm-type rear axle. The four-cylinder motor had a capacity of just over four litres producing forty horsepower. Some later versions of the TS3 were fitted with the SOS gearbox, which had a four forward and one reverse gear configuration. The radiator had the name TILLING-STEVENSONS along the top and PETROL ELECTRIC along the bottom. Note the hand crank for starting the engine and the roller blind for protecting the radiator in freezing weather conditions. Anti-freeze did not become available for use in automobile cooling systems in the U.K. until 1937.

Every Tilling chassis had solid-tyre spoked wheels and braking was only provided on the rear wheels. This would have necessitated some careful driving on steep hills such as Mill Street in Sutton or Gravelley Hill in Erdington with a full load of passengers.



**Fig. 2 – Another Tilling-Stevens TS3 bus, OA4555, on the Birmingham-Sutton-Four Oaks route via Boldmere. This vehicle was converted into an open-top double-deck bus in 1923 and withdrawn in 1929. [E.V. Trigg Collection]**

This omnibus would have been operated by a crew from the Company's Bearwood Road garage. Although the BMMO Company did have discussions as early as 1914 with the Sutton Coldfield Borough Council about the possibility of opening a bus garage in Sutton, there were issues between the Company and the Council, then the 1914-18 War intervened, and it was another twenty years before they opened their garage in Upper Holland Road on 26 August 1934. There was a residents'

requirement for better bus services, since most working people used some form of public transport to get to and from their places of employment

The genesis of the Birmingham and Midland Motor Omnibus Company (BMMO) was quite a complex affair. British Electric Traction (BET) was created in 1895 to develop electric traction and had already acquired an interest in the various tramway companies around Birmingham. From 27 September 1889, the BET took over the operation of the horse omnibus undertaking of the bankrupt Birmingham General Omnibus Co. Ltd. (BGOC), an amalgamation of a number of independent operators the assets of which had been purchased from the Official Receiver. This company had around 70 horse omnibuses requiring over 500 horses. BET ordered new horse buses in March 1900 and specified that they should be painted red. On 1 January 1902 their operations were placed under the control of the Birmingham and Midland Tramways Ltd. and, from this, the name Midland "Red" was coined.

The BMMO Company Ltd. was registered on 26 November 1904, merely as a means of raising capital by Birmingham Express Co. Ltd. (BME), a private company formed in 1903 that was already operating a small fleet of motor omnibuses. The offer failed to raise sufficient interest from investors so the directors of BME sold out to BET. Thus the BMMO became a subsidiary of BET and remained so for the next sixty-four years until BET sold its British bus interests to the state in 1968 and the National Bus Company was created to take control over the English and Welsh subsidiaries from 1 January 1969.

Despite its title the BMMO initially operated mainly horse omnibuses and a handful of unreliable motor buses that were rapidly sold off. The company very soon realised that it was quite unable to compete with the new electric tramcars recently introduced by Birmingham Corporation Tramways (BCT). Fortunately it did have the financial strength of the BET to support it so had a distinct advantage over most of the other new small bus companies entering the industry.

As new BCT routes were introduced the corresponding horse bus services were withdrawn. Furthermore, it was then a condition of the licenses issued by the Birmingham Watch Committee that buses were prevented from running on tramway routes. By 1911 the BMMO's Birmingham network was rapidly shrinking and confined almost entirely to the Hagley Road and Harborne where there were no tramways.

Between 1904–7 the BMMO purchased 31 buses of various makes and no further vehicles were added to their fleet until 1912. In that year the Company decided to expand its operations and chose the Tilling-Stevens petrol-electric chassis for the reintroduction of motorbuses. The petrol-electric system had advantages for the Company as the absence of gears made it easier for horse bus drivers to convert to the motorbus. All of the existing horse bus routes were rapidly converted to motor traction and during 1913 local routes were opened up in Smethwick, Oldbury and Sutton Coldfield. The BMMO Company at first operated all of their routes from a garage at 65 Tennant Street which was located between Granville Street and Islington Row, parallel to Broad Street.

