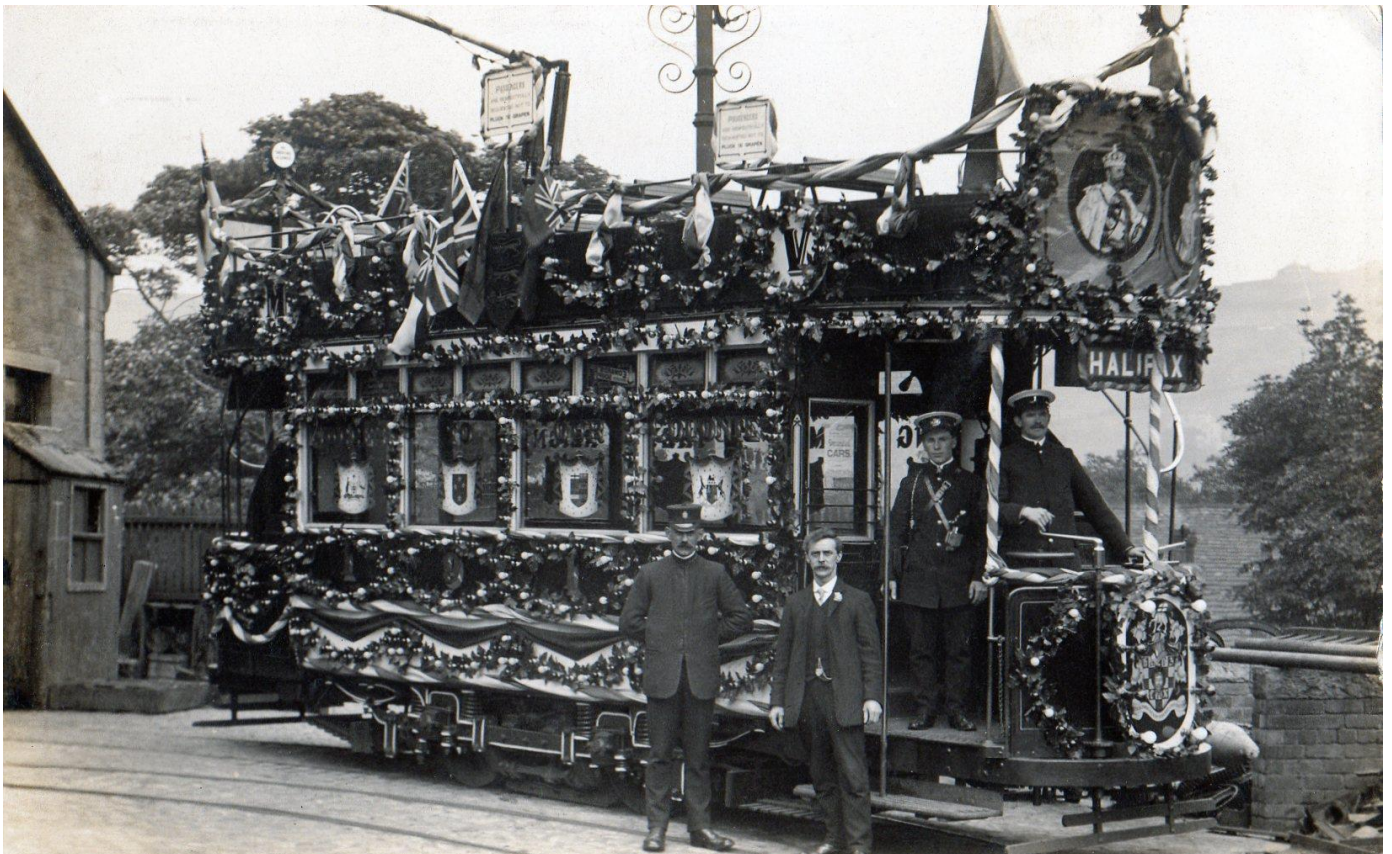


A Right Royal Spectacle: The Tramcar's Role in Royal Pageantry



Researched and produced by Jim Dignan, Tramway Museum Society Volunteer

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, 1897

Decorated tramcars have been used to help celebrate significant royal events such as Jubilees, Coronations and royal visits since the Victorian era. One such occasion was Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, which was celebrated on 22nd June 1897. This was the first such celebration in the history of the British monarchy, so the decorations were lavish. In those early days, the tramcars were drawn by horses which meant that the decorations couldn't be too elaborate.

Photographs that have survived from this era show that they mostly consisted of flags, foliage, swags, patriotic bunting and portraits of the monarch. However, the horses were also bedecked with ribbons, bows, plumes and even, in some cases, Union Jack flags! An early example is this London United Tramways two-horse tramcar that was decorated in honour of the occasion.



London United Tramways horse tram decorated for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, photographed close to the Acton Depot © TfL from the London Transport Museum collection: <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/>

A second image that was taken around this time features Croydon double deck horse tram no. 15, which is also lavishly decorated. Even the horses sport Union Jack flags draped across their backs as driver and conductor pose in front of the tram. The location is Brighton Road, Croydon, close to the Red Deer public house. The tram operated a service between Thornton Heath and South Croydon.



ⁱⁱ*Croydon double deck horse tram no 15 decorated for the Diamond Jubilee event. © TfL from the London Transport Museum collection: <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/>*

The late Victorian era coincided with Britain's supremacy as an imperial power. The Diamond Jubilee celebrations ushered in an exuberant period of festivities that lasted for a fortnight, including a Festival of the British Empire. There were durable commemorations that included the dedication of public parks and erection of memorial statues, drinking fountains, gates and clock towers. There were also more transient ones, including the decoration of streets and civic tramcars around the country.

King Edward VII Coronation, 1902

The next important Royal occasion for which decorated tramcars were pressed into service was the Coronation of King Edward VII. The Edwardian era marked a new beginning in many respects. The Boer War was finally over, ushering in a brief period of peace and prosperity; Britain was still the world's pre-eminent power, militarily and economically, though its dominance was increasingly threatened by Germany, Russia and the United States. There were continuing technological developments, particularly in the fields of communications and transportation. By this stage, Britain's tramways had largely switched from horsepower to electric traction. Many of these influences were reflected in the celebrations that accompanied the Coronation, not least in the field of tramcar decoration.

