

THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



This content is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, The Journal for Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

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NEW SERIES
Volume 6

2005

COVER

Thomson's 'New Favourite' Road Steamer at Edinburgh

Anonymous wood engraving published in The Graphic, 11 June 1870

This print is a reminder of a brief period of experimentation with steam-drawn omnibuses in Edinburgh around 1870. Steam was well established for railways and passenger boats but attempts to pull carriages on roads proved much less successful. R. William Thomson (1822–1873) was born at Stonehaven and became a civil engineer. As well as patenting the pneumatic tyre in 1846 (though rubber was then too expensive for general use), he also patented a fountain pen in 1849. From 1852 he worked in Java, inventing sugar refining machinery, a portable steam crane and hydraulic docks. After retiring to Edinburgh in 1862 he experimented with the use of ribbed solid rubber tyres for road steamers.

The print shows Thomson's three-wheeled steam tractor pulling a two-wheeled omnibus. The accompanying text explains that previous experiments had failed because of the difficulty in producing adequate traction without destroying the road surface. 'The great peculiarity in this road-steamer is that the wheels are bound round to the depth of five inches with an India-rubber tire. This covering, which at first sight does not appear capable of sustaining much hard work, possesses innumerable advantages, being at the same time perfectly noiseless, and exceedingly durable'. In the late 1860s there were encouraging local press reports of demonstrations of its use for ploughing soft ground and for pulling heavy wagons around Leith Docks.

On 25 May 1870 'a further experiment was made in Edinburgh with the steamer and omnibus. The omnibus has only two wheels, and is a handsome and commodious vehicle. It is built to carry sixty-five passengers — twenty inside and forty-four out. The journey, which was to Leith and back, was accomplished without the slightest hitch, and the whole of the party, amongst whom may be mentioned the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, expressed themselves highly satisfied'. At this period, wood engravings of this type were usually based on an actual photograph, and the background here has been identified as the arcaded screen in front of the Royal Exchange (City Chambers) in the High Street, at this date occupied by shops. When these were removed in 1900 the screen was reconstructed with wider arches to allow vehicular access to the courtyard.

A number of experimental steam omnibuses were developed in Edinburgh around 1870, and a few were even put into regular service for a while, including a rival all-in-one three-wheeler developed by Leith engineer Andrew Nairn. However these trials were abandoned soon after as the roads were still unsatisfactory, and the legal necessity for a boy to run in front with a red flag was a serious limitation. In practice the immediate future in Edinburgh would lie with horse-drawn omnibuses and, from 1871, trams.

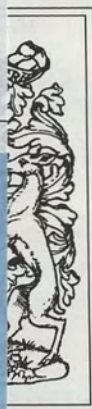
A.G.F.

Courtesy of Andrew Fraser

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The original series of the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* was published in 35 volumes between 1908 and 1985; a final index volume will appear retrospectively. *BOEC* was relaunched in a New Series in 1991.

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ISBN 0-9517284-5-8

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Books should be sent to the Book Reviews Editor,
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GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

1. Authors are invited to send a preliminary letter outlining the proposed contribution to Dr Fraser at the above address. An early indication of the illustrations envisaged would be helpful.
2. Copy should be submitted in typescript, double spaced, on one side of A4 paper, with wide margins. Consult recent volumes for details of house style. It is helpful if finished copy is also supplied in electronic form.
3. Notes and references should follow the text, with arabic numerals inserted consecutively at the appropriate places in the text.
4. References to printed sources should be set out as in the following examples:
Sir Daniel Wilson, *Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1891), II, p. 59.
J. B. Morrell, 'Medicine and Science in the Eighteenth Century', in Gordon Donaldson (ed.), *Four Centuries: Edinburgh University Life, 1583-1983* (Edinburgh 1983), pp. 38-52.
R. K. Hannay and G. P. H. Watson, 'The Building of the Parliament House', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 13 (1924), pp. 1-78.
5. References to manuscript sources should be in accordance with the practice of the repository in which the documents are housed. Examples are:
Edinburgh City Archives (ECA), Town Council Minutes, 12 August 1752.
National Library of Scotland (NLS), MS. 638, ff. 9-10.

NOTE ON PREDECIMAL CURRENCY

Before the present decimal currency was introduced in 1971 the system of currency in Great Britain divided the pound into 20 shillings and the shilling into 12 pennies. This was expressed as £ s d, or pounds, shillings and pence (from Latin *librae, solidi, denarii*). Conventions varied but amounts were usually expressed thus: £5 13s 11d, or £5. 13. 11, i.e. five pounds, thirteen shillings and eleven pence. Shillings could be expressed as e.g. 5s or 5/-, and shillings and pence as e.g. 5s 6d or 5/6. The penny was further subdivided into two halfpennies or four farthings. One guinea was 21 shillings, or £1. 1. 0. A crown was five shillings and a florin two shillings.

The pound Scots was originally the same as the English pound (pound sterling), but by the seventeenth century had declined in value to one-twelfth of the pound sterling. The Scots merk or mark was 13s 4d Scots. Scots money was abolished by the Act of Union in 1707 but calculations in pounds Scots remained current in Scotland till late in the eighteenth century.

Information on pre-decimal currency, and on pre-metric systems of weights and measures, is given in Colin R. Chapman, *How Heavy, How Much and How Long? Weights, Money and other Measures used by our Ancestors* (Lochin Publishing 1995). For the separate system of Scottish weights and measures see A. D. C. Simpson and R. D. Connor, 'Interpreting Scots Measurement Units', in Glen L. Pryde, *Dictionary of Scottish Building* (Edinburgh 1996), pp. 104-105.

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IAIN GORDON BROWN is Principal Curator of Manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland. In addition to a large number of articles in a wide variety of journals his most recent major publication has been *Abbotsford and Sir Walter Scott: The Image and the Influence*, which he edited for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 2003. In the field of Edinburgh history, his *Elegance and Entertainment in the New Town of Edinburgh* was reissued in 2002.

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