

Please return to JOHN V.

Item "TRAM BUILDING"

by Clive Boxer. Recorded circa 1992/93

'BACK IN THEM DAYS'

AN ORAL HISTORY OF PRESTON

EDITED BY ROGER J. JONES



Were did you get most of your wood?

All around sawmills, one down near Preston railway station, Cook's Timber Yard. Where there was a sawmill, we'd go. Sometimes you'd have to buy it by the load. There was a chap, I think his name was Brown. Who used to come down with a load on his two horse wagon sometimes and dump it in our yard in Preston.

How often would you go out selling wood?

Everyday. Cut in the morning, out in the afternoon if we could. You might miss a couple of days - just cutting wood. Sometimes you'd run out of wood. As much as we could, we'd go out every day.

How did you deliver?

Horse and cart mainly. I never had my licence till I was eighteen. Then we had a 1924 Chev truck. I went bottle-o-ing with it too. Later on we got an old '27 or '28 Studebaker. Cut the cabin off it, cut it in half and made a truck out of that. We'd load that with about a ton of wood, as much as we could put on it, and cart that.

Stan Ashman

What do you remember of Cook's Timber Yard?

Cook's Timber Yard in Mary St was a feature of my early life. At this stage my father had died and I was ten years old. One of my chores was to go down to Cook's Timber Yard with a hand truck and collect kindling which were the offcuts from the mill. You paid 3d, got a little ticket and you took as much as you could fit on your hand truck. The first thing you did was look for the four longest pieces of timber you could find and they went into the corners of the truck because the longer the length of the corners, the more you could pile on your truck. Sometimes you would get it up to at least six feet, over and above the height of your hand truck. That was always the chore on a Friday night, Cook's Timber Yard for the kindling.

Norma Witt

Tram building

What did you do in your first job and how did you get it?

They did not have any apprentices in those days. I was put on as an improver about August 1925 as a motor bodybuilder and I served about six years there. Then they put us off during the height of the Depression to get outside experience, then after about eighteen months I went

back for a job as they had started to build trams again. The old boss didn't think that he wanted me, but sent me a telegram to go in and get a doctor's certificate to see that I was alright. I was there until 1974, when I retired.

Could you describe the building and finishing of a tram, and how long it took?

At one stage there, we understood it took six men about six weeks to do it, that's right from the frame up, and finished. They reckoned that we were turning out at least one tram a week over the twelve months. Then of course, as the years went on, they seemed to take longer. They put six in a gang and they would start right from the bottom, up. Then if you put the floor in this time, well you would go on something else the next tram - alternate around. That is with the old W class trams.

It started off with the boilermakers and blacksmiths, and then it used to come over to the bodyshop and the bodymakers would put all the woodwork on, square the whole job up. The trimmers would be after the bodymakers, then it would go to the paint shop. Then it would come back to the bodyshop to be fitted up. The trimmers shop used to make all the seats and the blinds. Then the electricians did their job. The pipefitters put their work in underneath the floors. The pipes were to put the air through to the brakes. The electrical was for the lighting and controls.

What were working conditions at the Preston Tram Workshops?

Well the conditions were pretty good. I know it was pretty cold in the winter time because they had the big doors for the trams to go in and out, on the ends of the sheds, but then in later years they put these coke heaters in which made them much warmer. Of course in those days we didn't have any machinery much on the job, such as air drills for boring holes. We had to do most things with hand tools such as hand drills, or a brace and bit, or screw drivers. Not like they have got today, they have everything. There were no ear muffs until later years, no safety glasses. You had to buy your own tools. Nothing was supplied. An apprentice boy used to borrow £5 from the Tramways Board and pay that off with 2s 6d a week. Our foreman used to come along each month and see what sort of tools you had.

What were your working hours? Did they change very much over time?

Well at forty four hours, was half past seven until five, half past seven until quarter to twelve I think it was on Saturdays, and then of course they got the forty hours, which was much easier and you had Saturdays off. It was still half past seven till quarter past four. I lived up in Hawker Avenue and I could catch a tram from Tyler St punctually up there at about ten past seven and be down at the workshops at a little after quarter past or twenty past seven. The trams were on time and there was no mucking around, but of a night in latter years they got a tram that used to pick us up at the workshop and take us right up to Tyler Street.

With so many men working there, was it a disciplined working environment?

Yes it was. There was no telling the boss what to do. He knew what he wanted and that's the way it was. But the discipline was very good, I never had any faults with it at all. The bosses were quite good to get along with. We had an English boss and he was in charge, and he knew what he wanted. He'd come along and tell you if he didn't like what you was doing. I think there were five hundred men there at times. They were mainly Australians, and there were a few Englishmen. In later years we got Italians, Greeks and Maltese.

Could you describe industrial relations at the Workshops?

The union steward was there and you could talk to him about things, and he would go into the Trades Hall and ask about matters and he'd come back and tell you. Of course in those days the chaps or stewards, coming to collect your money would come out on a tram. They didn't have a car or anything, or they would ride a bike. I know that when I was foreman I would talk to the shop steward, and he would go away and come back again the next day and say 'Yes you can do that'. For example when tram cars were smashed or panels were rusting out, they asked the chief engineer, 'Could we pop rivet panels on?' and he found out and said 'Yes, you can huck rivet them on'. Well they spoke to the steward about it, and we worked everything out. As the boilermakers put the original panels on, they took them off, and then the bodymakers could put the new panel back on with these huck rivets, which worked out very well. So there was no arguments then.