The Coronation festivities were deliberately planned to showcase the nation's status as a major imperial power, and this extended to the presentation of many of the tramcars that were specially decorated in honour of the occasion. Electric tramcars were much bigger and more powerful than their horse-drawn predecessors, so weight was much less of a constraint. This enabled much more elaborate displays to be mounted, including the use of flag poles and large plaster busts depicting the monarch. By far the biggest and most spectacular innovation, however, was the widespread adoption of electric lighting to accentuate

the display. The effect on onlookers must have been profound, especially at a time when most domestic homes were still illuminated by much less powerful gas lights.

The Coronation itself was not entirely straightforward, however. Originally scheduled to take place on 26th June 1902, it had to be postponed at short notice until 9th August after the King was taken ill with an abdominal abscess that required immediate surgery. This presented problems for the organisers with some celebrations, including the appearance of decorated tramcars, going ahead as originally planned in June, while others were delayed until the later August date.

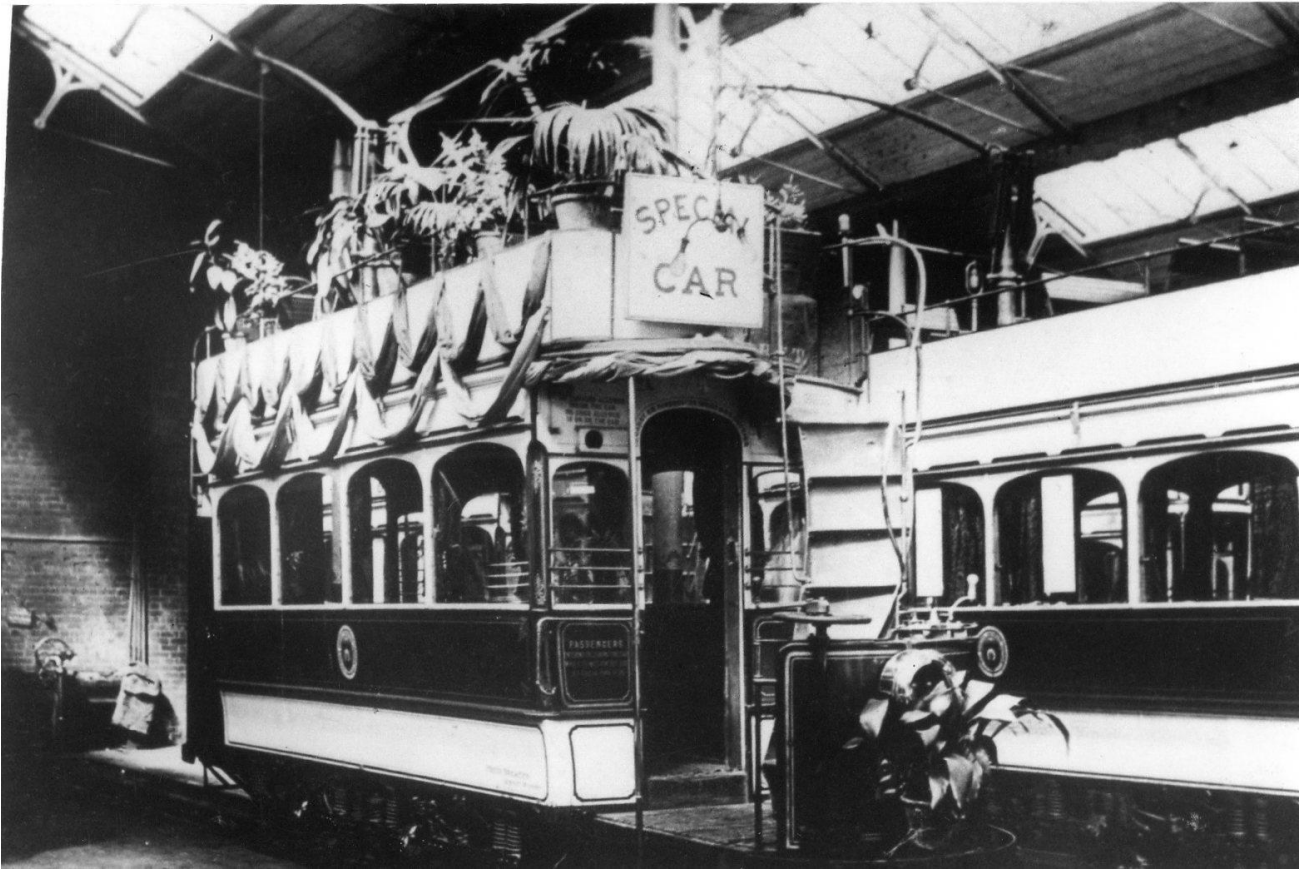
Leeds City Tramways claimed to have been the first city in the country to operate an illuminated tramcar, having decorated one to commemorate the ending of the Boer War slightly earlier in the year on 2nd June 1902. The same tramcar - no. 231 – was again pressed into service to celebrate the deferred Coronation event which lasted for five days between 8th to 12th August 1902.



