

To hail a hummingbird

It is 100 years since the first electric cabs took to the streets of London

by JANET ROUGVIE

ANYONE STEPPING out into the streets of London in 1897 stood a good chance of seeing a new phenomenon. Never encountered before in the city, the hummingbird had arrived.

These hummingbirds were not, as may be imagined, escapees from Regent's Park Zoo. They were, in fact, engaged in patrolling the city's busy streets at a hair-raising eight miles an hour. Painted in yellow and black and making the humming sound which earned them their ornithological nickname, they spent their days transporting Londoners across town.

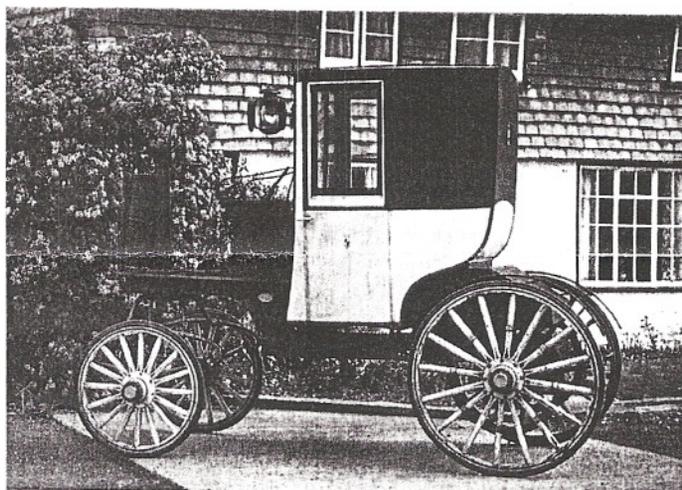
No horse clip-clopped ahead of the hummingbirds. Their power source did not require shoeing or stabling, and there was no need to clear the road with a shovel.

The hummingbirds were battery-powered! They were the very first electric cabs ever to operate in the City and West End of London, and 1997 marks the 100th anniversary of their introduction to the capital.

Hackney carriages had provided public transport in London for 200 years, and in 1823, 12 new cabriolets joined the ranks.

Originally from Europe, the cabriolet was a light, two-wheeled vehicle with an attractive shell-shaped body, and offered a different style of travel from the old coaches. The cabriolet's influence is still with us - for we still hail "cabs".

The later cabriolets resembled a coffin in shape and quickly became known as "coffin cabs", which proved doubly appropriate



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The hummingbird electric cab first operated in London in 1897

in the light of their record for instability, for if the horses stopped suddenly the unwitting occupants could be thrown right over the top.

Perhaps it was not surprising that Joseph Hansom was prompted to design a completely new type of vehicle in 1834.

His new cab concept was a covered body slung between two large wheels, with the driver sitting on top. Hansom's original model went through various refinements before becoming the standard London cab with smaller wheels, with the driver relocated behind. The "hansom cab" was born and reigned unchallenged in London's thoroughfares - until, that is, the advent of the hummingbirds.

London was not the first city to introduce horse-less cabs. By 1897, the motorised cab had appeared in Stuttgart and in Paris. In Juxon Street, Lambeth, the London Electric Cab Company stayed busy launching its 3½ horse power electric cabs on the capital. Hummingbirds were hired at 25 shillings a

day, complete with driver. By the end of 1897 there were 25 vehicles in service, and this increased to 75 the following year.

Sadly, things went wrong. Tragedy struck in the shape of a motor accident which in 1897 must have had a huge impact on the public imagination. *Punch* magazine had already drawn attention to the problems of street urchins hitching free rides. One cartoon shows a ragged child clinging on to the back of a hummingbird while a bystander calls out the traditional "Whip behind!" to the cabby. In this case the streetwise young ragamuffin responds with a witty, "Yah! 'E ain't got no whip."

However, the death of young Stephen Kempton of Hackney was not so funny. Just as in the cartoon, he was stealing a hummingbird ride when his coat became entangled in the car's chain drives. He was dragged between the rear wheel and the body of the vehicle and crushed to death. It was barely a month since the hummingbirds had gone into service. The event was

the first ever motoring fatality on a public road.

In September 1897 more trouble brewed. Cabby George Smith managed to drive his hummingbird into the front of 165 Bond Street before being apprehended. Charged with being drunk in charge of an electric cab, Smith admitted he'd had "two or three glasses of beer" and made history by becoming the first person ever to be found guilty of drunken driving. He was fined 20 shillings.

By 1900 the London Electric Cab Company was broke, and the hummingbirds ready for permanent flight. The battery marvels had proved unpopular and hopelessly uneconomic, and the 77 vehicles were sold off. The company went bankrupt, and no further motorised taxis plied their trade in the capital until December 1903. A French-built 12hp Prunel by Henry Whitlock & Co. of Holland Gate took over. Four years later the "taximeter" came into use, and the "taxi cab" was born.

This time there was no turning back: 1905 witnessed 19 petrol cabs, but by 1910 there were over 6,000. The petrol taxi was here to stay. The nostalgic hansoms hung on for grim death, and put up a strong fight for survival. There were still 200 in service by 1928, and the last horse-cab driver actually handed in his licence after the Second World War in 1947.

As for the hummingbirds, they may have been a seven-day wonder, but they undoubtedly earned their place in transport history. After all, it was the electric cab which marked the beginning of the end of the horse and the hansom, even if that end took a further 50 years to arrive.

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