

PROVINCIAL TRAMWAYS

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVINCIAL TRAMWAYS WHEN TAKEN OVER BY THE STATE ELECTRICITY COMMISSION

The condition of the tramway systems was, to a large extent, a reflection of the relative prosperity of the private companies.

Geelong was a much more recent installation, (14th March, 1912), operated by a prosperous company, whereas Ballarat (18th August, 1905) and Bendigo (14th April, 1903), there was also the conditions of the franchises held by the companies and naturally, the private company nearing the end of its term and faced with the possibility of having to remove its assets, could not be expected to be lavish on its improvements or even maintenance. The position at Geelong was that the tramways assets were taken over by the Commission at a reasonable valuation as they were in fair order for the existing requirements. There had also been quite recent extensions on the Belmont and North Geelong routes. As for Ballarat and Bendigo, these systems could only be described as very decrepit.

The Commission considered that apart from such items as land, they had no value whatever, and the systems were really just scrap. There may have been some features as between Ballarat and Bendigo, which were hard to understand, as the undertakings were both owned by the one company, for instance, Bendigo had a depot of sound construction and, in the city area, there were substantial lengths of double track, fully blue stone paved and more or less, in original condition. On the other hand, Ballarat had an old car barn which, incidentally had to be propped up, about the time the State Electricity Commission took over, to allow trams to be moved from the pits to the workshop area. The section in Lydiard Street, between Sturt Street and the Railway Station, had very little substantially constructed track. It was generally held that as Bendigo was the first installation of the two, the company spent too liberally in that city, so that Ballarat had to be content with a makeshift depot from the horse trams and a less substantially constructed track system. The rolling stock of the old company was largely a relic from the Sydney trams, as trailers were purchased from that city to

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which ends were built by Duncan and Fraser, and placed on short wheel based Brill trucks. All trams had handbrakes only, and had reached a very bad condition, both structurally and electrically in the latter years of the company's operations; during these years it was not unusual for trams to be running in service with only one motor functioning. As soon as the future of the tramways was more or less determined, and before the Commission actually acquired the undertaking, it was necessary to purchase a number of second-hand meadow bank single truck trams from the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Board, in order to maintain the service.

The tramway tracks generally were in deplorable condition. Most of the track was carried on a concrete stringer which had subsided and broken over the years and the paving alongside the rails only, was carried out with stone sets, so the condition of the track surface can be easily imagined. In these days the motormen of trams in these cities were frequently addressed as "Skipper" and perhaps his duty at the front end of a bouncing, swaying single truck tram had something in common with yachting. Traffic employees had to be expert in the use of short lengths of angle iron to get tram wheels back on to the rails or get the tram to take the points, and another essential equipment on the trams was a short length of V.I.R. covered cable. The dirty conditions of the rails with the depressed tracks would frequently result in loss of rail-tram contact when the trams were stopped. In this event the driver would place the control on the first power notch and step down with the cable to make the necessary circuit to set the tram in motion.

Pieces of rope were carried to tie up broken life-guards. The overhead was also in bad condition and breakages were prevalent. At one stage, a check at Ballarat showed about 300 ears were not sweated to the trolley wire, but simply bound with a few inches of copper wire. Such, then, was the condition of the Ballarat and Bendigo systems at the end of the company's term of operation.