

DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY – THE DEBDALE PARK LINE

by Basil Hancock

Editor's Note: It was hoped to publish this article in the previous issue of Underground News, to complement the Meeting notes about the DLR on pages 320-321, but lack of space precluded this.

If you thought that the first Docklands Light Railway cars carried passengers when the initial system opened on 31 August 1987, you would be wrong.

And if you thought that, until the first 21 cars were sold to Essen in Germany, all Docklands cars only used under running third rail current collection, you would also be wrong.

In fact the first car to carry passengers was car 11 in March 1987, using overhead current collection with a pantograph – and it all took place in Manchester.

During the 1980s Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive was promoting its light rail plans for the region, which eventually came to fruition when the first section of what is now a comprehensive network opened on 6 April 1992. However, in the 1980s, the only non-heritage tramway operating in the UK was in Blackpool, and in those days it was not really a good advertisement for light rail. The Tyne and Wear PTE Metro system centred on Newcastle, although promoted as light rail, was really a light metro and could only demonstrate some aspects of the mode as it was intended to operate in Manchester. So, without taking politicians and other influential decision makers overseas to view modern European tram networks, there was not much to show them in the UK.

In 1986/1987 the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) was under construction, and by early 1987 the first batch of 11 cars had been completed by Linke Hofmann Busch (LHB) in Salzgitter, Germany. A combination of the PTE and various contractors came up with the idea of operating a demonstration light rail line in Manchester using one of these cars, and with co-operation from a number of parties, including British Rail and DLR, a temporary 1.6-kilometre line was built.



It was opened by the Minister for Transport, David Mitchell, on 10 March 1987 and was operated under the name "Project Light Rail". It was jointly promoted by Balfour Beatty Power Construction Limited, British Rail London Midland Region, British Rail Engineering Limited (BREL), Fairclough Civil Engineering Limited, GEC Transportation Projects Limited and Greater Manchester PTE.

The line comprised a section of the disused Fallowfield line near Reddish in south eastern Manchester. This line had once been part of the Manchester – Sheffield – Wath 1,500 Volt DC electrified network, but by then electric traction had finished and most of the system was closed, apart from the Manchester – Glossop section which had been converted to the standard 25kV AC system in December 1984 and was by then operated by Class 303 EMUs transferred from Glasgow.

This section of line had been de-electrified some years previously, but most of the overhead supports were still in position. The demonstration section of track was fettled up by British Rail (BR) and 750 volt tramway overhead was erected by Balfour Beatty, who took the opportunity to experiment with a few different fittings and masts and even erected a short section of Docklands third rail too. Power was provided by using two Class 303 cars as a temporary substation, feeding power from the 25kV AC through the motor car to the 750V DC overhead.

British Rail also erected a temporary wooden station called Debdale Park close to the former site of Hyde Road station and various other organisations were also involved, as already noted. A small exhibition area and basic facilities were also provided, including a section of paved track next to the DLR third rail.

Car 11, the last of the batch, had not formally been handed over to DLR by GEC (who were themselves Manchester based), and with DLR's agreement it was brought to Debdale Park and fitted with a Brecknell Willis pantograph. Obviously, it had to be driven in Manual mode with drivers provided by BR,

and other “staff” were provided by the promoters and the PTE. The car carried discrete GEC and LHB logos on the front ends and a “Project Light Rail” destination display.

The demonstration service operated until 27 March 1987, and involved the car travelling out as far as the old Reddish electric depot and then returning to Debdale Park. There was a mixture of days when industry representatives, suppliers, politicians, press and other interested parties were invited, and two weekends when free public tickets were issued, with apparently more than 10,000 passengers being carried in total.



Above: (Left and Right) Two views of DLR car 11 at Debdale Park.

Left: DLR No.11 in Greater Manchester PTE livery.

All photos: Basil Hancock

The demonstration was a great success, gained a lot of positive publicity and clearly assisted in the eventual approval to construct and operate the Manchester light rail system. It has to be said that the operation of car 11 was a particularly generous move on behalf of DLR.

Many such organisations would not have allowed the public and press to steal their thunder before the opening of their own system, particularly with a type of vehicle which was completely new to the UK, but it was a measure of the way in which the industry was co-operating to promote the idea of light rail that agreement was forthcoming.



After the demonstration, everything was dismantled and car 11 was delivered to DLR, later being used to carry the Queen for the formal opening of the system on 30 July 1987 and operating the first public service on 31 August 1987.

However, if you knew where to look, it still retained one reminder from its days in Manchester, as the mountings for the pantograph were still visible on the roof (Left).

Photo: Basil Hancock

Sadly, vehicle 11 has been the first to be scrapped in Essen, in 2017. Ed.