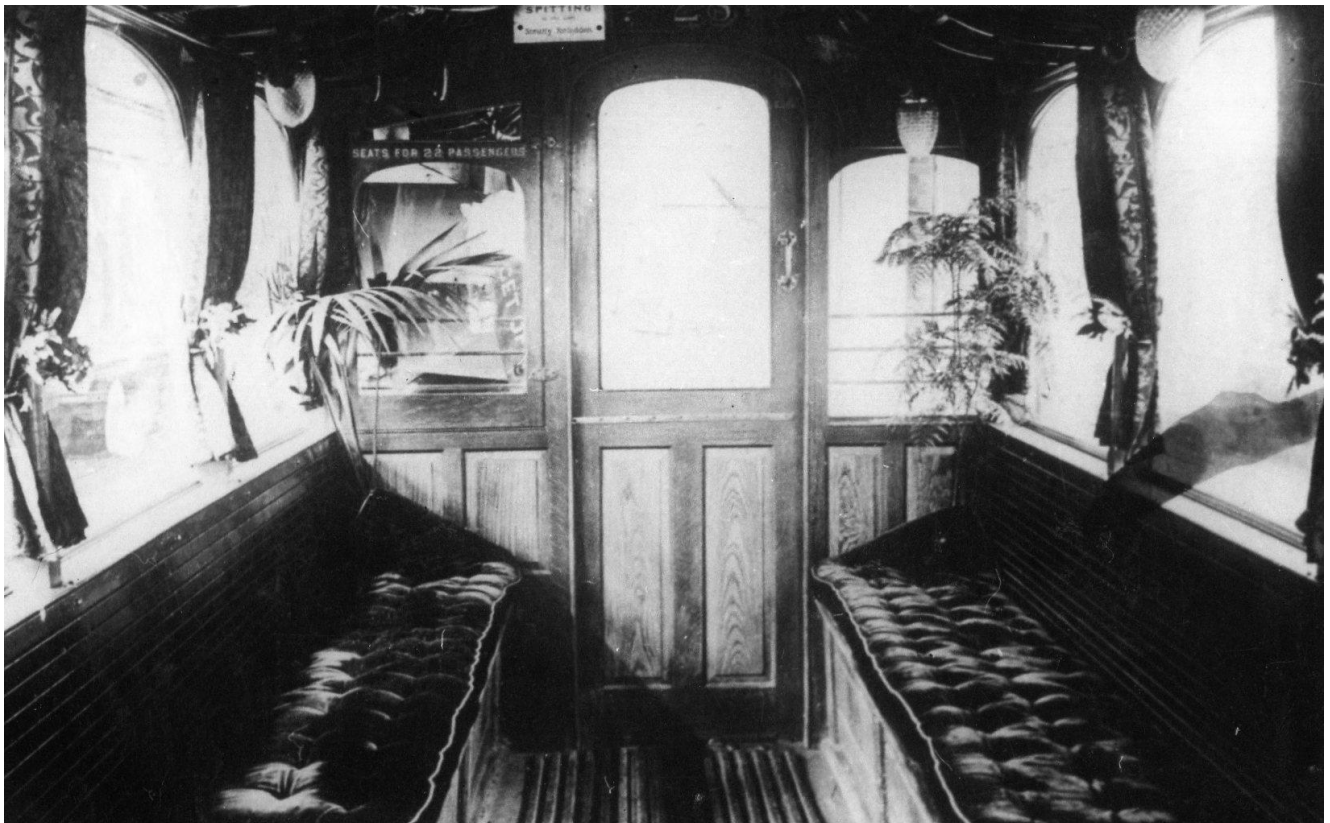
ⁱⁱⁱLeeds Illuminated tramcar 231. Photograph reproduced by permission of the Leeds Transport Historical Society.

The tramcar was described by the *Yorkshire Post* as being “a mass of splendid iridescence”. Buntings and balloons featured prominently but these were augmented by hundreds of “glow lamps of rainbow tints”. The wording across the upper deck was picked out with purple lamps, while the crown was illuminated with radiant white bulbs and the letters “E R” and “A R” were picked out with brilliant scarlet bulbs. Other motifs were illuminated with yellow or green lamps.

Another Yorkshire tramway operator to enter into the spirit of the occasion was Halifax Corporation Tramways, which decorated open-topped double deck tramcar no. 28. The following photographs show the specially decorated tramcar, which appears to be festooned with swags and potted plants even on the inside of the car.



^{iv}Halifax short-canopied open-topped tramcar no. 28 which took part in the coronation festivities on 9th August 1902, as photographed in the Skircoat Road depot. Photograph from the Bob Parr collection, courtesy of The National Tramway Museum.



^vInterior shot of the same tramcar. Photograph from the Bob Parr collection, courtesy of The National Tramway Museum.

Photographs of the decorated tramcars taking part in the accompanying processions are more unusual, but the following image depicts a Sheffield tram while it was taking part in the Coronation festivities in the city's Fargate. The tramcar in question, no. 31, was one of a batch of open-topped tramcars supplied by G.G. Milnes of Birkenhead in 1900.

