

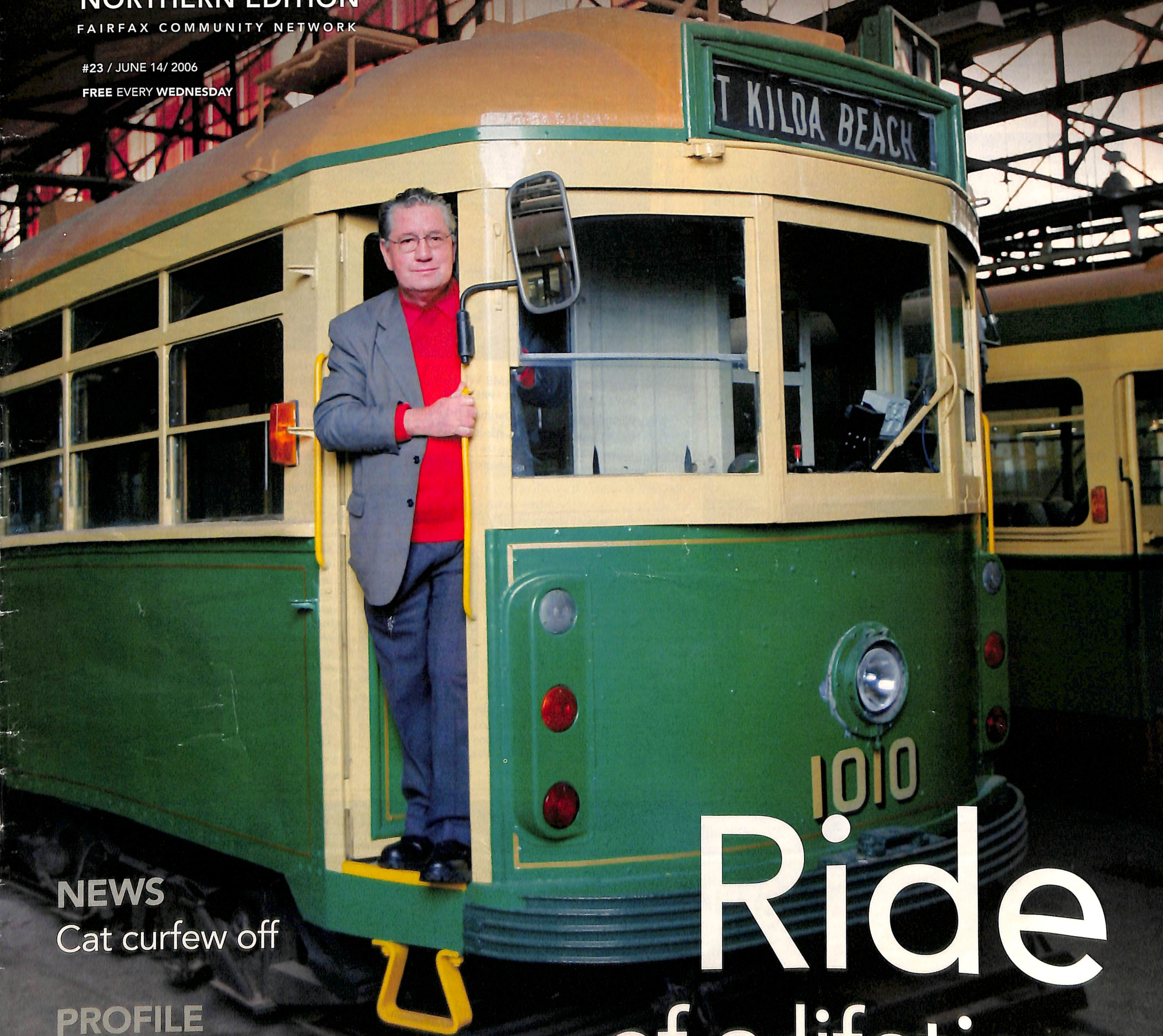
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# Ride of a lifetime





## The ride of a LIFETIME

Norman Cross is on a journey he hopes will never end. As a tram enthusiast and 43-year veteran of the Preston Tram Workshops, he has seen them all come and go. He discusses his passion with KAREN MURPHY. Pictures by PETER WEAVING.

■ IT'S a funny world, the world of tram spotters (sometimes known as gunzels). While the rest of us public transport users find ourselves, too often, cursing late services and a lack of funding, the enthusiasts speak in more affectionate terms.

Instead of our swearing and impotent mutterings, they wonder about the wellbeing of the 2031, the breaking system on the 345 or the electrics on the 627.

Just ask Norman Cross, former tram worker, current author and lifetime tram enthusiast who rattles off tram numbers like a bingo caller and who gives the impression of knowing the whereabouts of almost every tram built in Melbourne.

For example, he explains that by 1999 the 845 had done a remarkable four million kilometres, the 906 went to Auckland, the 930 to Edmonton, while the 968 is located in a school in Essendon.

