

Last Stop Routemasters

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Introduction

There are three items of street furniture, created during the last century of the British Empire, whose designs continue to define the global idea of a London street. In 1853, the pillar box – invented by the novelist and long-serving Post Office employee Anthony Trollope – was introduced to allow letters to be mailed without the need for a trip to a Post Office branch. In 1936, the K6 telephone box designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott marked the end of 15 years of experimentation to find the ideal vehicle for public telephony. And 20 years after that, in 1956, the Routemaster bus began service on the streets of the capital.

Coloured an unmissably proud yet regally dignified red, distinguished by curved, weighty contours and, most importantly, eminently fit for their purposes, these three design icons complemented each other with remarkable harmony. All three were soon inspiring a level of affection unusual for such ostensibly utilitarian, everyday objects, but none so much as the Routemaster. The ‘RM’ was far from London’s first double-decker but – as Travis Elborough has so eloquently charted, in these pages and in his book *The Bus We Loved* – it swiftly won a position of affectionate recognition both at home and abroad that none of its predecessors had managed. Its continued popularity was demonstrated in 2002, when widespread protests greeted the announcement that the Routemaster was to be withdrawn from regular commuter service because of concerns over pollution, congestion and, in particular, accessibility to disabled people.

To many Londoners – including those who, like Ralf Obergfell, were born and raised elsewhere – the notion of the city without the RM was an upsetting one that called for action. In Obergfell’s case, as he writes elsewhere in *Last Stop*, this action took the form of an effort to capture at least a taste of the pleasures the vehicle had to offer before it disappeared from the capital’s streets. The photographs reproduced here are a small fraction of the images Obergfell recorded during the final year of the RM’s operation, mostly gathered while travelling on the 19 and 38 routes that run between Finsbury Park and Battersea in one case and Hackney and Clapton in the other.

An exercise in neither protest nor nostalgia, the project is a document of the buses’ unique and enduring design qualities, but also a record of the RM’s interaction with the contemporary London community it served, an interaction whose vividly captured fluidity and variation were dependent on components absent from the Routemaster’s successors: the hop-on, hop-off open back and the presence of conductors. As one reader of *Time Out London* magazine suggested, it’s like the difference between analogue and digital. For the new vehicles – including the articulated ‘bendy buses’ originally designed by Mercedes for use on wide European boulevards rather than the often cramped twists and turns of London’s roads – it’s either on or off, bus stop or not. The RM had the capacity for intermediary states, allowing its passengers flexibility and adaptation to circumstance. The combination of appealing, sometimes quirky design, personalised passenger service and an adaptive relationship with the streets it toured gave the Routemaster a unique sense of character. At times, from certain angles, it could seem a living thing – a vital part of a vibrant ecosystem – as much as a piece of machinery.

These are the angles that Obergfell captures. His images throb with colour, personality and life, even if their primary subject is a mechanical vehicle. *Last Stop* certainly isn’t oblivious to the Routemaster’s iconic status as a symbol of London: in these pages we are vividly reminded once again that it can easily hold its own whether positioned beneath the braying hoardings of Piccadilly Circus, before the Houses of Parliament or in juxtaposition to the delicate diameters of the London Eye. But unlike all of these, unlike the pillar box or phone box, the RM is gloriously free, prowling the roads like the biggest beast in the jungle, glimpsed rising majestically out of the flow of traffic or even bearing down on a cyclist like a lion closing in on an antelope.

More often, though, it seems like a friend. ‘Welcome’, reads one of the many signs on which Obergfell focuses – just one of the many ways in which he looks beyond the bus’s iconic outline to pick out the myriad small-scale design features that combined into a uniquely satisfying whole. One aspect of this is the lettering laced throughout these images, usually in the stylishly utilitarian sans-serif fonts that are a signature of London transport. From the confident gold-on-red ‘London’ marking the side of a vehicle to the elegant functionality of the buses’ yellow-on-black frontal route displays, signage takes its turn in the spotlight here, offered up as

thoughtful work worthy of attention in its own right rather than a mere means to an end. The stark 'BUS STOP' painted onto the tarmac of a bus lane seems coarse by comparison.

