

Ballarat Tramway Museum 50 Years On

Today we celebrate the vision, dedication and sheer hard work of many people over the last 50 years – half a century! Without you all – many of whom are here today – the Ballarat tramway system would be just a memory and a collection of photos, films and videos. I hesitate to mention individuals who have contributed so much – as I do not want to leave anyone out – but I would like to mention and acknowledge Richard Gilbert as, I think, the only person who has served on the Board for most, if not all, the last half century. Richard can tell you about early Board meetings on cold nights sitting in 26 or 27 at the Depot and then sleeping in the trams!

I must say though that this fifty year celebration and reflection is a little unnerving to the extent that it does not seem to me all that long ago that we were in 1971 forming what then became the Ballarat Tramway Preservation Society – now, of course, the Ballarat Tramway Museum. Indeed my memories of the SEC provincial tramway systems seem quite fresh. I do, however, only just remember Geelong trams – and the colour bar traffic lights at the intersection of Ryrie and Moorabool Streets. Much fresher are the memories of waiting in a four wheeler at the Lydiard Street North railway gates at night for the Overland to get out of the way and watching the rather fascinating light signaling system at the loops from a Sebastopol line tram. And there was Bendigo, wonderful as well, with memories grinding up the hill out of the city centre on an Eaglehawk tram.

The SEC did treat us well with trams and equipment. Perhaps this also flowed from some relief on its part as the SEC was keen to get rid of the loss-making provincial tramways it had inherited from various electric supply companies. For a long time this desire was thwarted while the then Country Party held the

balance of power in the Legislative Council. As I said though, the SEC was very supportive of our enterprise and allowed our trams to remain in the then SEC Tram Depot on the north side of Lake Wendouree for a year or so pending the building of the new Depot in the South Gardens and did provide a great deal of equipment and advice. The SEC support was very evident on the opening day of our tramway when the then SEC Chairman Trethowan drove 40 into Wendouree Parade – after a short tutoring from me on how to drive one of “his” trams. He did well and I did not have to grab the controls!

The formation of the BTPS was a combined effort between those in Ballarat and Melbourne. As one might expect, it was a process that had its ups and downs – particularly as it involved “outsiders” from Melbourne who, though having energy and some good ideas, may not have been, or perceived to have been, aware of and sensitive to local issues. The Ballarat group formed at a meeting on 18 April 1971 and the Melbourne group in the same month in the iconic Room 11 at the Victorian Railways Institute; in the Flinders Street Station building offices. The two groups came together at a public meeting – reported in the Ballarat Courier on 31 May 1971. This was a very significant achievement in itself, which cannot be fully appreciated without some feeling for the dynamics of the time. As Richard Gilbert recalled:¹

The Ballarat group regarded the Melbourne group with a bit of suspicion, maybe we looked like a bunch of rebel university students, as was in vogue at the time and many of our group were indeed at Uni, and the politically controversial Vietnam War was on then. When we arrived, their Chairman, Melton Foo, insisted the proceedings be recorded on a tape recorder and Bill Jessup objected stating that he would not know where the recordings would end up.

It was all great stuff, and we can laugh about it now, but there were times when it looked as though the whole project could be lost as a result of these sort of “encounters”.

¹ *Fares Please* interview with Richard Gilbert.

The extent of the achievement also needs to be viewed in light of the then opposition of the Ballarat City Council – and from some particularly virulent opponents who were then members of that Council. To say that the City Council did not like trams was a serious understatement!

There were many other challenges faced and overcome on the road – or track – to tramway operations. The SEC equipment had problems as a result of its ongoing strategy of closing down the provincial tramways and spending as little as possible – though the Wendouree Parade track was, fortunately, in passable condition. A significant issue was the need for a new 600v DC power supply as the converters the SEC used to supply tramway power were unsuitable for future use. So a new power station was required; as was a new tram depot as the SEC depot was not available for operational use.

There were also issues to be resolved in relation to public liability insurance for operations and an operating agreement with the Ballarat City Council. I well remember meetings with insurance brokers and underwriters who struggled with the idea of assessing risk and pricing insurance for an electric tramway running on a public road run by a group of volunteers – “computer says NO”! Eventually the insurers were happy - though that is not quite the right word – as was the Council for operations between the Gardens pillars. Naturally, Council approval depended on finding a satisfactory public risk insurer and policy – so it was fraught and tricky at times.

Unsurprisingly, one of the issues raised by insurers and the Council was the qualification and licensing of tram drivers. Some of us were then also drivers working for the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board and so that was a good basis – but even M&MTB drivers needed training on and accreditation for two motor trams which were long gone in Melbourne, apart from works trams, scrubbers etc. We had discussions with the M&MTB and I well remember the afternoon when M&MTB Traffic Manager Elliott – I think he was Deputy at the time – rang me to say that they would support us by training and accrediting our tram drivers.

Many most enjoyable Sunday mornings followed in M&MTB works tram number 16 on a fairly deserted St George's Road in Melbourne's north. Some amazing emergency braking - with clouds of sand and the smell of burning brake shoes - took place as we hurtled the thing up and down the road. When we finished the morning we would take 16 back over the hump to Preston Workshops where Jack Fuller, then the head of the M&MTB Driving School, who conducted the training - and a thrill-packed morning - would complete the experience by inviting the trainee drivers to climb onto the roof of a W2 tram and hold the live contact wire. The Tramways Union had banned driver roof climbing to untangle trolley poles etc by that stage as drivers had died - not by electrocution but from heart attacks as a result of climbing the vertical steps which were often very slippery, as was the roof. And you realize the roof of a W2, or any other tram for that matter, is quite high when you climb it! In any event not a practice encouraged now - OH and S would go spare - but it was fun to have done it under supervision as was done previously in M&MTB driver training.

These were some memories from the early days and, as they say, the rest is history - but a history only made possible by the vision, dedication and sheer hard work of so many people who were involved in the years which followed. And in terms of hard work I cannot fail to mention and acknowledge the magnificent tramcar restoration and rebuilding work that is a feature of these years. It is really wonderful to see the skills involved being applied and passed on to future generations in and through this work. The beauty of the work done and the ultimate results are a real pleasure to observe and enjoy.

Now in 2021 the Ballarat Tramway Museum goes from strength to strength as more trams are acquired and a new depot extension and museum are under construction. But this is a continuing story and for another day - and I am sure for one in another 50 years!

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak today and on such an auspicious occasion. It has been a great pleasure revisiting the 1970s and beyond with you

all today – and to be able to catch up with so many people I have not seen for far too many years.

Clyde Croft

29 May 2021

Sebastopol

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