

## 50 YEARS AGO By Alan Bradley

In 1954 Robert Menzies was Australian Prime Minister, Henry Bolte was a year away from becoming Premier of Victoria, and Ron Barassi played in his first VFL Grand Final. Early that year the Ballarat tramways dealt with heavy traffic for a Royal tour, but lost two trams in a month due to accident damage.

### The Royal tour

In 1954 Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip made the first visit to Australia by a reigning British monarch. Ballarat was included in the visit. Streets and buildings were decorated with crowns, flags and special lighting. The Sturt Street floral clock (now relocated to the Gardens) was opened the day before the visit. Not to be outdone the SEC decorated tramway overhead poles, and decked tram No. 38 with red, white and blue bunting and the Royal Coat of Arms.

In those loyal days everything the Queen did on tour was of interest. No mention of a republic in those days. The *Ballarat Courier* reported that the Royal couple had flown over Ballarat on the way to Adelaide, and that Prince Phillip had passed through in 1945. It was also reported that Ballarat "trammies" were prepared to have a shorter break between shifts, and have a shorter lunch break, to provide an adequate tram service on the day of the Royal visit. This was an expression of their loyalty to the Queen.

On Saturday morning 6 March 1954 the Royal Couple arrived on the Royal Train at Ballarat Railway Station. From there they travelled by open car along Sturt Street to the Gardens, and then back to the Station, in a journey named "The Royal Progress". A crowd of 120,000 lined the streets to watch. Ballarat pride swelled when the Queen praised the Begonia display.

Prior to the Queen's arrival passengers from numerous special trains embarked at Ballarat and Wendouree Stations, and went by tram to viewing spots. Trams ran to the City Oval every five minutes until 9 am. During the "Royal Progress" the streets affected were closed, and trams ran a shuttle service. Once the Royal couple had left the crowds went to other attractions - the Begonia Festival rowing regatta, the Gardens, horse racing and trotting. Trams were packed throughout the day.

50 years ago the Begonia Festival was in its second year. The day after the Royal visit was a Sunday. Large crowds flocked to the Gardens to see the Begonia hothouse, and a "Music for the People" concert. The *Ballarat Courier* noted: "Trams, which ran at frequent intervals to deal with the abnormal number of travellers, also found progress difficult. They had frequently to stop while cars

were moved from the line, but drivers remained good-tempered and considerate throughout". The Museum faces similar conditions for Begonia Festival traffic half a century later.

### **The two accidents**

At about 8 am on 15 April 1954 tram No. 37, the first bogie car to run in Ballarat, was bound for Sebastopol. It collided with a semi-trailer at the corner of Drummond Street South and South Street. Motorman Dave Kellett suffered a fractured leg and the conductor suffered slight injuries, but the tram passengers were uninjured. The semi-trailer capsized onto its side, but its driver somehow escaped injury. Two trams were needed to pull No. 37 back onto the rails, before it was towed back to the depot.

Less than a month later, one of Ballarat's most spectacular tramway accidents occurred. During the early evening of 8 May 1954 tram No. 24 (the first ex-Melbourne tram to run in Ballarat) arrived at the corner of Sturt and Lydiard Streets. It was due to run the 6.28 pm service to Mt Pleasant. Motorman Frank Callahan left the tram and walked across the road to the SEC tramway offices. The tram rolled driverless down the hill on the north side of Sturt Street. At the bottom of the hill the tram left the rails and ran across Grenville Street, somehow without hitting a car or pedestrian. It finally crashed through a brick wall into an empty office of the Bucks Head Hotel (on the south-east corner of Bridge and Grenville Streets).

The folklore that "wide-eyed drinkers in the bar were showered with bricks and mortar" was just that - folklore. Incredibly no-one was injured. A female passenger rode No. 24 down the hill seated in the saloon, and suffered only shock. A nine year old boy had left the hotel office seconds before the tram crashed through the wall. The Courier noted: "Within minutes of the crash a tramway man, Mr Frank Callahan, hurried to the scene, and after making numerous inquiries, appeared to be on the verge of collapsing". He rested in the hotel then went to the tramway office. Meanwhile efforts were made to shift No. 24. After three hours of work, which included a snapped truck cable, it was finally hauled away.

### **The aftermath**

Both trams were extensively damaged, and neither car ran again. No. 37 had its front cabin torn off, and No. 24's front left-hand corner pillar was torn out. Both trams were scrapped in 1955 and the bodies sold. Single truck car No. 16 was scrapped about the same time. Three bogie cars came from Geelong in 1956 as replacements.

Former tramway employee Les Edwards told the author during the 1980s that a man named Hodgson, son of the Ballarat Depot Foreman, bought the body of No. 24. It was placed on a property in Wilson Street, Ballarat East. The bricks from the hotel were still on the tram body!

The Bucks Head Hotel was demolished in 1960, two years short of its centenary. The hotel had opened 25 years before the horse trams, and from 1887 to 1937 marked the city tramway terminus (before the terminus was shifted to the "Post Office corner").

What of the men involved in these accidents? Motorman Frank Callahan was suspended after No. 24's runaway, and later sacked. Former union delegate Herb Knight recalled in 1981: "There were points in front of the tram, and they hadn't been turned against the tram. So we lost that one. Naturally we tried but he lost his job. They felt it was negligent on his part. He should have turned the points in front of the tram, which would have sent it up Lydiard Street. It wouldn't have run down the hill at all".

Dave Kellett continued working as a motorman, occasionally filling in as an inspector, until the Ballarat tramways closed in 1971. In 1996 he recalled his part in the collision involving No. 37: "I do remember one thing, I was hanging onto the side of the tram after the accident, just as well I had my overcoat on. Someone dragged me onto the road, which I thought was pretty stupid. I was taken to hospital. I really got working on the knee and leg. I've still got the scar, I've got a plate in there. Since then I've had a reconstruction of the knee. They wanted to send me connying for a while, I said no. I went driving, it never worried me at all, even when I went past the same spot".

50 years after these events No. 24 and No. 37 are both long gone. Even the tramway itself is history, except of course for the section through the Gardens Reserve. The Begonia Display that so impressed the Queen in 1954, still impresses visitors today. The Begonia Festival has gone through several crises, but still survives.

### **Possible photos from disc**

2428i: Tram No. 24 in Lydiard St. North, terminating to the north of Sturt St outside the Post Office prior to shunting at the crossover during the Royal visit on 6 March 1954. Two months later No. 24 ran into the Bucks Head Hotel and never ran again. (Photo: Keith Kings)

2430i: Ballarat No. 16 stored at the rear of the SEC Wendouree Parade Depot on 22 January 1955. In partially derelict condition, destination box, head light glass, trolley poles and some blinds removed. (Photo: Keith Kings)

412i: Colour view of decorated tram No. 38 taken in Lydiard Street North during the Queen's visit to Ballarat on 6 March 1954. (Photo: Keith Kings)

1896i: Black and white view of decorated tram No. 38, on the depot access track in Wendouree Parade. (Kodak postcard. From Les Denmead collection)