What work breaks did you have?

You took your own lunch. They had a mess room there - they built a mess room a few years later, and you were expected to go into the mess room and have your dinner in there. But some of the shops didn't come over, they were a bit too far away, as you only got three quarters of an hour for your dinner. Eventually they got ten minutes for morning tea, in the later years. So we used to get the labourer to go and fill the billies up with hot water, so that when the men knocked off, the billy was there on a bench and they picked it up and had their ten minutes for morning tea. So it was easily enough arranged, no problems with management.

What were wages for people working there, such as tradesmen?

Back when I started I think it was about £4 3s. A couple of men were getting 3s more a week than the others because they reckoned that they were alright, but we found they weren't, and they were brought back to the fold. In later years the wage gradually got up. There was no big money like they are getting now. Tradesmen there got a little bit less than the outside tradesmen because they used to get a free pass which was a book of tickets. They could go on the tram anytime they liked with these passes, Saturdays, Sundays or any day.

Were all tram repairs done at Preston or were there other workshops?

No, they were all done at Preston. Holden Motor Bodies made trams too at one stage, and they used to come out to Preston to be finished. But all repairs were at Preston, unless it was a little running repair, then it was done in a depot. All accidents were done at Preston. You could get some bad smashes. It could be it all smashed back into the saloon, or a side wiped out of a tram. I've seen the fronts on them get taken right off. We went out to estimate the cost of one, and a poor beggar's false teeth were sitting up there in the front of the tram. Laughable at the time! It was said that autumn leaves on tram lines could cause close following trams to skid into one another. You would get some rear ends sometimes. A dash panel just pushed in a bit would be done at a depot, but if a windshield got broken or a bump in the front, then they would come out to Preston. If a tram was over a certain age - five or six years, then they brought them in for a general overhaul. They were overhauled in the bodyshop, taken to the paintshop to be repainted, came back to the bodyshop to be fitted up, or sometimes we would fit them up in the paintshop. The air for the brakes and electrical gear was all checked, wheels fixed up, so it was a general repair overall.

What buildings were at the Preston Tram Workshops when you started and which were added later?

Well the paintshop was there and the bodyshop, the engineers' shop and the electrical shop. The blacksmiths' shop was added later if I remember rightly. The stores were added later, and the offices and mess room. Earlier they built the trams down in Holden Street, North Fitzroy, and used to bring them up on a low loader with a couple of horses, and then we would fit them out in Preston until they got the line through.

What was the impact of the Great Depression on the Workshops?

Very, very bad. In the bodyshop they used to work one week on, and one week off. The truck shop was something similar. Some of them were a bit lucky, they might have got three weeks in a month. In the truck shop where they used to fix the trucks up underneath the undercarriage, sometimes they would pick men in the bodyshop to grease them, and they might get another day or two in.

Did they keep building trams in the Depression?

No, they only repaired them or overhauled them. They didn't start building trams until I went back in about 1932 or 1933 I think. They started building the W5s then, and carried on from there. Then they had a lull in between. Then we got onto the W6s and W7s. They built a few buses in between.

What work was undertaken during the war in the Workshops?

We built pontoons and bridge crossings, and made ammunition boxes. We worked overtime on those, sometimes working Saturdays and Sundays. We got pretty busy on that. Got to have a war to get busy! Great fitches of oregon, some were about twenty feet long, or twenty four feet by fourteen inches by six inches were used. You would have to lift that around on the break down saws. No cranes for lifting it. So the machinists were kept pretty busy on that. We also built 'meat wagons', as we called them, which were built of wood and had a treated canvas cover pulled over them. They took troops up to Alice Springs and were also used to transport munition workers. They had slat seats in them. They used to get in the back of them. They had a step down from them. There wasn't time to do anything else to them for comfort. They were 'meat wagons' as far as we were concerned, just like the fellows used to deliver the meat in.

We also worked on Thornycroft and Reo buses - austerity buses. You had to enter in from the front and had a bit of a round on the roof. They had steel panels on the sides, dropped windows and slat seats in them - so you all sat longways.

Clive Boxer

Abattoirs

They came down Sydney Rd, drive 'em all down the drovers. They'd be walking with them and their dogs. Down Bell St, then they'd come down Austral Ave to the abattoirs in Oakover Rd. Used to wake us up of a night, with sheep bleating and dogs yapping at them. As I say, they had a man to go ahead and shut all the gates to stop the sheep going in. It used to be frightening 'til we first got to know what it was they were doing. They had to wait 'til there was no traffic on the road. They might be walking for days 'til they got to the abattoirs.

They had a little sort of a lorry with a white canvas cover over like a tent, with flaps at the back to open. When they opened it, you could see the sheep all hanging on hooks each side inside the little lorry. Almost to the ground it was, just a little flat thing. They carted all the sheep around to the butcher's shops. You used to see the men carry and take them off the hooks and take them into the shop. That's how they took it around till they got motors.

Florence McDonald

Ham and bacon curing

Hutton's, all the kids of the area remember well. This is because at the Bell St siding, the pigs arrived in trucks, and men from Hutton's were sent down to drive the pigs back