Obergfell's camera lingers lovingly over numerous details that would seldom be noticed at all during an average commuter's journey but are in fact integral to the RM's appeal: our attention is drawn again and again to the preference for curves over corners, natural colours over neons, the distinctive over the banal. On the exterior of the vehicles, bug-eye headlights and a curved radiator grille can't help but recall a smiling face, while a wing-mirror-and-indicator combo forms an intriguing arrangement of shape and colour.

It's the interior of the vehicle, though, that yields a real treasure trove. The warm red of a leather seat glows in the sunlight, while, in a nocturnal shot, a light bulb bulges out of the ceiling like a friendly boil, casting a soft glow across the nicotine-cream paint around it. The convex mirror at the top of the staircase becomes a bulbous porthole, cheekily reflecting the balding head of a man whose face remains unseen, but for the eyebrows that have been raised into the bottom of the frame – another pair of curves. Railings at the top of the stairs take on a seductive, almost organic quality, the hard metal tempered into strange, curvilinear form; a comparably knobby window latch also becomes a curiosity when brought to our attention. More metal is made affecting when we see a conductor's hands cradle the chunky heft of a ticket machine with familiar ease: the fingers of the left hand splay across its bulk while those of the right turn its handle. If you didn't know better, you might take it for some kind of exotic musical instrument.

But these photographs aren't solely dedicated to the bus as an object. Just as important is the attention they pay to the Routemaster in its natural environment, on the streets of the capital, and the unique part it played in keeping its life flowing. The key attribute here is the open rear platform that allowed passengers to hop on and off in between stops, granting them a sense of ownership – of their journey, of the city – unavailable to users of the replacement services: more than once, Obergfell captures a passenger balanced in their own intermediary state, apparently hovering in mid-air, one foot on, one foot off, as they board or dismount.

Obergfell shows us a young man standing on the platform, eyes fixed on the passing world. Lit by direct sunlight yet gripping the yellow plastic pole – a latterday replacement for the more aesthetically satisfying if less universally visible metal original – he is both inside and outside, a part of the vehicle and a part of the street. That pole crops up again and again, a small gesture of distinction between interior and exterior, a symbol of that analogue fluidity of the RM that forms a major feature of these photos. There are shots of conductors standing sentinel at the pole, seen from inside and outside; one is caught exchanging smiles, and perhaps conversation, with the driver of a black cab, that other icon of London's streets. Divided by that pole, they are united in their ease at navigating the city; the cabbie's open window and lolling elbow even give him a mild echo of the permeable inside-outside boundary the conductor enjoys. Another shot shows the back of two kids' heads as they stand at the platform watching the road go by. The parallel lines here – the kerb, the road markings – echo the long streaks of light seen in another shot, a long-exposure night-time image of a bus passing a street corner. In both pictures, the sense of movement echoes the freedom suggested by the rear platform.

That freedom can also be tantalising – look at the pair of men running down the street, away from a bus stop and towards the RM that has just left it, backs turned to us and the bendy bus apparently approaching the stop. Impossible to say whether they'll succeed in boarding, but there's something about the way one of them holds a supporting arm to the other's elbow that makes you hope they do.

If there was ergonomic fluidity in the RM's design and environmental fluidity in the open back, the conductors offered a social fluidity – a multitude of potential interactions made possible by their circulation among the passengers in a way quite different from the one-man crews of newer models. (Indeed, with the introduction of automated swipe-in Oyster cards, there is no longer any need for most passengers to have even the most perfunctory exchange with the driver of a London bus.) Last Stop shows several faces of this interaction, mostly friendly, but with one or two tense moments too: a conductor shares a joke with a passenger here, both mouths wide with laughter; there, the stances seem more confrontational, a young, male conductor poker-faced while a female passenger's raised hand and tense features suggest some kind of dispute. Elsewhere, a kid plays up for the camera, pierced tongue poked out of a confidently grinning mouth and eyes fixed on the lens; the conductor's gaze is fixed on her, while another kid – the first one's friend? – looks at the conductor. It's an almost geometric arrangement of looking, a nexus of gazes that highlights the ways that the presence of a conductor – not to mention a

photographer – can encourage engagement between strangers in a city not famed for its inhabitants' openness to interaction.

