

ROUTEMASTER (1954 – 2005)

Magna at no expense spared (which means there were no expenses!) dispatched David Clarke, one of its roving reporters-photographers, to Oxford Circus, to witness London's farewell to the final Routemaster – the Number 159 bus.

THURSDAY 9th DECEMBER 2005 - END OF THE ROAD FOR THE ROUTEMASTER



Hundreds of people queued for up to 6 hours in an attempt to board the last RM bus and travel into the history books. Some 40 successful passengers enjoyed the greatest bus trip of their lives. Thousands of people gathered along the packed pavements, from Marble Arch to the Brixton depot, to cheer on the last hop-on-hop-off double decker in service and to wave good-bye to a London icon. This distinctive classic red bus with cream stripe has adorned numerous postcards and souvenirs over the past 50 years.

The 159 bus was scheduled to leave March Arch at 12.10p.m. and typically for London Transport is was running 28 minutes late! The waiting crowd had seen a series of red, green and gold Routemasters, each fully loaded with bus enthusiasts waving back to the nostalgic crowd.

Finally at almost 1.00 p.m. the last RM bus (pictured above) turned off Oxford Street into Regent Street on its last journey to Brixton Garage, complete with a Police escort and followed by an open topped bus brimming with the media. The bus driver Winston Briscoe momentarily steered the bus single-handedly around the corner whilst waving and smiling to a captivated clapping audience.

During the 28 minute wait I must have spoken to more members of the public than I have in the past 28 years of travelling in central London. Here are some snippets of those conversations:

“I have worked in a bus garage for many years and all the time we were getting reports of accidents being caused by passengers jumping on and off the open platforms. They had to go for safety reasons; also they are all about 40 – 50 years old and needed replacing.”



“Have you ever run as fast as you can after an accelerating RM bus with arms extended ready to grab the pole only to find the driver has suddenly applied the emergency brake just as you attempt to leap onto the platform?” – Yes..... that was my quote.

“I love this bus, it’s got so much seating with great ventilation. With the traffic moving so slowly in central London it’s good to get off the bus when you want to. I would have bought one of these buses if I had more space in my central London garden.”

“I loved speaking to the conductors, they were great characters. It’s the end of an era, I am going to cherish this day.”

“Are you waiting for the bus?”

“In Doctor Who, Billie Piper’s seen getting off a RM bus and then running across the street.”

“I remember the last trams in 1952. My wife and I decided to collect the special ‘last week tram tickets’. Usually you could find tram tickets all scattered over the decks, but you know we didn’t even pickup one special ticket, everyone was keeping them for souvenirs.”

I recalled how my parents reminded me that I travelled on one of the very last trams to trundle into New Cross station on 7/7/1952. (I was only 1 ½ years old at the time!)



Never before has so much public interest been shown in the journey of just one bus. The crowds of eager people following its last route delayed the 159, the journey took over 2½ hours. As the Number 159 finally entered the Brixton depot, the bus’s last stop, there was a great outpouring of emotion from those gathered to see the Routemaster pass into history.

At present London Transport are running 20 Heritage Routemasters refurbished to their original gleaming glory, with engines that meet Euro emissions standards. Complete with 1960’s ‘London Transport’ logo, Numbers 9 & 15 are on ‘heritage’ or tourist routes in central London.

I wonder when the ‘bendy’ buses come to the end of their life-span will there be so much public interest shown?

David Clarke