

CLASSIFICATION REPORT - W CLASS TRAMS

1. NAME OF ARTEFACT

W Series Trams.

2. LOCATION

Melbourne.

3. TYPE OF ARTEFACT

Public Transport Vehicles.

4. LISTING STATUS

Recommended for Classification at level 'A'

5. SUMMARY

Statement of Significance

Melbourne has long been a place characterised by its trams. Essentially the image is of W Series trams - the 305 operating and serviceable trams of Classes W - W7, built 1923-1956. Of timber framed superstructure and fine joinery, with dropped centre design and saloons at both ends, the trams are a distinctly Australasian development. Operating through the central city and developed to facilitate suburban expansion in the post World War One era, these robust trams are the predominant Melbourne icon, presenting a strong symbol of the city through their apparently ubiquitous presence, reflected in tourist photographs, postcards or souvenir badges, and in part representing a system which helped shape Melbourne in the post war era. An increasing number of cities throughout the world are developing tourist tramways with trams of mixed origin and style, and some are increasing their systems. Internationally, however, Lisbon and Oporto in Portugal, and Calcutta in India are the only other extensive electric networks known to the Trust, using trams of a vintage character. In this context Melbourne stands alone due to the distinct character of its stock. Well patterned into our history and a clear expression of daily life in Melbourne as they continue effectively to fulfill their practical function, the W Series trams are of state, national and international significance.

6. DESCRIPTION

6.1 Physical Description

The trams have a motorman's compartment at both ends. They are designed with a saloon at each end of a dropped centre compartment which contains two doorways with two sliding doors each side. (Of the seven surviving trams with canvas doors each side, three have been withdrawn in the past month for sale or scrap, and the remaining four are currently due for withdrawal). The dropped centre is flanked each side by a pair of entrance doors with external foot mounting boards. The carriage is supported on two four-wheel bogies with one motor driving each axle. An overhead trolley pole is located at each end of the tram. All trams feature a roof of canvas stretched over arched wooden slats.

The trams are compact and robust. Whereas there are some differences of bogies or body detailing according to class and modification, the image is as one. They are notable for the strong and fine joinery of the varnished, internal timber superstructure. Incandescent lights and leather belt pulls are examples of the internal elements which contribute to their character.

This Classification is of the W Series trams which are still in commuter service, even if only occasionally operated for this purpose, or which are operable. There are 305 such trams, being:

Class W/W1/W2: (Built 1923-31)	Nos 380, 431, 504, 510, 547, 568, 600, 646. (Total - 8)
Class W5: (Built 1934-39)	Nos 681, 682, 684, 685, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 752, 753, 754, 755, 757, 758, 759, 760, 764, 765, 767, 768, 769, 770, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 780, 781, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 793, 796, 797, 800, 802, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 814, 815, 816, 818, 819, 821, 823, 824, 826, 828, 829, 830, 831, 833, 834, 836, 837, 838. (Total - 97)
Class SW5: (Built 1939-40)	Nos 840-849. (Total - 10)
Class SW6:	Nos 850-969. (Total - 120)

(Built 1938-51)

Class W6: Nos 970-979, 981-1000. (Total - 30)
(Built 1951-55)

Class W7: Nos 1001-1040. (Total - 40)
(Built 1955-56)

6.2 Context

The W Series trams are closely identified with both Melbourne's central city "metropolitan" function, and with its suburban image. They have been instrumental in the commercial extension of the city, for example, along Collins Street and St Kilda Road and are generally a key element in the portrayal of the city character with tourist promotion invariably focusing on the trams in front of Flinders Street Station, and along St Kilda Road. Melbourne's suburban image also incorporates the W Series trams which travel the regular grid of main roads through the "middle suburbs" that were substantially built up between the wars.

6.3 Present Use

The W Series trams are in use for public transport.

6.4 Present Condition

A total of 819 W Series cars have been built. Most of the fleet of approximately 305 remaining vehicles have been modernised in various respects since the 1970s. A few have been retained for heritage purposes. Alterations include: conversion of trams with three side doors and blinds; standardisation of drop centre seating arrangement; replacement of internal sliding doors and their heavy timber bulkheads; modifications to windows; installation of ceilings; the exterior colour scheme and corporate logo; padding of timber seats in central compartment; removal of jarrah floor slats; replacement of dark green seat upholstery with brown; use of "timber" veneer laminex for internal sides; replacement of small characteristic features, such as the original pear-shaped standee hangers which are now generally triangular, and the replacement of the timber pole to which the leather belt pull is attached with a chromed steel one.

