

Long Island's lovable double-deckers

Not everyone loved them — and they weren't really double-deck — but the unique clan of commuter cars will never be forgotten

By Mike Boland



THEIR SIZE AND LENGTH were overwhelming. The big balloon roof with headlights and portholes at each end was always a pleasant sight. The two rows of paired windows staggered along the car side always seemed to disappear in the distance. With illuminated numberboards in the headlight housings—no other Long Island Rail Road electric multiple-unit car had this feature—you always knew which car you were looking at. And I appreciated the little touches, like the equip-

ment trust plate in the upper corner of each car and the upper-level window guard bars to prevent passengers from placing their arms outside the car. That's how I remember Long Island's double-deckers.

The funny thing was that they weren't really double-deckers at all, though everyone called them that. Their staggered, two-tier seating configuration was unique in the U.S., having been created and patented by Albert E. Hutt of New York in 1928. Both

the upper and lower levels of seats were reached from a single center aisle, which was two steps (about 14 inches) above the lower level and the same distance below the upper level. Ramps at each end of the aisle descended to standard vestibules. Each tier had pairs of fixed seats facing each other, and each group of four seats had a double window. Seating from 120 to 132 passengers, the double-deckers were an effort to increase capacity on the Long Island's busy third-rail electric lines into



FRANK ZAHN

Pennsylvania Station, New York.

The Pennsylvania Railroad—Long Island's parent from 1900 to 1966—built three prototype double-deckers at its Altoona (Pa.) shops in the 1930's. In addition to their odd seating arrangement, they were built of aluminum to save weight. By the time LIRR decided to acquire a fleet of double-deckers, though, World War II had put such projects on hold. When aluminum and other materials became available for civilian use again, PRR built 60 dou-

ble-deckers during 1947-49, just before I was born. It's now three decades after they were removed from service, but I still miss all 63 of them.

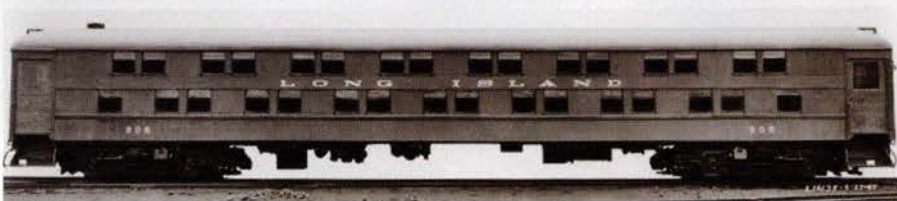
Hooked for life

I probably saw my first double-decker in Far Rockaway, Queens, from the apartment house in which I lived with my family during the early 1950's. It overlooked the elevated LIRR station, and that's how I got hooked on trains . . . and the double-deckers. What

Car 1306—its tinted, sealed windows identifying it as a late 1960's rebuild—leads a Babylon train out of Jamaica in March 1971. Circular "Dashing Dan" logos are at each end above the stripe.

a sight it was to see a solid consist of them rolling along the Rockaway Peninsula, 25 feet above the ground on a 5-mile-long concrete viaduct.

I was just a small boy then, but I wondered if the passengers enjoyed the view, especially during the summer. The double-deckers' air-conditioning



TWO PHOTOS, CLASSIC TRAINS COLLECTION

Prototype 200 (left) of 1932 differed from all its sisters in being just 72 feet long and lacking both motors and controls; this first double-decker is also the last, preserved at the Railroad Museum of Long Island, Riverhead. No. 205 (lower left), an early postwar car, shows off the double-deckers' standard 80-foot, 8¾-inch length.

left something to be desired, so I wonder if anyone ever opened a window to get a whiff of the nearby ocean. Had I been able to, I would have ridden the vestibule of the last car, for in those days the end door of the last car of just about every LIRR M.U. train would be

open in hot weather to cool the train. You could stand there on your own private observation platform and feel the warmth of the sun while enjoying the scents of creosote, traction motors, brakeshoes, and salt air. At the Beach 98th Street station, the aroma became

mixed with cotton candy, saltwater taffy, and popcorn from Playland, the nearby amusement park with its calliope and wooden roller coaster providing sounds as pleasurable as the ocean waves crashing three blocks away.

My first ride on a double-decker came on a trip to the 1964-65 New York World's Fair. When the New York Mets moved to Shea Stadium in Flushing from the Polo Grounds in 1964, it was even better for me, since the World's Fair station also served Shea. After Mets games, I always led the charge through the train to find the nearest



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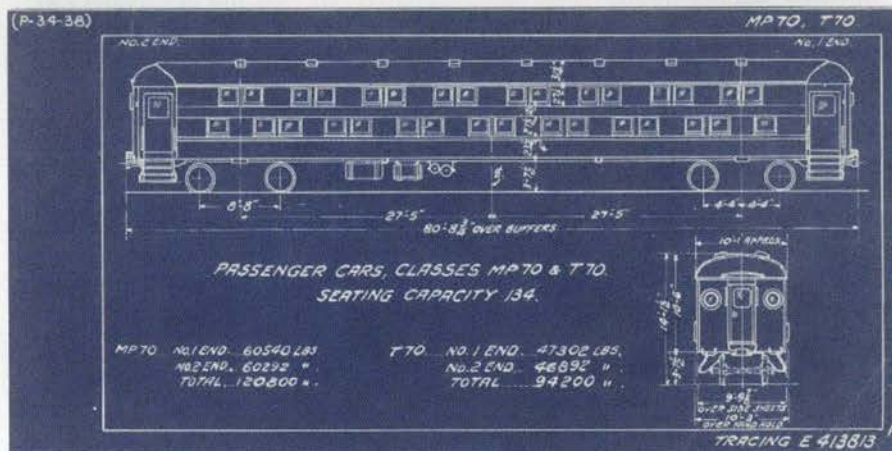
Sporting orange ends for better visibility, car 1328 heads east out of Jamaica station in October 1958. The two-tone gray livery designed by Lester Tichy was author Boland's favorite.

double-decker and then either step up or down to find seats. When you found seats for four, it was like sitting in a luncheonette booth with no table. It made conversation with friends easier, although when you sat with strangers, they avoided eye-to-eye contact. It was good practice for riding the subways.