When on 5 September 1913 the BCT opened a tramway along the Hagley Road and, in accordance with the Watch Committee's ruling, Midland "Red" buses were no longer able to use this thoroughfare, it became obvious that the chances of the BMMO being able to extend its services within the city would be extremely curtailed if it was necessary to avoid all tramway routes. Subsequent negotiations between the BMMO and the BCT led to a highly successful agreement on 14 September 1914 whereby the Company would not compete with the Corporation within the city boundary and the Corporation would not compete with the Company outside the city boundary. The Company was allowed to run through services of motor omnibuses between the centre of Birmingham and places outside the city over the tram routes. Fare adjustments were introduced to provide commercial protection for the Corporation's tram and bus services. As part of the agreement the BMMO sold its main base and garage at Tennant Street to the Corporation. Thereafter the Company moved its headquarters and Birmingham operations to its garage in Bearwood Road.

Photographic evidence, including the photographs within this text, show that up to 1920 at least two local routes were run from Birmingham to the Borough. One was to Sutton and Mere Green via Erdington and Chester Road while the other was to Sutton and Four Oaks via Boldmere – service No. 12. A Midland Red route map dating from 1920 indicates route numbers 18, 18a, 18b and 18c between Birmingham and Sutton, Birmingham and Streetly, Birmingham-Sutton-Tamworth-Ashby, and Birmingham-Sutton-Lichfield-Burton. This was no doubt indicative of the rate of route expansion by the company at this stage. Route numbers were drastically altered from 1921 as a result of actions by BCT so that double digit route numbers were reserved for BCT services while the Midland "Red" route numbers contained three digits such as 107, 109, 110, 113, S76, S67 for routes within the Borough.

Restrictions were also imposed on the BMMO Company by the Sutton Coldfield Borough Council because the Council insisted on the use only of single-deck vehicles in the belief that double-deck vehicles would allow passengers on the upper deck to peer into the bedrooms of houses en route and compromise the privacy of residents. It was not until 1938 that the Council relaxed this restriction and allowed double-deck vehicles to be used. During this period the relationship between the Company and the Borough Council was often quite prickly.

The BMMO Company profited from the 1914-18 War when the vehicles of many bus companies were impressed by the War Office. They were able to retain their fleet intact because the War Office did not at first favour the Tilling-Stevens petrol-electric system. This became a period of expansion for the Midland "Red" as they took over routes from neighbouring bus companies.

Once the War was over the Company was able to consolidate its wartime gains and to seek operational routes further afield. This was a period of intense competition; there were a lot of surplus buses with a large jobless workforce returning from military service and a public transport industry that was barely regulated. Therefore the Company decided upon a policy of aggressive expansion and increasing mileage was of no concern provided that routes were profitable. Likewise, if routes were commercially unviable then they abandoned them very quickly.

However it was found that the Tilling-Stevens petrol-electric bus was outmatched by the smaller vehicles commonly used by their competitors. The Company's Chief Engineer, Mr. Wyndham Shire, concluded that what was required was a design that combined the lightness of the smaller vehicles with the capacity of the Tilling-Stevens vehicle. As a result of his decision, the BMMO Company designed and built most of its own buses from 1923 to 1970 and prior to 1940 a substantial number were also supplied to companies within the BET Group.

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**Additional reading for a more extended history of the Midland "Red":**

1. Gray, P., Keeley, M., Seale, J., *Midland Red, A History of the Company and its vehicles up to 1940, Volume I, and 1940-70 Volume II*, (1978-9), Glossop, The Transport Publishing Company.
  2. Torode, R. & Keeley, M., *Midland Red Style*, (2011), Harrow, Capital Transport Publishing Limited.
  3. Bassett, J., *Wheels Around Sutton, Lichfield and Tamworth*, (1997), Studley, Brewin Books.
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