It comes as no surprise to find that Cross, who worked at the Preston Tram Workshops from 1959 to 2002, not only dislikes the term "gunzel" but was one of the inspirations behind the successful 1986 film about a tram-buff called Malcolm.

As he walks TMT through the historic Preston site – home of the

world-class W-class trams – he explains how that involvement came about.

"I developed a love of trams and trains from my father who worked in the railways and from the time I was three I could remember the particular numbers of the trams passing our house in Northcote, particularly number 268, which was the same number as our house," he says.

"That one was my first love and from an early age I started a tram memorabilia collection.

"One day I was working here at Preston and the film-makers Nadia Tass and David Parker arrived to do some research. One of the bosses said they had better talk to me, so I sat down with them and had a chat.

"Then I had to go back to work, so Nadia came to visit me at home one Saturday. She saw all my posters, my model trams, my signs and destination rolls and she said, 'Oh my God, Norm. We've invented someone who actually exists!'

"I taught Colin Friels how to talk tram talk, how we refer to trams and was on set quite a bit where a few of us would play with the models used in the movie while David Parker was setting up a shot. And then he'd be ready but we couldn't

stop and he'd yell at us and tell us to grow up."

Norm Cross worked at the Preston Tramways Workshops during some of its busiest, most productive times, in an era when the current crippling skills shortages could hardly have been imagined.

Then, from its establishment in the 1920s and long before the era of subcontracting and outsourcing, the workshops employed more than 650 painters, screen-printers, chemists, photographers, electricians, metal and wood workers as well as book-keepers, accountants and administration staff.

All located on 7.3 hectares on the corner of St George's Road and Miller Street in Preston, the workshops were not then so much a place of employment as a self-reliant community.

The facility had its own football, soccer and cricket teams, a choir and a heritage-listed amenities hall that served as a prosaic lunchroom and a ceremonial centre hosting everything from dinner dances to theatre performances, to trade investitures and weddings.

It also has national significance and is listed by the National Trust in a description that reads: "The Preston Tramways Workshops





played a pivotal role in the development of the Melbourne tramways by providing a facility which could meet the needs of a rapidly expanding and modernising public transport system, which soon became the most extensive in the world".

Yet with its proudly unionised workforce, the Preston Workshops were also of state importance, and were once known as the East Wing of Trades Hall with workers there central to the dramatic tram dispute of 1990 when hundreds of trams clogged city streets in an attempt to dissuade the Cain Government from doing away with Melbourne's iconic conductors.

Again Norm Cross was involved. "In a way I started it," he says.

"I came in one day and saw trams that had been brought onto the site in the middle of the night being worked on by strangers.

"I asked what was going on and they told me they were being redesigned for one-man operation. So I called the union and within an hour we had a picket line.

"Five weeks that went on with all the trams blockading the city. There was even one – the 2020 – that became home to a young couple who moved in and set up house, pot plants and bedding included.

"That young woman got very upset when the blockade was over and gave the impression that she really thought it was her home."

Yet above all, the Preston Workshops were the home of the locally-beloved W-Class trams that proved over time to be the sturdiest, most popular and recognisable of all Melbourne trams.

Even now, though some of the 700 trams built at Preston between 1926 and 1956 are entering their

dotage, still those in working condition trundle along our city circle line as well as delighting tourists in San Francisco, Seattle and Christchurch.

There is also, of course, one very famous W-class tram now making its way through a snowy, royal park in Copenhagen.

Up to 30 of these trams are still housed at the Preston workshops including an original "art-tram" painted by celebrated Australian artist Clifton Pugh in a program that ran from 1978 to 1983 and which included the efforts of such luminaries as Brett Whiteley, Mirka Mora and Michael Leunig.

Not surprisingly Norm Cross also

needed to fix it and was going to come back and repaint it but sadly died before he could do that."

So now the 504 rests quietly in the Preston sheds, waiting for a painter who will never come.

But work of a different kind continues on the site.

Now owned by United Group Limited, the much-reduced workforce of 35 specialises in tram repairs, finding space around the old to fix the new.

There is also hope the workshops may win some construction work for the fleet of new trams promised recently by the Bracks Government and now the subject of a local design competition.

Those attached to the site and its proud history believe that if Melbourne once produced the best trams in the world, we could well do it again.

Word: Gunzel  
 Definition: A peculiarly Australian - even Melburnian - term for a tram enthusiast. A derogatory description used to denote a pecking order within the community of railway enthusiasts for a person who pursues useless and pointless railway enthusiast activities, thus used by train buffs to denigrate the activities of tram buffs.

had a certain involvement.

"Even though Clifton Pugh was a Labor man to his bootstraps, he had friends from all sides of politics and was a friend of (then Premier) Rupert Hamer," Cross says.

"They were having lunch one day when Pugh looked outside and saw a tram and said he'd like to paint one of them. So Hamer said 'why not?' And set up the program.

"He painted the 504 in 1977 but in 1985 it got smashed and was about to be scrapped, so I rang him and told him they were going to wreck it.

"Pugh agreed to give the money