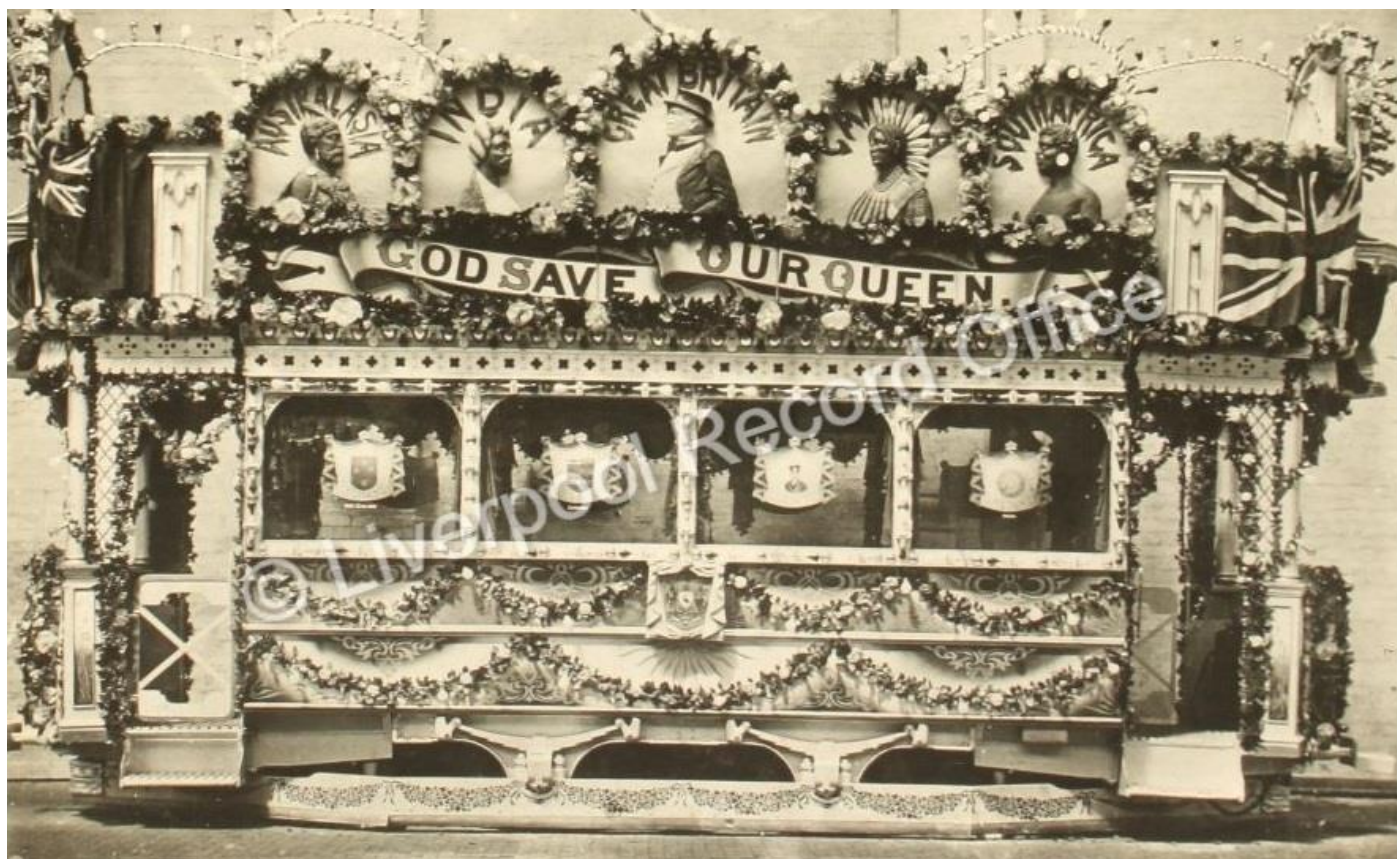


^{vi}Sheffield tramcar no. 31 processing down Fargate during the 1902 Coronation. Image reproduced by kind permission of Picture Sheffield www.picturesheffield.com

The trams that were used to celebrate such occasions were often ordinary service cars that were temporarily withdrawn from service for a relatively brief moment in the spotlight before reverting to their everyday appearance, like Cinderella after the ball.

Liverpool Corporation provided an interesting exception to this rule by converting one of its older redundant tramcars into a permanently decorated tramcar that could be wheeled out and modified to suit the occasion. The tramcar in question – number 428 – was extensively transformed with repanelled bodywork that was decked out in a striking white and gold colour scheme. This formed the backdrop to an exotic tableau of scenes depicting the variety, culture and influence of the various constituent territories of the British Empire, which reflected one of the predominant themes of the 1902 Coronation festivities.

In common with several other decorated tramcars, enormous busts of Edward and Alexandra were mounted in recessed canopies at the front and back of the vehicle respectively. Even the trolley pole was festooned with yards of multi-coloured bunting. The highlight of this dramatic ensemble – quite literally – consisted of 1,500 coloured light bulbs, each of which was set in a copper reflector. As the tramcar moved, these various lamps were switched on and off by a rotary cut-out that was driven by a belt from one of the axles. To cap it all, the roof of the single-deck car had been converted into a makeshift open top deck, from which the Tramways Band were able to entertain the crowds of passers-by with stirring patriotic or popular contemporary tunes.



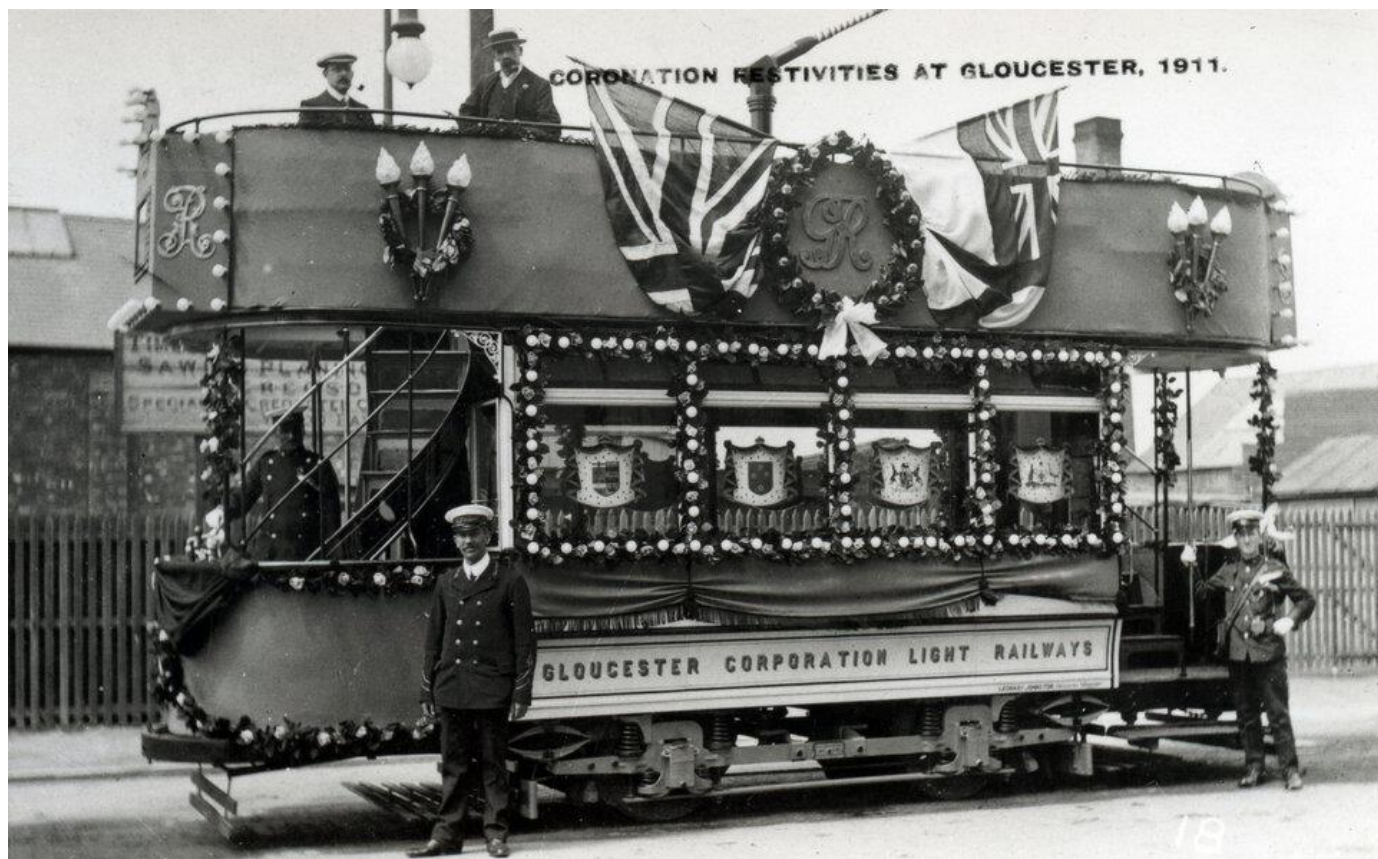
^{vii} Liverpool's first decorated tramcar, no. 428, in 1902. © Liverpool Record Office, reproduced with permission.

