Transport for London

TfL Corporate Archives Research Guides

Research Guide No 33: Aldenham Bus Works

Originally intended as car sheds for the never-built Northern line extension beyond Edgware, London Transport (LT) Aldenham Bus Overhaul Works was located near Elstree, some 6km north-west of Edgware. Ickenham had been proposed as a site for a new overhaul works but was rejected by the government due to being an intrusion into the Green Belt. The Aldenham site was acceptable; although being within the Green Belt, its 'existing use' for manufacturing purposes allowed it to escape a planning veto. The contract for building the depot was awarded to Haymills (Contractors) Ltd and was partially complete by the outbreak of war in September 1939.

With the cessation of the war, contractors moved in to demolish and redevelop parts of the building in anticipation of its rebuilding as an Underground railway depot. New vehicles and bus repairs were carried out on the site from around 1945 but it was to be some years before rebuilding got underway. In December 1947 it was decided to make temporary alterations to the building to enable it to be used for heavy repair of bus bodies until it was required for railway purposes or other purpose-built overhaul facilities became available.

In 1950 it was announced that there would be no further railway construction beyond Edgware. Chiswick Works was struggling to manage the overhauling of buses, and with the abandonment of the Underground extension it was decided to convert and extend the existing building at Elstree, which became known as Aldenham Bus

Overhaul Works, taking its name from a nearby village. This left Chiswick to specialise in engines, gearboxes and experimental work and chassis overhauls. This set-up continued until 1955 when all overhaul work was transferred to Aldenham.

Construction and extension work began in 1952. The building measured some 480yds x 180yds, the site covering 53.3 acres (21.56Ha) and being virtually self-contained, even with its own power station. This made the site the world's largest bus overhaul works. The official opening of the completed works on in October 1956 was to be by Harold Watkinson, Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, as misleadingly stated on a ceremonial plaque in the works. The ceremony was in fact performed by Hugh Molson MP - his parliamentary secretary - deputising for Mr Watkinson, who was otherwise engaged on Cabinet business.

Aldenham never reached its full capacity as an overhaul works, and part of the Works was leased to British Leyland as a repair and spares storage centre. The site was at its busiest during the late 1950s/early 1960s. Work carried out included body rebuilds, accident repairs, repaints, seat trimming, destination blinds, new bus preparation, and tilt-testing, whereby a complete bus would be tilted to a certain angle on a special table to ensure its stability in the event of an accident.

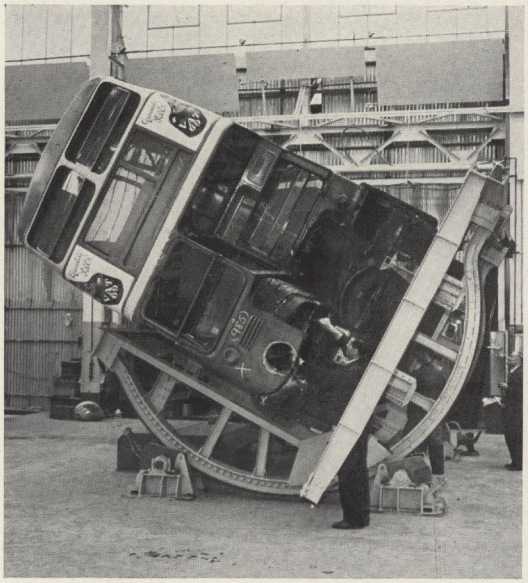


Fig. 2 Body underside being repaired on inverter



Fig. 3 Special gantries in the paint preparation shop

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The high level of standardisation achieved by LT at this time meant that, with few exceptions, a bus entering the Works for overhaul rarely left with the same body and chassis combination with which it entered. Initially the Works was designed to overhaul members of the RT-family, since the vast majority of these vehicles had interchangeable parts. After some four years on the road, the complete bus would arrive at the Works, the body would be removed from the chassis, and the two would then each go their separate ways. At this point, the vehicle would lose its identity. The body would be thoroughly inspected for damage, with replacement panels fitted if necessary. The bodies were lifted, placed on an inverter and pressure-cleaned underneath. They were moved around the works by means of an overhead crane, originally intended for tube trains, and were then lowered into the areas known as ‘standings’ for any repair work to be carried out.

