

# HECTIC ELECTRIC TRAM

**It was the first of its kind  
when horse-and-buggy  
ruled the highways**

By REX SHANE

Illustrations by courtesy of the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

**B**IZARRE features marked the inauguration of Australia's first electric tramway on October 14, 1889, and its brief, stormy history. This historic line ran from Box Hill railway station, not far from Melbourne (V.), to Doncaster, three miles away.

Australians first saw electric trams at the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1888, when two imported cars gave demonstration runs. A few horse-and-buggy age citizens were brave enough to risk their lives in the new contraptions during the 58-day show.

After the exhibition, the Melbourne Cable Tram Company bought one car as a lighting plant. The second looked like being a white elephant until speculative land-subdividers sent high-pressure salesmen into the Doncaster district.

A railway had reached the rural village of Box Hill in 1882, boosting the orchard district of Doncaster as a picnic resort. The local publican built a high, wooden tower as a lookout, but it was burnt down. A gale wrecked his second tower. Undeterred, he erected a third, 285ft high, with 597 steps. It proved to be a major attraction at his Tower Hotel.

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With land sales attracting hundreds of buyers and picknickers to Doncaster every weekend, investors saw a ready-made public demanding transport from Box Hill, and formed the Box Hill and Doncaster Electric Tramway Company. It bought the second electric tram.

On Easter Monday, 1890, the tram carried 1,500 passengers and the company showed a small profit for its first half-year. Then a land syndicate disputed its right-of-way. After negotiations, the syndicate served notice to cease trespass by June 20, 1891. The tram stopped running on June 19, and next day the syndicate erected fences across the line on its boundaries.

But the electric tram had won many converts among its former opponents. By next morning, the fences had been wrecked and the timber and wire stolen. The syndicate hit back by felling the poles and wrecking the power-line.

## Effigy's ashes in a rough coffin

On June 22, indignant residents met at the local council chambers, only to be told that there was no hope of a settlement by negotiation. They hung an effigy of the syndicate's secretary at the Doncaster terminus with a notice inviting all and sundry to attend the public burning on the following Saturday night.

A crowd of 800 gathered for the show. The effigy's "ashes" were dumped into a rough coffin, with a sheep's head for good measure. Then a singing, dancing funeral procession moved to the syndicate's land where a mock burial service ended with three

enthusiastic groans for the obstructive "corpse."

Despite local support, legal action forced the tram company into liquidation early in 1892, but H. J. Hilton formed a new company operating along a slightly deviated route. The tram ran again in March, only to strike more trouble through sabotage.

## Fear of vandals and drunkards

By June, 1889, the company had spent £5,000 on a permanent way, including payments to land owners along the track, but the enterprise was not popular with all residents. Some regarded it as a death blow to the promised railway to Doncaster. To others, it meant an invasion of trippers, vandals, and drunken parties.

Pushes were then becoming notorious. They raided orchards, destroyed trees and as-

saulted protesting owners. The owners retaliated with mantraps, spring-guns, and armed patrols. They did not want the larrikin-carrying trams at any price.

When protests failed to stop construction, vigilantes beat up the work gangs and wrecked lines until the company secured a strong police guard to complete the work. It was ready for the official opening on October 14, 1889. A big crowd of prominent citizens attended.

Stubborn owners, who refused to grant a right-of-way, had forced the line to run around sharp curves and up steep grades. The car could carry 40 passengers—if its 12 h.p. motor was in good order. Fully packed, it made the first run in 20 minutes.

The traffic increased so much that a second, more powerful car was ordered. However, a member of Parliament who had opposed the line then demanded free trans-

port on production of his gold pass. His fare was demanded and he started an opposition cab service from Kew, nearer Melbourne.

In nine days he had only one passenger—himself. That ended the competitive line.