Needless to say, it was a big hit with Liverpudlians and over three million passengers were conveyed on the city's trams during the last week in June. Indeed, the increase in revenue every time it appeared was such that the decorated tramcar was retained as a long-term member of the fleet. An interesting spin-off was a series of officially sponsored competitions in which the foremen of the various depots vied with one another to produce the best designs. Cash prizes were awarded for the top three designs, and as many as twenty cars that had been decorated for the competitions ran in service showing off their displays.

King George V Coronation, 1911

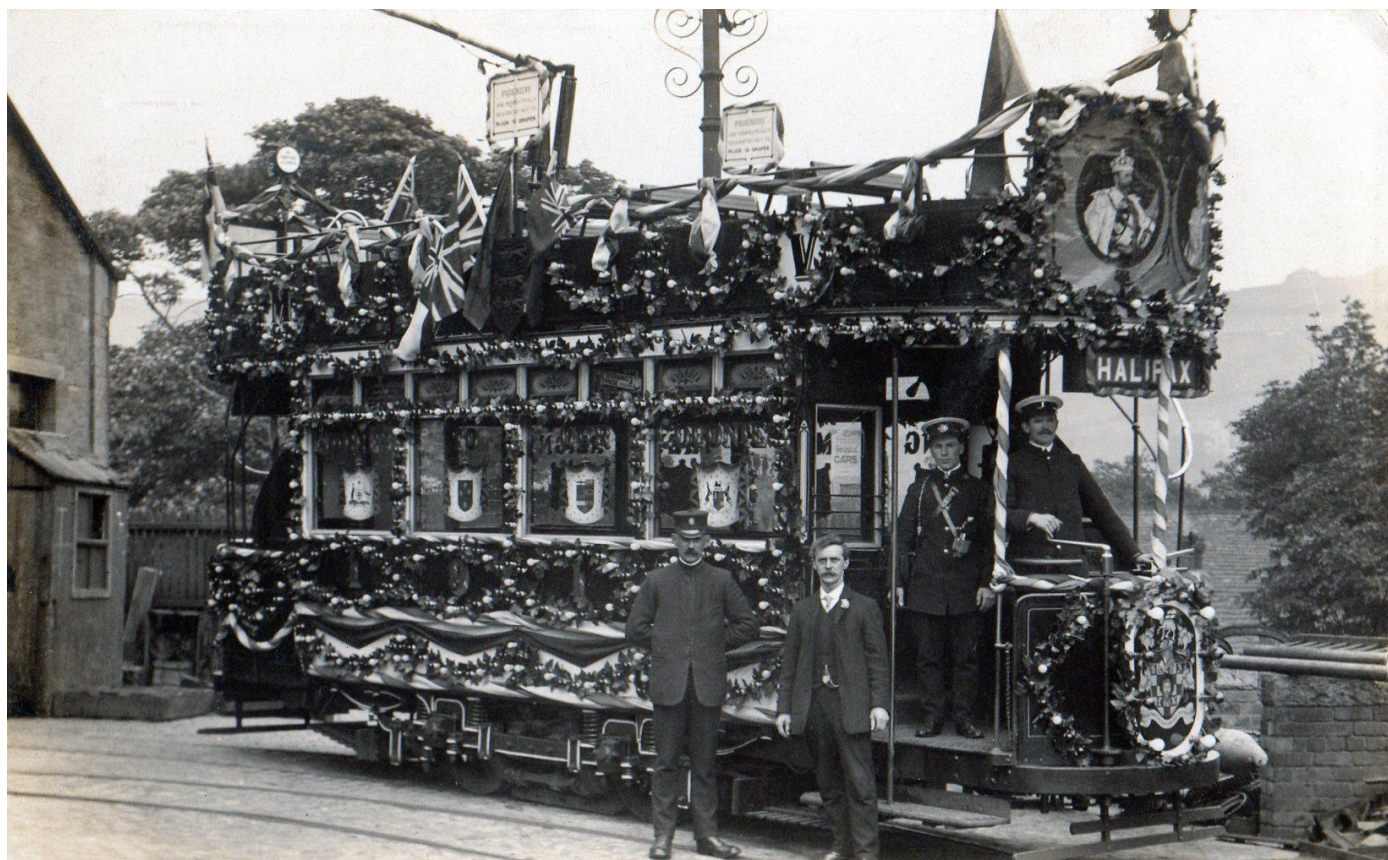
King Edward was 59 at the time of his accession and died less than a decade later. The Coronation of George V and his wife Mary took place on 22nd June 1911 and was celebrated in lavish style, which included the appearance of decorated tramcars in many parts of the country. By this stage, many of the larger tramway fleets consisted of top-covered tramcars, which altered their appearance somewhat and offered an even greater surface area on which the decorators and illuminators could practise their arts. Some open-topped cars still featured in the festivities, and overall there was a greater variety in the decorative styles on display.

Not surprisingly, many of the smaller tramway operators contented themselves with relatively modest displays, and the unidentified open-topped tramcar belonging to Gloucester Corporation Light Railway is a typical example, with its combination of flags, royal insignia and restrained use of electrical illumination. This officially posed photograph taken on 22nd June 1911 may have been intended to show the senior staff of the tramway rising to the occasion as it also features the tramway's Chief Inspector in the foreground of the picture with other unidentified officials on the top deck.



