

“A ROUTEMASTER ON THE MOON!?”

A SHORT REVIEW OF DIESELISATION PROSPECTS FOR THE UNDERGROUND PASSENGER TRAINS

by Eric Stuart

Many of us have heard of these crazy statements about objects found on the moon and dieselisation of parts of the Underground may seem equally to belong to the realms of fantasy. But a delve into records of the past shows that there were might-have-beens and some that actually went further.

When the Metropolitan was extended into the Chilterns, it terminated at Chesham; but the further extension north as far as Aylesbury and beyond started at Chalfont Road (now Chalfont & Latimer), leaving Chesham out on a limb.

For many years, the line was served by a shuttle between Chalfont Road and Chesham, with a few through trains to and from London at peak times, which in earlier days included Saturday lunch-times. A few coaches were used for a branch train, with the locomotive running round at each end of each trip.

Although experiments with steam railcars had been tried throughout the UK, they were not an unqualified success. Mostly, they were replaced by push-pull steam trains, otherwise called motor trains or a variety of similar names. Petrol and diesel cars were tried, with varying degrees of success, but only when the GWR introduced their AEC cars did a very practical design appear on British lines. None of these experiments featured on the Chesham service before London Transport days and not until 1941 did push-pull operation of the branch come about.



Under the 1935 New Works Programme, the Metropolitan electrification was to be extended to Amersham. One of the features in which the original plans differed from those that were implemented in the 1960s was that Chesham was not included. Through LNER steam trains would run to and from Marylebone at peak times, but the shuttle was considered for a more radical change. In 1936, one of the GWR cars was tried on the Chesham branch (*Left*), with the possibility of such a car working the branch in mind – in fact, this came to nothing.

This was not the end of the dieselisation concept, however. After the war, widespread dieselisation of British Railways was considered again. A company called Associated Commercial Vehicles (ACV) built a red and two tones of grey coloured three-car train in 1953 as a test project. These cars were rather rudimentary, rode on four wheels each and were unkindly known as ‘Flying Bricks’ because of their angular shape.



The train normally ran in three-car format, although it could run as a single, two- or three-car train. It was trialled on various parts of the British system in the early/mid 1950s, mainly on branch lines. Among those lines they visited were the Amlwch branch in Anglesey, the Allhallows branch in Kent, Epping – Ongar (*Left*) and Chesham. It worked in passenger service between Chalfont and Chesham, although I’m told that, on at least one occasion, it had to be rescued by a steam loco. (I think the steam shuttle remained on stand-by for such a breakdown!).

Photo: London Transport Museum

The unit not being considered a success, the Chesham shuttle remained in the hands of the three-coach Ashbury sets for a few more years until the post-War electrification plans, which now included the branch, were implemented.



But dieselisation was not quite dead. There was still one through train to Marylebone each week-day morning by 1960. When the class 115 diesel sets arrived, one of these would make its way to Chesham, towing a parcels van with newspapers. At Chesham, the DMU uncoupled, ran forward into the goods yard, then round to the north end of the parcels car, which it pushed into the goods yard before returning to the platform ready to form the 05.38 to Marylebone. However, post-electrification, this early morning train became operated by London Transport electric stock.

The last DMU departure from Chesham was on 14 October 1967 and is seen (*Above, Left*) on that occasion. The train is still in green livery with yellow 'straw' lining and yellow speed whiskers. At far left is the bay platform, which lasted only until 1970, and the water tower. To the right of the train is the loco run-round track for goods trains, which had ceased over a year previously.

Photo: Colour Rail

Even that was not quite the end of diesel passenger trains, as a Pressed Steel Class 121 'Bubble Car' worked the service one week-end, whilst, on another occasion, a Southern Region 'Thumper' DEMU did similarly, offering passengers the rare chance of travelling in First Class compartment comfort.

On the other side of London, a different story unfolded in reaction to another part of the 1935 New Works Programme. After the Second World War, the electrification of the LNER Loughton and Fairlop Loop lines as the Central Line was staged as the Central Line crept further eastward, to Stratford, Leytonstone and Loughton, each time requiring the former steam trains to shorten their journeys. These trains were conventionally worked, with the locos running around at each end of a trip. When Epping was reached in 1949, the method was changed, as the Epping – Ongar shuttle was worked in push-pull mode – or as a Rail Motor, as the terminology was there.

As mentioned above, the ACV unit also had trials on the Ongar shuttle. However, under the dieselisation plans for BR, Stratford depot was to receive a batch of two-car Metro-Cammell diesel units to replace steam push-pull trains to the east of London. These included the Southminster branch and the Romford – Upminster and Upminster – Grays (–Tilbury) lines. The destination blinds fitted to these trains included entries for EPPING and ONGAR, although, later, LOUGHTON replaced ONGAR.

When the Central Line took over operation of the Epping Line, there were a number of trains that operated during the night between Stratford (Main Line station) or Liverpool St (Main Line station) and Loughton or Epping¹. Presumably to avoid the need for keeping traction current switched on, these trains remained steam worked by the push-pull trains that operated the Ongar shuttle. They were shown in the Working Timetable as "Rail Motor to XXXX". Passengers – mainly staff or night workers – were told they needed to already hold tickets in advance for these trains, as the Booking Offices were closed.

Diesel units began to arrive at Stratford BR shed in early 1956, with two reported present on 8 April. However, with the trials and tribulations of introducing new motive power, plus the fact that initially there were only two units, meant that public service was introduced in stages. Presumably, in view

¹ With detail changes over the years, these trains were as follows:

Weekdays –

02.26 Stratford – Epping, and 03.17 Epping – Stratford.

04.10 Stratford – Loughton, and 04.48 Loughton – Stratford.

Sundays –

05.06 and 05.36 Epping – Liverpool Street, and 06.20 and 06.56 Liverpool Street – Epping.

of the forthcoming transfer of the Ongar line to LT operation, the other branches were prioritised, some services starting on 17 September 1956. The Epping – Ongar transfer took place in November 1957, with public service by electric trains starting on 18 November, so it seems no DMU ever showed ONGAR and went there.

However, by January of the following year, it was reported that DMUs were working at least some of the nocturnal trains. They would not have been needed on the other lines in the middle of the night. (Also, three such units were used for the RCTS “Northern Heights” rail tour on 1 October 1960 which penetrated the Northern Line and on to the old GN station at Edgware). Eventually, the Metro-Cammell units were moved away and their operations, including on the Central Line trains, were undertaken by the Rolls-Royce “Lea Valley” units of Class 125 until the operation of those Central Line trains ended, the last ones with effect from 5 October 1970.