

Tilling - Stevens TS3A, Petrol-Electric motorbus

Motor omnibus body built by Ransomes Sims & Jefferies, 1922.



The vehicle you see here is a major restoration project that has already been in progress for most of the last decade.

In 2013, the museum was approached by a family in Witnesham just outside Ipswich, who revealed that this old bus body of unknown origin had survived on their premises for many years. A site visit and some research soon proved that this was one of a number of bus bodies built in the early 1920s by the Ipswich firm of Ransomes Sims and Jefferies. The museum was keen to accept this important artefact and it arrived at Priory Heath in the early months of 2014.

The Eastern Counties Roadcar Company had been established in 1919, with backing from two large national transport interests, British Automobile Traction, and Thomas Tilling Ltd. of London. ECRC being headquartered in Ipswich some 70 miles from London, it was the latter firm that did most of the groundwork in the early days of setting up the operation. One of the specialities of Thomas Tilling's own bus operation was its widespread use of a patented Petrol-Electric motorbus chassis. These vehicle were built in the Tilling Stevens factory at Maidstone, and were widely used by the parent company as well as being sold on the open market.

Top left: The Ransomes body, just as it had survived at Witnesham, until 2013.

Centre left: This red shaded image shows just how little of the complete vehicle the museum started with in 2014. The photograph shows one of the TS3A buses that formed a large part of the famous 'Southdown' fleet in the 1920s; more or less identical to the Eastern Counties Roadcar Co. examples, but now extinct.

Lower left: This photograph is a Ransomes official view taken in 1922, and is believed to show the first of the bodies that had been completed for the Eastern Counties Roadcar Co., to the design of Thomas Tilling Ltd. This vehicle was not a totally new build, it re-used the engine and running gear from an older, second-hand bus and thus retained the registration identity of that vehicle; CD 3596 (a Brighton registration).

Bottom: A postcard view showing one of the Roadcar Company's TS3A motorbuses heading out of town along a bustling Felixstowe road. It had just passed by the former Royal Oak public house, just half a mile from the present day site of the museum.

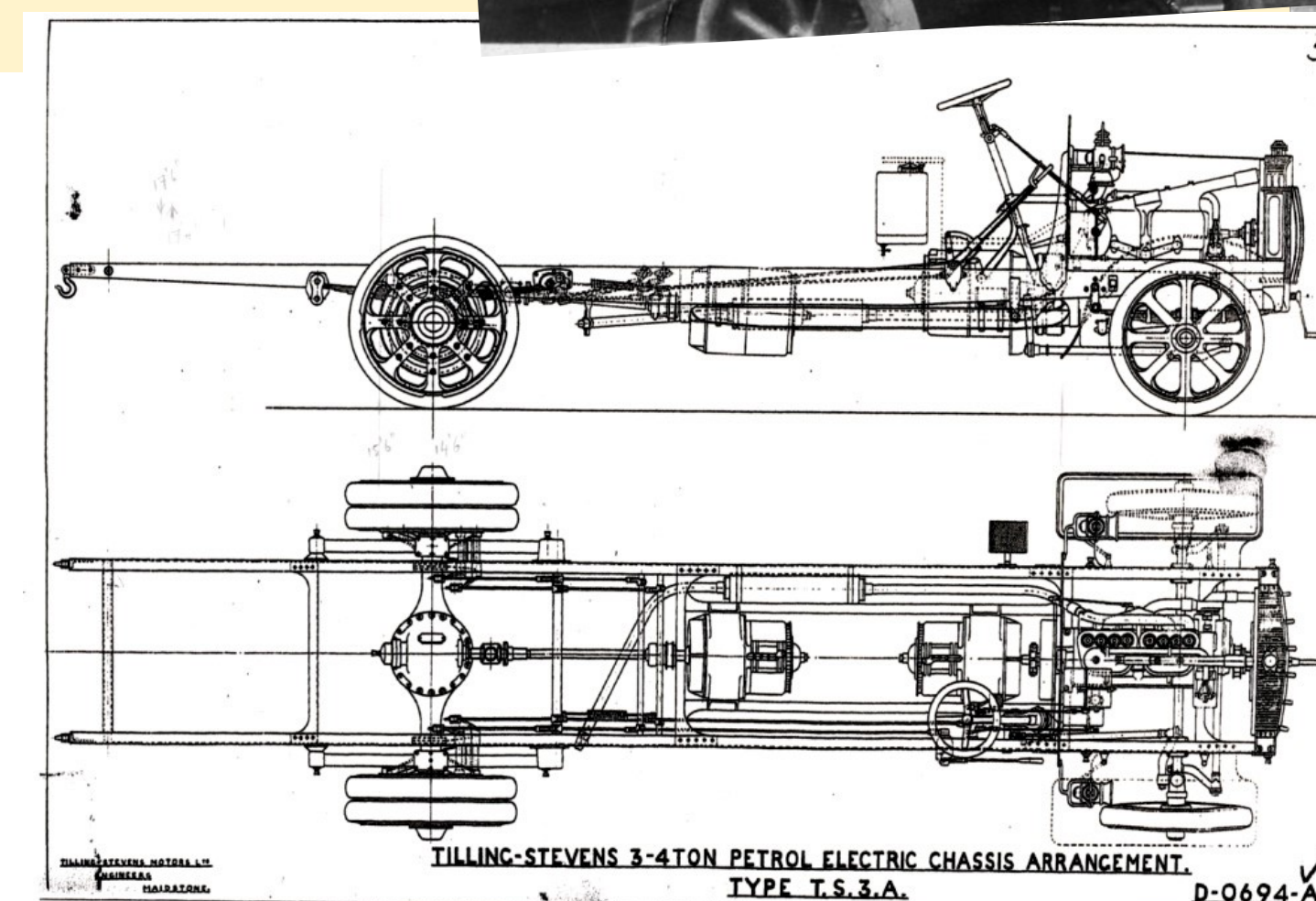
Their main selling point was that they utilised a unique electric transmission system, whereby the normal arrangement of clutch and gearbox could be totally dispensed with. Instead, a large petrol engine drove a dynamo (a DC generator), which in turn provided electric current to a DC traction motor. This simplified the driving technique a great deal (in an age where the vast majority of the people would never drive a motor vehicle), and made for a fairly robust and reliable chassis. These factors were important considerations to a fledgling company whose operations were spread over a large and mainly rural area.