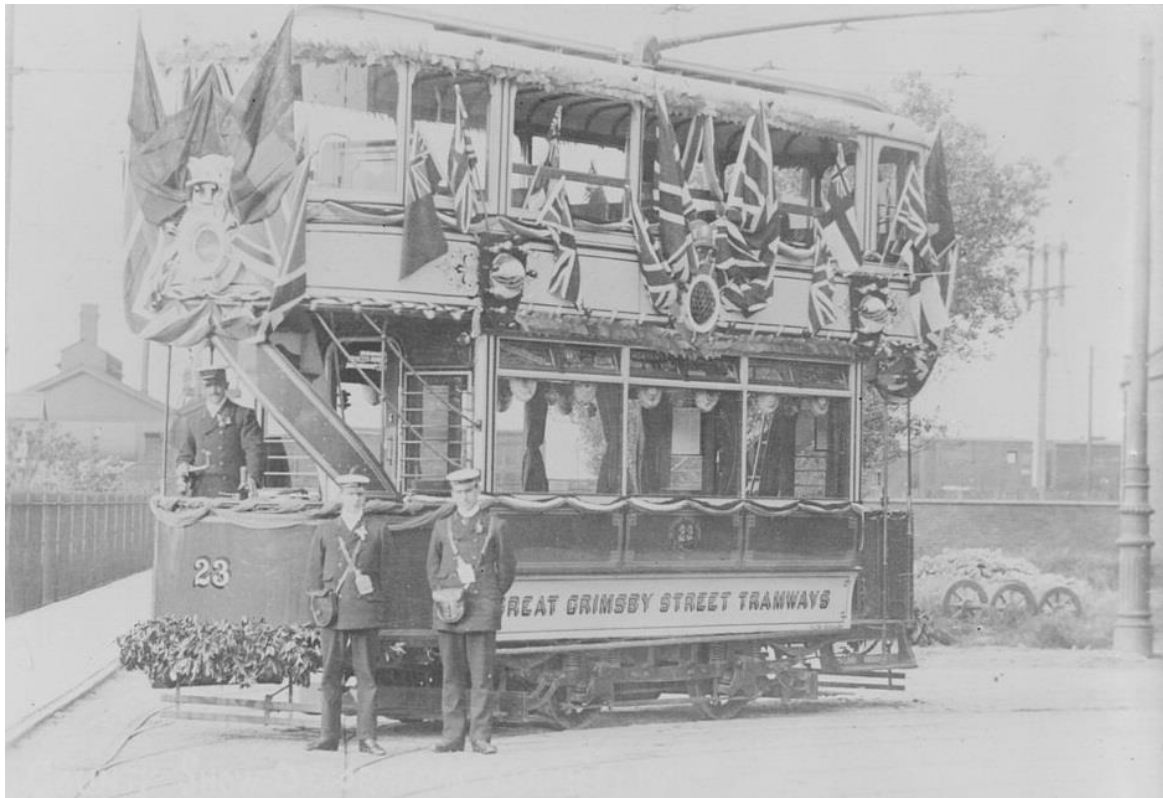
^{viii} Gloucester Corporation Light Railways tramcar decorated for the Coronation of George V © The National Tramway Museum.

Halifax Corporation also decorated an open-topped tramcar – number 83 – in rather more lavish style, which also features in a specially posed photograph featuring company officials and crew.



^{ix} Halifax Corporation's open-topped balcony tramcar no. 83 decorated for George V's Coronation in 1911. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Trevor Hartley.

Great Grimsby's more modern looking tramcar no. 23, which is top-covered, harks back to an earlier era of tramcar decoration with its copious use of flags, ribbons and greenery and even more restrained use of artificial illumination. The tramcar and crew were pictured outside Pelham Road depot around the same time.



**Great Grimsby tramcar no. 23 decorated for George V's Coronation, 1911 © The National Tramway Museum*

Among the larger operators, Nottingham's tramcar no. 129 (below) sported a more elaborate display with portraits, flags, bunting and floral effects. It also had eye-catching illuminated crowns and expressions of loyal support to the newly crowned King and Queen on opposite sides of the tramcar.



^{xi}Nottingham Corporation Tramways car no. 129 decorated for the 1911 Coronation of George V © The National Tramway Museum.

Even more striking was Sheffield Corporation's heavily illuminated offering, which also featured on postcards produced to commemorate the occasion. Even though the images are in black and white, they still manage to convey the impact the trams must have had, whether fully illuminated or observed in daylight.



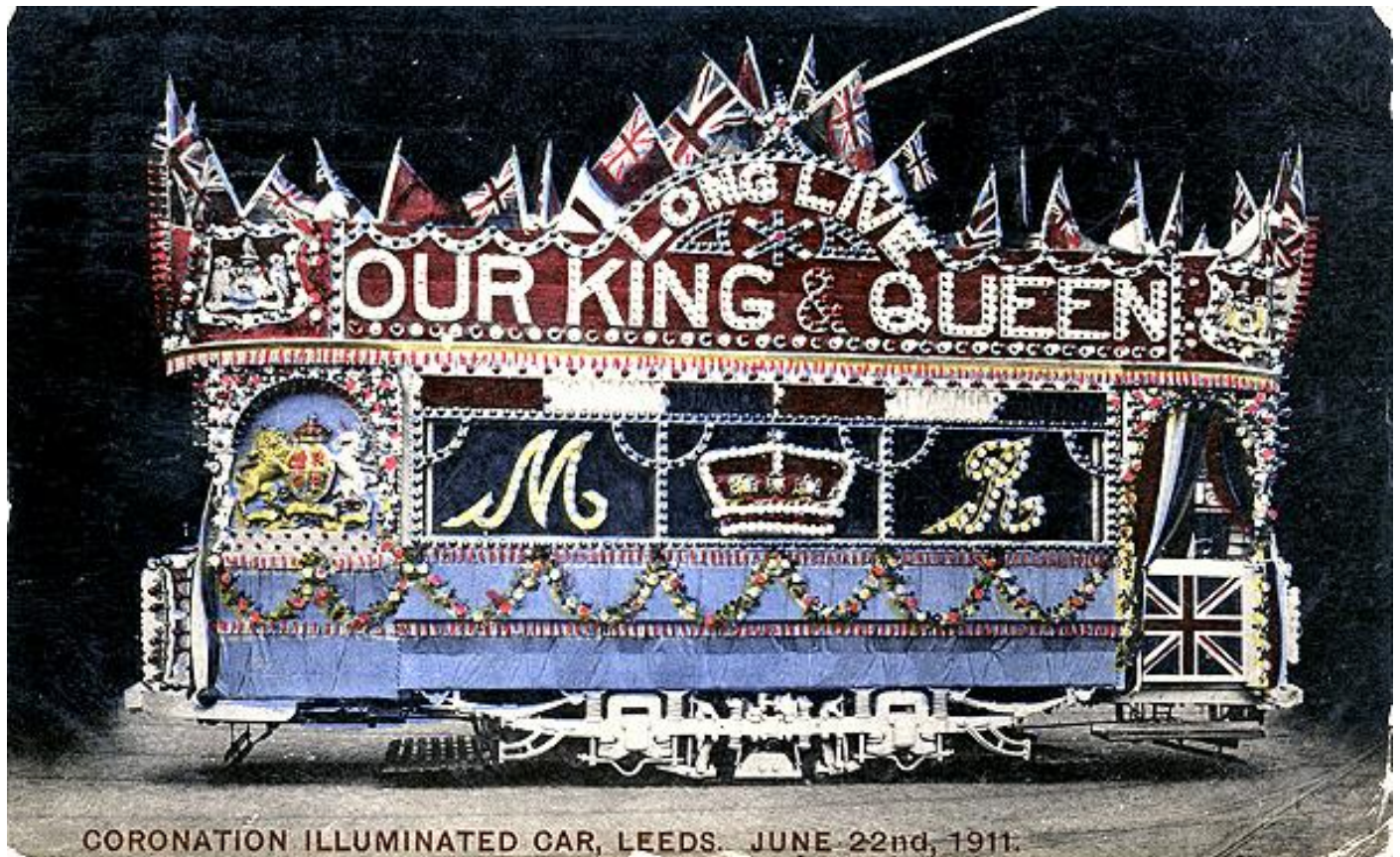
^{xii}Sheffield illuminated tramcar celebrating the 1911 Coronation of George V © The National Tramway Museum.