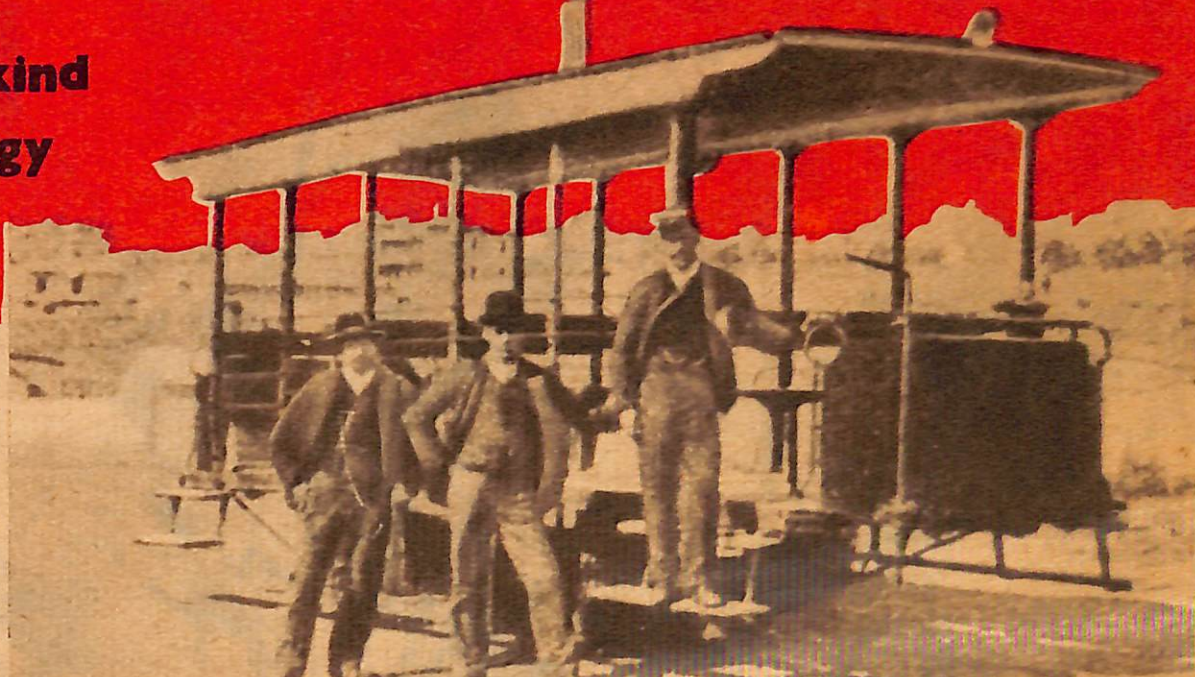
The company was in financial trouble when Hilton stored the new car and, with one of its motors in the old car, saved 25 per cent on running costs. But the land boom burst. When the local banks closed its doors, Hilton's company took a bad blow. Despite this, the tram ran intermittently until April 14, 1893, when the company abandoned the struggle.

Hilton then leased the whole undertaking for 1/ a week. Determined to keep the wheels turning, he became his own stoker, driver, electrical mechanic, general manager and car-cleaner, only to meet with more sabotage, including interference with brakes.

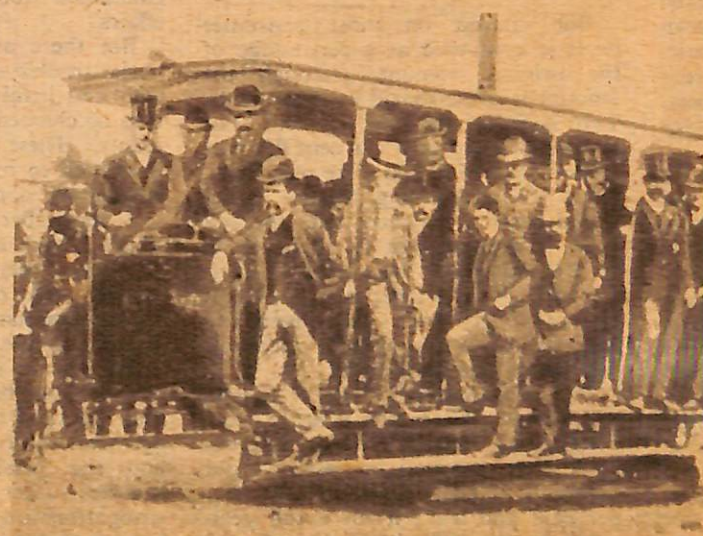
## Brakes failed on a picnic trip

Catering for one Sunday-school picnic with 45 passengers on the tram Hilton found that the brakes would not work when he started downhill for the return journey. With terrified adults clutching screaming children, the open car hurtled down the track, squealing around the bends, but somehow managed to stay on the rails until an up-grade slowed it.

Even Hilton's efforts to keep the tram running were in vain. He was forced to surrender his lease and on January 6, 1896 the hectic history of Australia's first electric tramway ended. Only the concrete base of its engine-house remains as a marker to its memory. #



Australia's first electric tram stands ready, with its crew, for the opening three-mile run on the line between Box Hill and Doncaster, near Melbourne. Land sales were booming in the nearby districts.



On its first run between Box Hill and Doncaster on Easter Monday, 1890, the tram carried this batch of passengers.