In 1919, Thomas Tilling sent several second-hand Tilling Stevens TS3 buses to Ipswich to assess the viability of the operation. The enterprise was a success, and quickly more buses were sent to Ipswich from London and Brighton, where Thomas Tilling had established large bus fleets. New buses were not delivered to Ipswich itself until 1922, around which time the company also began a programme of rebuilding and re-bodding the earlier second-hand vehicles to the larger TS3'A' specification, a much larger vehicle overall. This saw the introduction of double deck buses with 50 seats, rather than the previous low figure of 36.

A large fleet of TS3A buses was built up, with ECRC soon establishing garages at Felixstowe and Bury St. Edmunds. Many of the buses were fitted with complete bodies from Thomas Tilling, but a small number were fitted with bodies built in Ipswich by Ransomes to an almost identical design. It is one of these vehicles that we have decided to recreate. The original body survived because, after a short working life of only eight years, the vehicle was sold to a dealer, where it was separated from the chassis, and again sold off as a garden shed.



Two views of TS3A buses seen at the top of the Old Cattle Market bus station. The lower photograph shows possibly the last running example in 1930s Ipswich. In 1931 all vehicles were transferred to the newly formed Eastern Counties Omnibus Company (this particular bus being reclassified as PE23). By around 1930 the buses had been converted to run on pneumatic tyres, fitted with deep chassis lifeguard rails, and updated with a 'tin bible' destination indicator. It is not thought that any of the petrol-electric TS3A buses survived in service into 1932.



Can you help us to restore the oldest surviving Ipswich motorbus?

The museum has already invested around £30,000 to get the project to the stage you see here. We have spent ten years acquiring spares and missing original parts. Unexpectedly in 2021 we were able to acquire at auction, a partly restored TS3A chassis which was a perfect fit for

our Ransomes bus body. This was only made possible by the generosity of the late Roger Harrison who had left some money specifically for restoring Eastern Counties' buses.

Current fundraising efforts have raised a further £40,000 to begin the serious bodywork restoration of this rare vehicle. We estimate that about the same amount again is required to see the project through to completion by 2030.