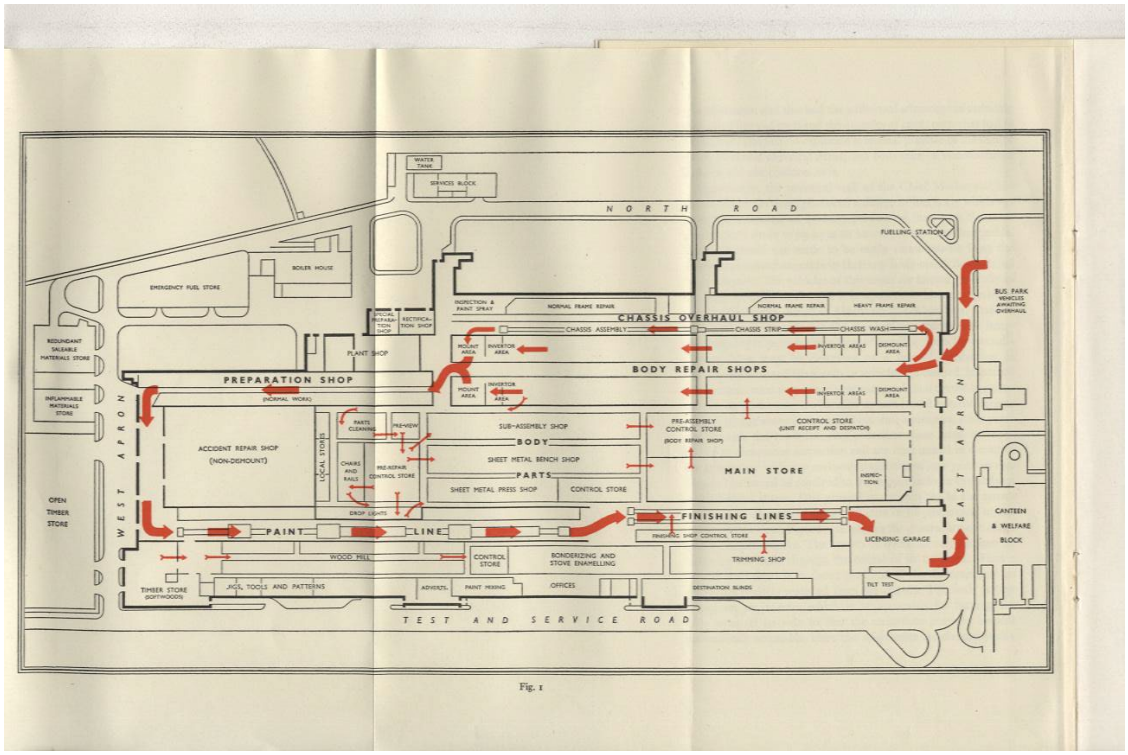


Fig. 1

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Chassis were dealt with on a parallel work-line, with replacement parts being fitted as appropriate or returned to Chiswick for attention. Entire buses or chassis could be smoved around the Works by small tugs hand-operated by one man, or by means of motorised tractors. After any necessary chassis-work had been completed, it was repainted and remounted with a newly-overhauled body, not normally that with which it entered the works. Since chassis overhauls generally took less time than body-

overhauls, this system saved LT a considerable amount of money by not losing an equivalent amount of road-tax whilst the vehicle was moving through the Works. Thus it was quite normal for a bus emerging from overhaul to take the stock and registration number of one which entered the works a few days earlier, even though it was a completely different vehicle. Buses were road-tested along an internal roadway along the front of the building and brake-tested. Vehicles were then taken off for painting and the application of adverts and transfers, were re-equipped with seat cushions, and generally made ready for the road, having undergone final inspection by London Transport and Ministry of Transport staff for certification before release.

