



# Getting around Weston

For most of our history, getting around Weston-super-Mare meant walking. Weston was so small that horse-drawn vehicles were barely needed, and were rarely seen.



*An omnibus of the type used in and around Weston © Weston Museum*

In the 1800s, as the population began to grow, the need for public transport became obvious. There were fewer than 3,000 people living in Weston at the start of the century. By its end there were more than 20,000.

Technology had been developing as the town expanded, and in the late 1800s new forms of public transport became available. This was just as well, as Weston was struggling to move a growing number of visitors around town in the summer months.

Many Westonians wanted to see trams brought to the town and various plans were put forward. Some wanted a steam tramway built, but this idea was rejected in 1882. In 1889 the Weston-super-Mare & District Electric Supply Co. was formed and proposed an electric tramway. This type of tram is powered by electricity drawn from overhead cables strung along its route.

As the tram system was still being planned, buses, which needed no tracks to run on, were introduced in 1890. These first 'omnibuses' were horse-drawn, but like modern buses carried several passengers and had a regular route.

In 1900 plans for a tram system were finally approved when the 'Weston-super-Mare Tramway Order' was passed. A track 4ft 8½ inch wide would be laid along the promenade from the Sanatorium to Birnbeck Pier and from the Grand Pier inland along Oxford Street. The generating station that powered the system was to be built on the Locking Road. Plans were made to take the trams to Weston's railway stations, but these were later abandoned.

Work began on 24 January 1902, with around 200 men laying track. These workmen were paid 5½ pence per hour for their labour, a wage equivalent to just £2.65 an hour today.



*Trams passing through Beach Lawns, c. 1905*

By the end of March the main part of the route was complete, from the depot in Locking Road to Birnbeck Pier. On 11 April two tram cars went on a trial run. Unfortunately, there was a de-wirement (the tram losing contact with the overhead power cable) in Oxford Street. After a few modifications though, the Board of Trade inspectors passed the line and a certificate was granted on 2 May.

**The Weston-super-Mare Tramway was officially opened on 13 May 1902 and was soon serving thousands of passengers a day.**

There was no timetable and the trams ran according to demand or season. If a steamer was due at Birnbeck Pier there might be 7 or 8 tram cars waiting there. If the weather was good, open top cars would be brought out, returning to the depot if the rain came. All of the tram cars were painted dark red, although this weathered to a dull brownish colour.

In the early days, the trams were very popular and some passengers travelled them just for the fun of it. Not everyone was pleased, however; one onlooker said that the wires of the tramway made Weston sea front look like “an elongated clothes line”!

As might be expected, bus and cab drivers did not welcome the trams either, as they provided serious competition for customers. They did everything they could to obstruct the track and it took a court order to stop them interfering with the trams.

Up until the First World War, the tram workforce was entirely male. Soon after the war began huge numbers of men were called into military service, creating opportunities for women. In August 1914 Beatrice Page of the Weston Tramway became the first female tram driver in Britain. She overcame prejudice to serve on the trams until the end of the war.

Motorised omnibuses arrived in Weston in 1903, when a Daimler bus began operating from Birnbeck Pier to Marine Parade. The number of motor buses would grow steadily in the following years. With ever more powerful engines they would soon be able to carry as many passengers as a tram car.



*The old bus station on Beach Road, 1983 © Graham Wise/Kevin Lane Collection*

A new bus company, Burnell’s Motors Ltd., was set up and naturally found itself competing with the trams. Their buses would sometimes race the trams to get to customers and this often resulted in tram cars becoming de-wired on corners.

The success of Burnell’s and other bus companies led to the construction of a new bus station, which opened in 1928 on Beach Road. Buses were making more and more money, the trams less and less.



*Trams and a bus near the Marine Lake in the mid-1930s*

In 1934 the Bristol Tramways & Carriage Co. bought Burnell’s and three months later began negotiations to close the tramway. The last tram ran on 17 April 1937, driven by the then Chairman of the Council. In the course of its life the Weston Tramway had carried over 51 million passengers and travelled over 4 million miles.

Ever since then, buses have reigned supreme as the only public transport in Weston. The station on Beach Road (now home to the Carlton Mansions development) was demolished in the late 1980s, but buses still pick up passengers from stops all over town.



Weston-super-Mare  
Town Council