For this Mets fan, half my fun was riding the double-deckers to Shea. Late one weekend afternoon after a game, I landed in the first car, so I walked to the front. The vestibule door behind the engineer was usually closed, and most times a green curtain was pulled down over the window to prevent railfan eyes like mine from watching. Other times, the door would be open and the can-



HENRY RAUDENBUSH



CLASSIC TRAINS COLLECTION

vas hung from the top of the frame. As I got to the door this time, I was in for a surprise: closed door but no curtain!

The next 15 minutes were spent in fascination as I watched the engineer handle our train. I can still hear the low, steady drone of the double-decker gearing as the Westinghouse motors slowly accelerated. The whining got higher and higher as the train gained speed. I was fascinated by the green "MAS" indication of the cab signal—it looked like a miniature traffic light—meaning Maximum Authorized Speed. I stayed there until the speed-control whistle sounded and the yellow "30" became illuminated as we began to approach Jamaica station, where we, like so many other LIRR riders, changed trains.

200, 201, 1347, et al

Over the years, I became pretty knowledgeable about double-deckers

An interior view of a rebuilt car (top) shows the double-deckers' unique up-down seating arrangement, while a blueprint for the two 1937 cars notes a capacity of 134, not the actual 132.

and began to look for the three prewar experimental cars with their two rows of roof vents. There was No. 200, a nonpowered trailer that also lacked operating controls. Built in 1932, this was the first double-decker. Unfortunately, I never got the chance to ride it. Then there were Nos. 201 and 1347, built as a "bride-and-groom" set in 1937; one car was a control-trailer, the other a control-motor. The pair was separated before my time, and I saw trailer 201 only once, but motor 1347 always seemed to show up and I rode it often.

Although riders at first liked them because they were new, the double-deckers proved to be unpopular with passengers and crews, and subsequent

orders were for longer, single-level cars with 3-2 seating. Yet to my surprise, the Long Island began to rebuild them in 1967. The rebuilds wore orange stripes along the letterboard with large, orange speed lettering at the bottom of the car. They had new tinted, sealed windows, and most of them lacked the road's circular "Dashing Dan" herald, making them easy to spot. Among the rebuilds' interior features were new, more-comfortable seats and improved air-conditioning. Alas, the rebuilding program ended after only 10 cars were done.

Near the end, the double-deckers operated in solid consists of 10 cars, just as they did in their early days. Corrosion of their steel underframe and aluminum carbody via electrolysis would soon force their retirement. I remember being at Valley Stream station late one afternoon when a solid consist went by with motors, ballast, and rails all creating an unforgettable sound on the elevated structure. Control motors, motorized trailers, rebuilt cars, cars with stripes, cars without stripes, a pre-war car, cars with Dashing Dan heralds, cars without Dashing Dan heralds, the lone car painted in MTA white and blue—the double-deckers' entire history passed before me in a few short seconds. And just like that, they were gone.

In January '71, just over a year before their retirement, a solid train of double-deckers looks like a long, thin apartment building at Jamaica.

Bound for Long Beach, four double-deckers and a 1950's single-level car cross the old wooden trestle over Reynolds Channel in February 1968.

It was a moment in time, forever etched in my mind. And the best part was the expression the engineer gave me as he passed. He just glanced at me to see that I was watching his train. I was. We made eye contact for a split second and then he looked back to the track ahead of him. He knew I liked what I saw. He didn't know I was the double-deckers' biggest fan.

Say it ain't so!

I didn't know about the last run of the double-deckers until it was too late. Rebuild No. 1301 ended it all on the afternoon of February 29, 1972, with a trip from Hempstead to Penn Station. The 1301 was on the west end of the train, and one local television station showed film of the train on its 10 p.m. news. The LIRR said the cars were phased out, but the newspapers were more direct. "The Route of the Dashing Commuter turned into the rout of the double-decker," began one story.

It was a tough article to read, with unkind words about my favorite cars. I had heard the stories that the double-deckers were a bad design and unpopular, but you couldn't convince me. Then again, I never had to collect tickets from the passengers sitting in the lower tier, below the aisle of the car.



F. G. ZAHN



JIM GILLIN

Minutes away from their Penn Station destination, double- and single-deck cars on a Port Washington train pass PRR's Sunnyside Yard in 1955.

Wet aisles could be a problem for those seated on the lower level. Their facing seats earned them the nickname "knee-knockers." And I was no coach-cleaner, either, so maybe those cubicles were tough to clean. But I never heard an engineer complain about how they operated.

As a railfan and a rail commuter, I've ridden a lot of cars over the years on the Long Island Rail Road, but there's has been nothing like the double-deckers. A few years ago I remember hearing talk that there might be an M.U. version of the new, bilevel car now used in LIRR diesel service, but I wasn't worried. I knew it wouldn't happen. And it didn't. I knew there would never be anything like the double-deckers. And there hasn't. ■



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More on our website

A roster of the LIRR's double-deckers is available at our website, www.classictrainsmag.com