In time, Aldenham successfully handled overhauls for Routemaster buses as they became due for attention, despite them having sub-frames as opposed to complete chassis. Vehicles of the smaller classes of bus and sub-classes were normally overhauled as one unit and not body-changed.

New buses were also delivered to Aldenham for checks, before being despatched for service. The works also dealt with crash-repairs if the damage was beyond the scope of the home garage, such as collisions with low bridges.

Much of Aldenham's workload was lost after the formation of London Country Bus Services in 1970, as part of the National Bus Company, to which the Country Area and Green Line services were transferred and which made its own arrangements, although some work was carried out at Aldenham for LCBS on a contract basis. With the introduction of 'off-the-peg' buses in the 1970s, whose design did not generally lend themselves to Aldenham's body-changing overhaul process and which took far longer to deal with, the decision was taken in October 1985 to completely discontinue the practice of overhauling buses every 4-5 years. Bus overhaul subsequently moved back to Chiswick and on a much smaller scale.

After due consideration as to its future, Aldenham Works closed completely in November 1986 and the site was acquired by Slough Estates. The derelict site remained largely empty until it was demolished in July 1996 and redeveloped as the Centennial Business Park.

A British Transport Film documentary entitled 'Overhaul' was made in the works in 1957, and Aldenham appeared in the first ten minutes of the 1962 feature film *Summer Holiday*, starring Cliff Richard.

Key archival records

ArchiveRefNum	Content
LT000350/001/015	Correspondence concerning London Aircraft Production at the works 17 January 1940 – 26 July 1945
LT000172/027/015	Contract for the construction of various buildings at Aldenham Depot, 10 August 1939
LT000232/164	Memoranda, extracts from minutes and notes concerning work done at Aldenham and Chiswick – details of material and stock control systems, 11 May 1948 – 7 May 1959
LT000249/173	Booklet describing large-scale bus overhaul at Aldenham, circa 1950
LT000757/020	Booklet by AAM Durrant concerning the manufacture of new buses at Aldenham including a plan of the factory, 1956
LT000842/026	Reports of the overhaul procedures at Aldenham; Works organisation and staff, 30 October – 1 November 1956
LT000279/064	Investigation into a fire at Aldenham, 21 May – 22 December 1958
LT001893/034	Booklet: Aldenham Works – Large-Scale Bus Overhaul, 20th Century
LT000197/041	Booklets concerning technical visits to Aldenham and Chiswick Works, May 1969
LT000375/069	Material relating to setting up of team with a view to transferring activities from Aldenham to Chiswick and Acton, 21 January – 28 January 1972
LT001890/040	Report by Operational Estate Manager regarding possible property solutions for Aldenham following the report 'A Future at Aldenham', October 1984
LT001845/001	LRT Bus Engineering Ltd Board Minutes 1985-86 – numerous references to Aldenham and its rundown, 3 April 1985 – 22 July 1987

LT000338/005	Report on engineering facilities at Aldenham and possible expansion thereof, 8 January 1985 – 9 July 1986
LT000714/033	The future of Aldenham: possible letting, refurbishment, loan from LT, 3 April 1985 – 27 May 1987
LT001890/074	Leslie Hays & Associates detailed appraisal of Aldenham Works, October 1982
LT001890/077	Vehicle overhaul programmes and accident repairs, first aid, staff accidents, 4 December 1930 – 7 November 1975
LT000287/222	Correspondence etc regarding Open Day at Aldenham as part of the celebration of 150 years of London's Buses, 8 June – 23 October 1979
LT001253/015	Memoranda, correspondence, and draft deed concerning the sale of Aldenham site to Slough Industrial Estates Ltd, 30 March 1987 – 11 May 1987

Extra details about these records, and searches for further records can be made via our online catalogue at tflcorporatearchivescatalogue.co.uk

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