

## Brief History of Melbourne's Horse Omnibus System

The first public transport service to operate in Victoria was provided by W F E Liardet, who began running a "double-bodied carriage" between Melbourne and Sandridge (Port Melbourne) in December 1840. Four years later the "Brighton mail car", which was also licensed to carry six passengers, began serving the isolated bayside settlement of Brighton. In 1847 St Kilda was provided with a similar facility. Horse drawn cabs were introduced in the middle 1840s and by 1849 a cab rank had been established in Collins Street. To control the growing transport industry the Hackney Carriage Act was passed in 1850. During the following decade several omnibus services were established to provide public transport between the town and outer lying areas. The number of omnibus services operating out of Bourke Street increased from nine in 1856 to twenty eight in 1860.

Early in 1869 the Melbourne Omnibus Company, with an authorised capital of 25,000 pounds, was established "to provide a safe, easy and cheap means of transit to and from the various suburbs and along the lines of the principal streets of the city". The main promoters of the company were stage coach proprietors, F B Clapp and Henry Hoyt, and William McCulloch, a general carrier. Their new venture was based on the profitable omnibus services already established in Great Britain, France and America. Twenty five vehicles were imported from New York and Sydney, and the first line of buses, from the Spencer Street railway station to the Birmingham Arms hotel on the corner of Smith and Johnston Streets, Collingwood, began running on 23 April 1869.

The buses operated from early morning to midnight, and a five minute service was provided during the busy parts of the day. A standard fare of three pence was charged for a journey along the whole or any part of the route. This was half the fare charged by cabs and the earlier buses. Press advertisements advised that "The public will find the company's omnibuses safe, commodious, clean and comfortable in any weather; their drivers civil, steady and trustworthy men; and punctuality may be relied on."

Following the success of the Collingwood line, the company began expanding its enterprise. By 1880 the company had buses running from the Flinders Street railway station to Ascot Vale, Brunswick, Coburg, Clifton Hill, Flemington, Moonee Ponds and Pentridge, from the Royal Arcade in Bourke Street, to Albert Park, Emerald Hill (South Melbourne), Hawthorn, Prahran, South Yarra, St Kilda and Windsor, and from the company's office in Bourke Street to Sandridge (Port Melbourne). The services were efficient and well patronized. In commenting on town life in Australia in 1883, R E N Twopeny recorded 'Nowhere do omnibuses drive a more thriving trade than in Melbourne, and they deserve it, for they are fast, clean, roomy and well managed'.

Suburban stables to house the horses and vehicles were established in Fitzroy, Richmond, Hotham (North Melbourne), Clifton Hill, Emerald Hill, Prahran, St Kilda, Sandridge, Brunswick, North Fitzroy and Moonee Ponds. The company also built a central workshop and feed-works near the Fitzroy stables, where buses were built and repaired, and where fodder was processed for delivery to the other stables. The Hotham stables contained a breaking-in yard where all the company's horses were broken-in and trained.

Although not stated at the formation of the company, the founding directors always intended to construct and operate tramways rather than omnibuses. Over a long period the company unsuccessfully petitioned the government and the municipalities for permission to introduce tramways. In 1877 the company went into voluntary liquidation and re-formed as the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company. The company's buses were then carrying about five million passengers annually.

By 1882 the company was working fifteen lines, employing 178 buses, over 1,600 horses and 470 men. For the year ended 30 September 1881 the buses carried more than ten million passengers without a serious accident. During a parliamentary enquiry into the company's proposal to introduce tramways, F B Clapp, the Managing Director, admitted that the buses could not cope with the demand for services. In 1883, parliament finally passed the Melbourne Tramways & Omnibus Company's Act (No.765), which allowed the establishment of tramways within the City of Melbourne and eleven adjoining municipalities.

The company originally planned that the horse bus stables would be used to house the proposed horse-drawn trams. However, it was later decided that most of the proposed tramways would be powered by underground cables, and new buildings were constructed in other locations to house the cable trams.

As the growing cable tramway network replaced the existing bus services the displaced vehicles were used to open up new services further out. Some of these bus services were later replaced by municipal electric tramways, and the last of the company's horse bus services (from the North Carlton cable tram terminus in Rathdowne Street to Albion Street, East Brunswick) did not close until 3 May 1916. The Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company's lease of the cable tram system expired on 30 June 1916, and exactly three years later a liquidator was appointed to wind up the company.

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