

# Thomas Tilling Ltd

(Thomas Tilling 1825-1893)



1846 - 1969

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Cover Illustration: 1904 Milnes-Daimler painted in the livery of Thomas Tilling Ltd. It was initially delivered to the Southborough & District Bus Company, Tunbridge Wells, but was sold a few months later. In 1907 the bus was converted to chain drive. (Louwman Museum).

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Portrait of Thomas Tilling c. 1880. (LTHL collection).

Thomas Tilling, whose family had moved from Gloucestershire to Middlesex in the early part of the nineteenth century, was born in Hendon in 1825. In 1846, at the age of 21, he moved to London with just £30 and set himself up as a jobmaster in Walworth, hiring out horses, carriages and drivers.

In December 1849 he commenced negotiations with Mr. W. Stevens for the purchase of a horse bus, which was concluded in January 1850. With the bus came the running rights to operate four journeys a day between Peckham and the 'Green Man and Still' in Oxford Street. Tilling reportedly drove the bus himself.

In 1851, Tilling put his first four-horse omnibus on the road, charging 1s 6d per journey. Aptly named the 'Times', the omnibus quickly gained a reputation for punctuality. Drivers were instructed to pick up passengers only at designated bus stops and to leave on time, as opposed to waiting until the bus was full. Allocated seats for loyal customers and the opportunity to buy a season ticket further set Tilling apart from his rivals. (Such was his contribution to the London transport system that it is said his name found its way into popular culture via cockney rhyming slang; Thomas Tilling = one shilling!).

By 1856 he was a member of the Atlas and Waterloo, and the King's Cross and Barnsbury Associations. He owned around seventy horses and, although he had established himself as a horse bus proprietor, he would still undertake carriage work of any kind.

In London there was an annual licence fee for each bus, based upon the carrying capacity, and a mileage fee. The duty was reduced in stages until by 2nd July 1866 it was ¼d (one farthing) and abolished altogether in 1869. Richard Tilling recalled later, that the duty payment (in gold) had to be taken once a month to the Inland Revenue offices.

When the Metropolitan Fire Brigade was formed in 1866, Tilling was contracted to train and supply horses to haul the fire engines; the horses were trained to respond quickly and, prior to handover to the fire



Tilling two-horse omnibus on the Wandsworth - Clapham - Battersea Rise route c. 1855. (LTHL collection).

brigade, were employed on bus services (primarily the Peckham route) to gain experience with heavy traffic.

Thomas Tilling became the largest supplier of horsepower in London and owned more than 4,000 horses by the end of his life. He died in 1893 and was buried at Nunhead Cemetery.

The company became Thomas Tilling Limited in 1897, with two of his sons, (he had eleven children!) Richard and Edward, and son-in-law, Walter Wolsey, as directors. The issued share capital was £400,000.

The Tilling's still remained jobmasters, providing horse-drawn transport for private individuals, the Post Office, the War Department, the Fire Brigade and others, in addition to operating over 250 horse buses. This broad base was to help them when the Company ran into financial difficulties later, for even though the horse bus had all but disappeared, there was still a demand for horses.

On Friday 30th September 1904, Thomas Tilling put one of three newly acquired Milnes-Daimler motorbuses into service. It had 34-seat, open-top double-deck bodywork, seating 34 (16 inside and 18 outside) that was to set the standard for almost 20 years, although the Company continued to run horse buses for a number of years. The last regular Tilling horse bus operated in London on the night of 4th August 1914, on the Honor Oak - Peckham Rye Station route. The horses subsequently being requisitioned for war work.



Tilling Milnes-Daimler branded for the Peckham and Oxford Street route. (LTHL collection via Southwark History Library).

In 1907, Tilling began the first long-distance motorbus service, running 13 buses between Oxford Circus and Sidcup in Kent.

In 1909, Thomas Tilling concluded a pooling agreement with the London General Omnibus Company, which became a closer association on the 15th May 1912, although this limited Tilling's London buses to a maximum of 150, forcing the directors to look to the provinces for future expansion and the company began operating in Folkestone in 1914, Brighton in 1916, and Ipswich in 1919. The L.G.O.C. and Tilling did join forces to operate a combined route from Peckham to Turnham Green via Oxford Circus. The L.G.O.C. had introduced numbers on all its routes, and this was route number 12.