Last Stop also takes us behind the scenes at the bus depot, showing drivers and conductors away from their posts. There are moments of relaxation and humour that add an extra human dimension to the RM theatre: reading on a patch of grass, playing pool, holding up a plate of well-earned grub. But the proprietary stance that many conductors display while on duty is still very much present, especially in Jet's portrait shots of drivers and conductors with the vehicles they command. Workers stand before or beside their buses, arms crossed or held

confidently by their sides, or, in one instance, with a hand resting tenderly on the bus's bonnet. There's a sense of pride here, and teamwork – the sort of affectionate mastery Gainsborough might have found between a man and his horse. (One exterior shot shows a driver mounting his cabin like a steed, while in another image parked vehicles stand in a row, like cavalry waiting for the off, or even guardsmen themselves.)

The range of ethnic backgrounds from which the conductors and drivers come is also worth noting: another part of the Routemaster's heritage, after all, was London Transport's active recruitment of West Indians at the time of the RM's introduction. A whole social history of late twentieth-century London is inscribed into the bus's lifespan, and Last Stop provides a snapshot of the final chapter. It's impossible to say today what will be most striking to viewers of these images fifty years from now – what they will be able to read into the clothes, the poses, the street scenes whose peculiarities are so commonplace to us now as to be invisible. But these aspects of the Routemaster's working life are every bit as important to these photographs as the fine details of the vehicles' construction – perhaps more so, as we can revisit the machines in their retirement, but not the living nexus of social, environmental and design elements that they constituted while in regular service.

It's tempting now to look back on some of these shots with a sense of sadness, not just at their status as records of a time now past, however recently, but at the passing of the machines themselves too. There's no doubt that many people felt emotional at the passing of the bus: one visitor to the Last Stop website described blinking back tears as they perused the images on show. The heroic pose of a green number 19 shot from ground level, for instance, is undercut by the 'Not In Service' sign on its façade. Among the most sobering images are those taken in the garage as the Routemasters undergo repairs. Strictly speaking, we should probably compare the situation to a hospital – one shot shows an RM with its bonnet open and engine exposed, as if undergoing open-heart surgery – but under the circumstances it can feel more like peering into a morgue. Deep gouges score the vehicles' bodywork in ominous compositions of red and black, while rows of un-upholstered seat frames take on a skeletal air. Is it fanciful to see echoes of innards in the parts that spill out, or of a ribcage in the rows of tyres stacked against a graffiti-scrawled panel? And call me morbid, but I can't help seeing a skull in the RM that has lost its radiator grille and windscreens.

But it would be wrong to dwell on such thoughts. First and foremost, Last Stop is a celebration of the RM at work, its various aspects captured by Obergfell's lively sense of space – the alternation between the curious close-up that zeroes in on an item of interest and the bigger frame that locates the vehicle in its natural habitat – and his eye for the telling detail – the glance exchanged, the ingeniously-designed latch, the moment of flight as a passenger just grabs onto a departing bus – all the small things that add up to a big part of a city that is now a part of its history. Routemasters can still be seen on London's streets, on tourist-oriented 'heritage routes' running between Aldwych and the Albert Hall and between Trafalgar Square and Tower Hill, but what were once proud masters of the road are now indulged relics, less moving landmarks now than animated museum pieces. Their iconic contours can still be witnessed at first hand, but for an appreciation of the rich, fluid London life that once passed through their open backs, we can turn to the images contained in Ralf Obergfell's Last Stop.