One of the most unusual and imaginatively decorated tramcars of this era was one constructed by Bradford Corporation, which used the truck and underframe belonging to an early 1898 tramcar (no. 10) to create a replica of the royal crown. This was lavishly illuminated by 1,100 coloured lightbulbs whose glow was said to be visible for miles as it made its way along dark country roads and through streets that were dimly lit by gaslights. Having made its debut during the 1911 Coronation festivities, it was subsequently called upon to celebrate other events over the next two decades before it was eventually withdrawn in 1931.



^{xiii}Bradford illuminated tramcar. Reproduced by kind permission of John Prentice, Webmaster of the Tramway Information Website.

The 1911 Coronation was also significant in that it was one of the first to feature coloured images of some of the decorated tramcars even though the colours were applied by hand and may not have been entirely accurate. The following image shows one of the Dick, Kerr tramcars that formed part of the Leeds fleet. As these had all been top-covered by this stage, it appears that the top cover must have been temporarily removed specially for the occasion, together with the reversed staircases. Some of the motifs that had been used on car no. 231 in 1902 reappeared, but the Royal Coat of Arms in the staircase area was used. Although not visible in this image, the Leeds coat of arms, which features two owls, adorned the ends of the tramcar and, as it moved, the eyes winked. According to local press reports, however, the predominantly blue bunting behind the garlands of flowers on the lower deck was actually green in colour.



CORONATION ILLUMINATED CAR, LEEDS. JUNE 22nd, 1911.

^{xiv}Leeds tram decorated for George V Coronation © The National Tramway Museum.

King George V Silver Jubilee, 1935

The Coronation of George V proved to be the end of an era in one important sense, as it was the last such occasion to be attended by royal representatives of the great continental European empires before the scourge of war redrew the map of Europe and upended so many certainties of the past, including many of the European royal dynasties themselves. By the time the King celebrated his silver jubilee in 1935, the world was a very different place. The scars inflicted by the combined traumas of the First World War, General Strike and Depression prompted a rather more modest set of celebrations than those accompanying previous royal festivities.

Nevertheless, various tramways around the country maintained the tradition of preparing specially decorated tramcars in honour of the occasion. Birmingham Corporation Transport, for example, decorated car 63 with a mixture of draped swags, insignia, portraits and lights. The tramcar also carried illuminated messages: "God Bless our King and Queen Silver Jubilee" was spelt out using white bulbs and the dates "1910-1935" were picked out in red bulbs. It toured different parts of the city on six consecutive days between 6th and 11th May.



^{xv}Birmingham tramcar no. 63 decorated for King George V's Silver Jubilee, 1935 © The National Tramway Museum

Even though Halifax Corporation was by this stage in the process of converting its tramway network in favour of a bus-operated service, it also decorated a top-covered tramcar which ran for the duration of the Jubilee festivities in May 1935. The same tramcar was again pressed into service for a less glamorous event later in the same year to promote 'Halifax Shopping Week'.



^{xvi}Halifax tramcar no. 63 decorated for King George V's Silver Jubilee in 1935, shown picking up passengers at the end of Queens Road in Pellon Lane. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Trevor Hartley.

Another tramway that celebrated the Silver Jubilee event during its twilight years was Portsmouth Corporation Tramways, which transformed single deck toast rack tramcar no. 104 into a spectacular boat-like apparition, complete with illuminated hull and prow. This tramcar formed part of the procession that was held to celebrate the occasion. By November 1936, however, the tramway itself had been abandoned.



^{xvii} Portsmouth tramcar 104 decorated for the 1935 Silver Jubilee event © The National Tramway Museum.

As the above account makes clear, the Silver Jubilee festivities were generally much more modest and low-key than previous Royal celebrations had been. The fact that they coincided with an era of steadily escalating tramway abandonments ensured that this was reflected also in the sphere of tramcar decorations.

King George VI Coronation, 1937

By the time of the Silver Jubilee itself, the King's own health was also steadily declining and his life drew to a close in January 1936. At this point, his son became Edward VIII and would, in normal circumstances, have celebrated his own coronation on 12th May 1937. Before then, however, alarm at Edward's plans to marry an American divorcée and concerns over his unorthodox approach to his role precipitated a Constitutional crisis that ultimately resulted in his abdication on 10th December 1936.

Consequently, Edward's younger brother Albert acceded to the throne as George VI and, together with his wife Elizabeth, was crowned instead on the date that had originally been set aside for Edward's Coronation. This watershed moment for the British Royal Family also proved to be the swansong for the long tradition of commemorating significant royal events by decorating tramcars.

As in previous years, a number of tramways participated in the festivities with the aid of specially decorated tramcars. Some of these were decorated in a traditional manner that would not have looked out of place on previous royal occasions, as was the case with Halifax Corporation's car no. 108. Although this relatively modern top-covered "De Luxe" tramcar was built in 1928, its festive embellishments harked back to a much earlier era.



