

The Geelong Tramways, A Brief History

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

Geelong was the last of the three provincial cities of Victoria to receive a tramway system. Bendigo and Ballarat had horse drawn tramways operating prior to 1900. These were converted to electric operation (after short lived experiments with electric battery and steam) early after the turn of the century.

Electric tramways were seriously considered for Geelong as long ago as the 1880's. Rumours were frequent as to the intention of enterprising groups to give Geelong this almost unbelievable advantage. The introduction of tramways was usually bracketed with the installation of electric lighting. During the 1880's at least two tramway companies were formed. The confusion was considerable and to clarify the issue the Town Council invited tenders in September 1888 "for the concession, construction, and working of electric tramways in Geelong and surrounding districts". Only one tender was received but the project soon collapsed.

The introduction of trams received a further fillip when in August 1890 the Government Gazette published an Order in Council authorising construction of tramways in Geelong. However, having got the Order in Council nobody knew what to do about it and the project lapsed again.

TRAMS ARRIVE

On the 3rd of May 1901 electricity was supplied for the first time to Geelong and suburbs. Although electricity was available and public support for a tramway system was strong, Geelong had to wait until the 14th of March 1912 for the inauguration of the service. On this memorable day the population turned out in force to witness the innumerable ceremonies, speeches, afternoon teas, and the usual ^{ensuing} ~~succeeding~~ band concerts. ~~The 2nd of 1901~~

Reports of the day stated that "Bunting was flown everywhere, establishments made special displays, numbers of them liberated their staff for an hour and the school children had a holiday for the occasion." The four official cars were extravagantly decorated. For example the Newtown and Chilwell car had "a blending of pale blue and green. Evergreens formed the background for festoons of pale blue flowers, unique trumpet lilies, silken blue flags were clustered on the canopy of the car front and back and the borough name was emblazoned on either side." At the entrance to each of the three cities; West, Geelong and Newtown, elaborate ceremonies were performed. Silken cords were cut with silver scissors by the Mayoresses and lengthy speeches were made by Company officials, Mayors, Members of Parliament and other leading citizens.

At 6 p.m. the trams were available to the public and between that time and 11 p.m. 7,000 passengers were carried. Weeks later the daily average was still 7,000 proving the need for efficient public transport. (Benders would be delighted). Fares were quite expensive for the ^{day} ~~city~~. Threepence to Newtown or West and a penny ha'penny to the Post Office. The cleanliness of the trams contrasted with that of the earlier buses and the Company prided itself on the fact that "every night when the cars return to the Depot men will be in attendance to wash down, clean and disinfect them for the run next morning. A vacuum cleaning apparatus will search every corner for the germ laden dust".

The Melbourne Electric Supply Company Ltd, which already provided the local domestic supply of electricity in Geelong, held the franchise to operate the tramways. Two routes-to Newtown and Geelong West-opened the service with short branches to the railway station and wharf and a short spur to a Depot adjacent to the power station on the corner of Brougham and Yarra Streets. Double track was laid in the central city area with single track and passing

loops elsewhere. At the "Wharf" terminus the trams serviced the steamers operating across the Bay to Melbourne. In 1912 the steamships Courier, Coogee, and Edina provided fast and frequent services to Melbourne. Over the years with declining patronage and interruptions to the tram time tables from late arrivals the steamers ceased to run (1938) and the "Wharf" Branch was torn up and relocated in ~~Brougham~~ St. (1940) to form the "Beach" terminus.

Along with the tramways, the company also commenced operation of a bus line between Geelong and East. Three Milnes-Daimler buses with bodies of the same style as the saloon sections of the trams were placed on the route. Their solid rubber tyres apparently had an injurious effect on the roads, as it is reported that they had to be rerouted on occasions to better thoroughfares. However, their bodies, in turn, suffered heavily during the course of their operations, and were provided with suitable strong bracing. When the East Geelong tramway was opened on the 12th of October 1922, they were withdrawn and sold. When the bracing was removed to enable the bodies to be separated from the chassis and lifting ropes attached for the purpose, the bodies collapsed.

The extension of the tramway system to South Geelong (along Moorabool St.) to the Barwon River) was delayed until late 1913 because the railways feared competition!