On 11th June 1911, Tilling had introduced the first of a new type of vehicle to their motorbus fleet. The Tilling-Stevens TTA1 was the first successful petrol-electric vehicle, which dispensed with the need to change gear, making it very easy to drive. It was a joint collaboration between Tilling and W.A. Steven (established in Maidstone in 1897 by William Arthur Stevens) and had built its first petrol-electric vehicle using designs patented by Percival (Percy) Frost-Smith in 1906. A petrol engine was connected to an electrical generator and the current produced passed to a traction motor which drove the rear wheels. It was popular among bus drivers rather than the conventional crash gearbox (in the days before synchromesh). Tilling-Stevens Motors Ltd consolidated its position with bus operators during World War I as the Army considered the





A Tilling Stevens TTA1 petrol-electric bus first introduced on 11th June 1911 and became the standard bus used by Tilling in London and other provincial areas. This is LF9851 on contract to the Great Eastern Railway during 1914. (LTHL collection).

petrol-electric chassis not suitable for use in France. The low-mounted electrical items were considered vulnerable. The main fault of the petrol-electric, however, lay in its performance on hills; climbing, the motor ran too slowly to deliver enough power to the electrical equipment, and descending, the engine could not be used to brake. Nevertheless this type of bus formed the basis of many of the Tilling fleets for years to come.

Richard Tilling, who had the same love of horses as the rest of the family, had overseen the conversion of the family business to motorbus operation. At the time the British Electric Traction Company was engaged in expansion throughout the country, having been restricted in London under a similar agreement as that entered into by Tilling. Richard Tilling took the view that to work with the BET, rather than against them, was the way forward. This resulted in close co-operation between the two groups, and Tilling became a major shareholder in the BET subsidiary, the British Automobile Traction Company.

By 1928, the British Automobile Traction Company had interests in 19 bus companies, with Tilling being a co-owner in 11 of them, and at the same time was partly owned by Tilling itself. To simplify the arrangement the BAT was reconstructed with the new title, Tilling & British Automobile Traction Ltd, and Tilling exchanged its shares in the various operating companies for an increased shareholding in the new company.



No. 6005 (GJ2005), a Tilling AEC Regent with Tilling open-staircase bodywork operating in Brighton in the early 1930's. It passed to the Brighton, Hove & District company when it was formed in 1935 and later converted to open top. (LTHL collection).

Sadly, Richard Tilling died in June 1929, his death ultimately severing the link with the Tilling family, since there was no direct successor (although he had seven children himself) and two of his three sons chose to be absent from the board meeting that selected Richard's successor. Harry, the eldest son expected his cousin, Walter Wolsey (Jr), to be elected chairman (which he duly was) and either himself or his younger brother Reginald to be elected vice-chairman. When the position went to J. F. Heaton, he resigned from the board, followed shortly after by his brother, leaving Tilling & BAT without a Tilling family member on the board.

In 1933, the new London Passenger Transport Board compulsorily acquired the 328 buses that made up Tilling's South London services.

Although Tilling & BAT prospered throughout the 1930's the relationship was always uneasy between the various factions, and, in 1942, the Company was wound up. Tilling Motor Services Ltd was formed from the break up and took control of Caledonian, Crosville, Cumberland, Eastern Counties, Hants & Dorset, Lincolnshire, Southern Vectis, Thames Valley, United Automobile, West Yorkshire and Wilts & Dorset. Also included were Brighton, Hove & District, Bristol Tramways, Eastern National, Southern National, United Counties, Westcliff-on-Sea and Western National, which had been purchased separately by Thomas Tilling Ltd outside the T&BAT group.

After the Second World War, the newly elected Labour Party announced its intention to nationalise the road transport industry, forming the British Transport Commission in 1948. In September of that year, Tilling Motor Services sold out to the BTC for almost £25 million.

Under nationalisation little changed and the central management was able to bring a degree of standardisation to the companies under their control. The Tilling Group was fortunate in having acquired the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company in 1931, along with Eastern Counties Omnibus Company, whose bodybuilding activities were re-named the Eastern Coach Works Ltd in 1936. Subsequently, Bristol chassis and ECW bodywork became standard amongst Tilling Group fleets. Under BTC ownership, Tilling Motor Services (the holding Company) was placed into voluntary liquidation, along with another historic name the National Omnibus & Transport Company, although the London private hire business was given the name Thomas Tilling (BTC) Ltd.

By the 1950's, however, there was a general decline in the numbers of passengers using public transport. In 1962 the Transport Holding Company took over the nationalised transport industry, bringing with it a new structure. The industry still faced severe problems. As well as declining passenger numbers, there was a need to shed unremunerative services, constant rounds of fare increases, and, probably most serious of all, a chronic loss of platform staff to more rewarding and less anti-social occupations. In an attempt to solve some of these problems, the 1968

Transport Act formed the National Bus Company, which came into existence on the 1st January 1969, amalgamating the interests of The Tilling Group with the recently acquired BET Group, and the Tilling name finally passed into road transport history after 122 years.

The Tilling Group had been diversifying its interests for a number of years and not only did it have a stake in road transport but had also acquired a number of other companies. Following nationalisation of Thomas Tilling Ltd's bus interests, the non-transport related subsidiaries continued under separate ownership as the Tilling Group, until it was finally taken over by BTR plc in 1983.

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Additional information, corrections and photographs are always welcome.  
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*Illustrations courtesy Louwman Museum and Southwark History Library.*

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