^{xviii}Halifax Corporation's decorated tramcar no. 108 as it appeared while in service during the coronation festivities for George VI in May 1937. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Trevor Hartley.

By way of contrast, Birmingham Corporation enlisted the same tramcar – number 63 – it had used two years earlier to celebrate the Silver Jubilee, but modified it so thoroughly that it was almost unrecognisable. In place of the traditional double decked tramcar, much of the upper deck had been cut away to give greater prominence to the decorative crown which formed the centre-piece of the display.



^{xix}Birmingham tramcar no. 63 decorated for King George VI's Coronation, 1937 © The National Tramway Museum.

Edinburgh Corporation also featured a decorated tramcar that had been remodelled to form a more authentic representation of a crown. The image below shows car 40 transformed into a gold-painted crown, photographed as it proceeded down the Mound overlooking the Scott Monument. With such a drastic reconstruction it is perhaps not surprising that after touring the tramway for the two weeks of festivities, the tramcar itself was subsequently ignominiously scrapped. Prior to this, the tramcar had been stripped of its seats and used as a works car for the transportation of bags of sand that were used in a major expansion of the Leigh tram depot in 1937.



^{xx}A highly modified former passenger tramcar making its way down the Mound as part of the celebrations for George VI's Coronation in May 1937. Reproduced by kind permission of Peter Stubbs.

A somewhat less drastic but equally eye-catching and ambitious transformation appeared on a Manchester Corporation tramcar which made ingenious use of a specially designed framework to produce an entirely different body shape for the tram, in keeping with the art deco styling that was popular during the inter-war period. The overall effect closely resembled the shape of contemporary “balloon”-style tramcars that had recently been introduced in Blackpool, though the Manchester adaptation is likely to have made use of a much earlier type of bogie tramcar dating back to 1905-6. Although these were originally built as open-topped trams, they were later enclosed with the aid of top covers that were designed and produced in-house and were also known, coincidentally, as “Balloon” trams.



^{xxi}Unidentified Manchester Corporation tramcar, as it appeared in heavily disguised form for George VI's coronation on 12th May 1937. Reproduced by kind permission of John Prentice

One of the most elaborately styled, versatile and best-known of the decorated tramcars that helped to celebrate the 1937 coronation belonged to Liverpool Corporation. In 1923 it had decided to revive the tradition of operating a permanently decorated tramcar that could be adapted to suit a wide variety of commemorative and commercial events. This second version of Liverpool's famous illuminated tramcars was based on car 51, a redundant open-topped tramcar that had originally been built in 1899. In its 'default' guise, the tramcar featured large glass panels on each side of the car that bore motifs of the city's famous Liver Birds, but these were designed to be replaced with other designs to suit the occasion.

The tramcar was also fitted with over 5,000 coloured electric light bulbs. Many of these were used to illuminate static images but, in addition, others were linked to various motor-driven switches that enabled no fewer than nineteen different patterns of differently coloured lights to appear in sequence. Quite apart from the visual display, the open-topped format also provided a mobile platform on which the Tramways Band was able to perform for the assembled crowds.

Although the tramcar first appeared for a fund-raising event in 1923, new panels were created for the 1935 Silver Jubilee celebrations, which were adapted two years later for George VI's coronation. By this stage the tramcar had become famous, not only in its home city of Liverpool, but also in many of the surrounding townships as far afield as Stockport and Ashton-under-Lyne that could also be reached via several inter-connected tramway networks.



^{xxii} Liverpool Corporation's second illuminated tramcar, no. 51, as it appeared for George VI's coronation in May 1937 © The National Tramway Museum



^{xxiii} Liverpool Corporation's second illuminated tramcar in its original guise, featuring its Liver Bird motifs © The National Tramway Museum.

Although the illuminated tramcar survived until the end of the war, it was unceremoniously scrapped in November 1947 and, by the time of Elizabeth II's coronation in 1952, very few of Britain's first-generation tramway systems still survived. By this stage, the fascinating tradition of decorating municipal tramcars to celebrate significant royal occasions had virtually come to an end.

Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee, 2012

Just over a century after Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee event had sparked off the tradition in 1897, a second such royal event took place in June 2012 when the current monarch's Diamond Jubilee was celebrated. This time, the event was commemorated with the appearance of a second-generation Nottingham Express Transit tram – no. 211 – in a special red livery to mark the event. This not only coincided with a royal visit to the city, but also provided a faint echo of the days when royal events were routinely celebrated by the appearance of decorated and often lavishly illuminated tramcars around the country.



^{xxiv}NET tram no. 211 in a special livery to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee and visit to the city of Nottingham on 12th June 2012 © Frank Bagshaw.



Photographic References:

ⁱ TfL from the London Transport Museum collection: <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/>

ⁱⁱ TfL from the London Transport Museum collection: <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Leeds Transport Historical Society: <https://lths.co.uk/>

^{iv} Photograph from the Bob Parr collection, courtesy of The National Tramway Museum:
<https://www.tramway.co.uk/library-collections/online-catalogue/>

^v Photograph from the Bob Parr collection, courtesy of The National Tramway Museum:

^{vi} Picture Sheffield: www.picturesheffield.com

^{vii} Liverpool Record Office: <https://www.liverpool.gov.uk/archives>

^{viii} The National Tramway Museum

^{ix} Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Trevor Hartley.

^x The National Tramway Museum.

^{xi} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xii} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xiii} Reproduced by kind permission of John Prentice, Webmaster of the Tramway Information Website.

Other examples of decorated tramcars can be viewed on the same website by following the link:

<https://www.tramwayinfo.com/>

^{xiv} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xv} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xvi} Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Trevor Hartley.

^{xvii} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xviii} Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Trevor Hartley.

^{xix} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xx} The photograph originally formed part of the Edinburgh Transport Collection housed by Lothian Buses (now Lothian Regional Transport) and is reproduced by kind permission of Peter Stubbs. Other photographs of decorated Edinburgh tramcars can be viewed on his Edinphoto website by accessing the following link:

http://www.edinphoto.org.uk/0_edin_t/0_edinburgh_transport_trams_decorated_waverley_market_raf.htm

^{xxi} Reproduced by kind permission of John Prentice, Webmaster of the Tramway Information Website.

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^{xxii} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xxiii} The National Tramway Museum.

^{xxiv} Frank Bagshaw