THE TWENTIES

The 1920's saw considerable expansion of the system with four route extensions and a number of tramcars added to the roster. In September 1927 the Chilwell line opened, followed in October by the line to Belmont (subsequent to the completion of a new bridge across the Barwon River.). The expanding industrial area of North Geelong received its tramway in July 1928, while the rails to Eastern Park were put into service in September 1930. Thus the Geelong tramways entered the 1930's with 27 cars and 11 $3\frac{1}{4}$ miles of track, the maximum

reached.

In these early years the trams flourished. The operation was profitable and their advent opened up considerable advantages for the public. It ~~is~~ ^{was} learned that "since the tramways came into operation, Queens Park has become a very popular resort. In the past the long distance from town, and the steep hill to be negotiated, have combined to handicap the place in popular favour. Now the trams run almost to the top of the hill with the result that a great many more people are visiting the park." It is difficult to see people making this walk in 1971!

THE THIRTIES

The State Electricity Commission took over the tramways on the 1st of September 1930. Unlike the Ballarat and Bendigo tramways which were inherited at the same time, the Geelong system was in excellent condition. The fleet was improved with the purchase of four second hand Birney cars from the Port Adelaide system. The depression was the central feature of the early '30's and a considerable decline in passengers resulted. In 1932, much against the wishes of the crews, one man operation was introduced. The war saw the use of conductresses on the trams for the first time. During the war the trams carried heavy loadings and managed to survive the shortages of materials and maintenance fairly well.

The entry of bogie cars in 1947 spelt the end of an interesting feature of the local tramways.—coloured route indicator lights. Although not introduced when the system opened in 1912 they were in use by 1915. Four colours were used:—red, white, blue and green. For example, Newtown trams displayed a green light, Ghilwell—green and blue, and North—red and white. In 1951 the rolling stock reached a maximum with 31 passenger tramcars.

Like today's bus services, through routing was practised. Before and after WWII Newtown West and Eastern Park cars ran to City, whilst Chilwell cars ran to East and Belmont to North. Newtown and West cars ran to Beach or Railway as required. About the end of 1952 amendments were made as follows; Chilwell to Beach or Station, East to West, Newtown to Park and North to Belmont. Most single track sections were protected by coloured signals operated by the trolley wheel passing through a contactor on the overhead wire.

The problem of head-on accidents with motorists on single track sections of the routes caused the SEC to fit red marker lights on the trams. This on some trams was later extended to brightly illuminated black and yellow stripes on both ends of the cars.

CLOSURE

The marriage between the SEC and the Tramways companies was more by default than by design. The SEC was created to unify sources of electricity and its distribution. Although the Commission was only an electricity manufacturing and supply company, its acquisition of the Electric Supply Company (who owned the provincial tramways) necessitated the purchase of the tramway systems in Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong. With declining patronage and increasingly ~~anxious~~ deterioration of the trams and track the SEC became increasingly anxious to divest itself of the trams. Subsequent to an enquiry, the State Government announced plans in November 1955 to replace the Geelong trams with privately operated bus services. The closure was ~~to be~~ undertaken in 4 steps: firstly on January 8, 1956 the last cars ran on the routes to East, West and Chilwell, together with the workings to Beach and Railway. The second abandonment was on the 24th of January when Newtown and Eastern Beach routes ceased and third on the 4th of March with the closure of North.

Just as the service commenced in a blaze of glory, so did its finish. On the 25th of March 1956 huge crowds turned out to farewell the trams which had served the transport needs of the city for just over 44 years. Gaily decorated trams traversed the last line, Belmont-City, and were crowded with enthusiasts and well-wishers. Numerous ceremonies took place on the final run, presentations and speeches were made, and the then Mayor, Sir Roy Fidge, took the controls for one of the last sections. Quickly, the last vestiges of the tramway system disappeared. The shed in Brougham St. was closed, the power lines came down and the trams were either scrapped or transferred to Ballarat and Bendigo. So ended a vital and colourful aspect of Geelong's history.

APPEAL

The Barwon Apex Club is returning a double bogie tram to Geelong early in October. To help meet transport and "museum" display costs, the Club is running an appeal. Donations should be forwarded to the "Barwon Apex Tram Appeal", P.O. BOX 412, Geelong 3220. Unless otherwise indicated, all donations will be publicly acknowledged.

The Club is also interested in obtaining photographs, relics and items of interest for possible inclusion in the pictorial display to be associated with the tram. Enquiries should be directed to the above address or to 17 Buckland Ave. Newtown (ph. 21-1793).

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