

Shillibeers Original Omnibus Versus the Greenwich Railroad

Synopsis

A piece of commercial advertising criticising the proposed new railway and extolling the benefits of the established omnibus services.

Themes: Impact of the railway upon cities
 Impact of the railways upon road traffic

Text:

By Joint Stock company taken in hand
A rail-road from London to Greenwich is plann'd;
But they're sure to be beat, 'tis most certainly clear
Their rival has got the start – George Shillibeer

I will not for certainty vouch for the fact
But believe that he means to run over the Act
Which Parliament passed at the end of last year
Now mad null and void by the new Shillibeer

His elegant omnis, which now throng the road
Up and down every hour most constantly load
Across all the three bridges now gaily appear
The Original Omnibus – George Shillibeer

These pleasure and comfort with safety combine
They will neither blow up nor explode like a mine
Those who ride on the railroad might half die with fear
You can come to no harm in the safe Shillibeer

How exceedingly elegant fitted inside
With mahogany polished – soft cushions - beside
Bright brass ventilators at each end appear
The latest improvement in the new Shillibeer

Her no draughts of air cause a crick in the neck
Or huge bursting boiler blows all to a wreck
But as safe as at home, you from all danger steer
While you travel abroad in the gay Shillibeer

Then of the exterior, I safely may say
There never was yet any carriage more gay
While the round-tire wheels make it plainly appear
That there's none run so light as the smart Shillibeer

His conductors are famous for being polite
Obliging and civil, they always act right
For if just complaint only comes to his ear
They are not long conductors for George Shillibeer

It was meant that they all should wear dresses alike
But bad luck has prompted the tailors to strike
When they go to their work his men will appear
A la Francaise, conducteur, a Mons. Shillibeer

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Unlike the conductors, by tailors oppressed
 The horses have all in new harness been drest;
 The cattle are good, the men's orders are clear
 Not to gallop or race – so says Shillibeer

That the beauties of Greenwich and Deptford might ride
 In his elegant omni is the height of his pride –
 So the plan for a railroad must soon disappear
 While the public approve of the new Shillibeer

Glossary:

- Mine In this context and period: A firework which throws numerous crackers or similar small explosions up into the air. (OED)
- Cattle When the song was written the term "cattle" included horses

Source of Text: Bodleian Library, *allegro* Catalogue of Ballads ; Harding B 20(241)

Music. Not tune given

Source of Music: Not tune given

Printer: Howlett and Brimmer

Where Printed: London

Author : Anonymous

Date: 1834

Notes of the Song and Its Historical Background

As cities grew so did the demand for public transport links between the various quarters of the town.

George Shillibeer introduced omnibuses (which he had seen in Paris) to Britain. On 4 July 1829 he started a three-horse vehicle along the new road from Paddington Green to the Bank via Islington. His omnibuses carried twenty passengers all inside, charging high middle-class fares – a shilling all the way; six pence half way.

His business was undermined by competition from Thames steamboats and the opening of the first part of the London and Greenwich Railway.

Ref. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

The phrase "*A la Francaise, conducteur, a Mons. Shillibeer*" is a reference to Shillibeer's practice of employing French speaking staff. The British aristocracy's love of things French survived the Napoleonic Wars and French speaking staff were intended as a sign of refinement.

Like many others with a vested interest in horse powered transport, Shillibeer emphasised the dangers of steam engines – "*These*" [omnibuses] "*pleasure and comfort with safety combine /*

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They will neither blow up nor explode like a mine / Those who ride on the railroad might half die with fear / You can come to no harm in the safe Shillibeer"

The London and Greenwich Railway Company was the first to have a terminal in London. It received parliamentary approval on May 17 1833 - thus dating this song to 1834

The line opened in 1836 and copied the word "omnibus" from Shillibeer by offering "Omnibus or Open Carriage" fares of 6d. It was one of the first lines to offer season tickets and helped to establish the habit of commuting between home and workplace.

Ref : <http://www.yellins.com/transporthistory/rail/l-and-g.html>