The trams have a reputation for being relatively trouble free as to work performance, with a low incidence of need for repair and maintenance due to normal wear and tear. Present Government policy is

that they be progressively replaced, with only a handful being retained as tourist novelties. Their maintenance schedule has been neglected during the 1980s. About twenty-five have been stripped or scrapped in 1989-90. This program continues, as well as sale to local, interstate and overseas museums and tourist tramway operations. The last trams which retain most original fittings are due to be taken out of operation in early September 1990.

7. HISTORY

Melbourne's first cable tram travelled to Richmond on 11 November 1885, signalling replacement of the horse-drawn buses then operating extensively within Melbourne. The cable tram network spread to cover 74 kilometres and became the most extensive single integrated system in the world. It is assessed that no other city conceived and carried into effect a consolidated public tramway system of this scale.

The Box Hill and Doncaster Tramway Company introduced Australia's first electric tramway in 1889, and other Melbourne electric tramway systems were developed in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1919 the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board was formed to take control of all Melbourne's cable and electric tramways, and to convert them to an all-electric network. It commenced a vigorous program of extending the system and building a standardised rolling stock.

In 1923 the MMTB began building the W Class tram series, which continued until 1956. Construction of some of the early vehicles was contracted out to private companies, but by the late 1920s, all construction took place at the MMTB's Preston Workshops (1926).

The first drop-centre trams in Melbourne originated with the Prahran and Malvern Tramways Trust in 1913. This drop-centre design, which evolved into the MMTB's W Series, is regarded as an Australasian development. The design was not adopted by the Brill streetcar construction company in the United States of America, which supplied rolling stock to the cities of many countries. In 1915 the St Louis Car Company displayed one such "sowbelly" tram at San Francisco, and Los Angeles Railway had 183 of these built. Their initial attraction was easier stepping heights which facilitated access, especially for women with long skirts. The last Sowbellies ran in 1947. The drop centre design was not particularly successful in California and never became standard there.

The W Series drop centre trams were also designed to be part open. This feature is regarded as a product of the Australian climate, and it is not surprising to find that the part open vehicle was also found in California, where, however, most vehicles were open at both ends rather than in the middle. The four W Series trams which retain blinds are our last link with the original "part open" tram concept. (The W Series' original 4 and 3 blinded doors have since been modified to 2 doors.)

There was some use of part open, or "combination" cars in Britain, not for climatic reasons, but to separate smokers from non-smokers. This may also have been a factor in the design of the W Series. In Egypt, similar cars were used to provide separate harem compartment.

Trams in other cities had elements of the W Series features, but none were the same. Open trams for joy-riding, sometimes double-decker, operated in resort towns such as Blackpool, Rothesay, the Isle of Mann, Southend on Sea and Sintra (Portugal). Centre entrance cars became common in Europe after about 1929/30, but they were all enclosed and the idea was to lower the step height and/or improve passenger flow. Other cities which retain vintage trams - Lisbon, Oporto, Calcutta - do not, and never did, have part open part closed trams. Melbourne's drop centre trams are unique among the few operating vintage tramway systems which survive.

The MMTB was created as part of the rationalisation of urban services undertaken in the World War I period. Provision of public transport to the urban fringe was necessary to facilitate new housing in the period of post war demand. Electrification of the tramways contributed to the substantial increase in efficiency of travel to the suburbs in the interwar period. Although the actual increase in track length did not realise the massive expansion proposed in the MMTB's 1923 General Scheme, this plan precipitated multiple "Tramways" estates, often well in advance of, and distant from, the envisaged extensions. The W Series trams were an important instrument of a government policy which facilitated a major era of suburban developments in Melbourne, and remain prominent in the fabric of these "middle" suburbs.

The trams have always been understood in terms of the city they were built to serve; the town planning commission report of 1929, which dealt to a large extent with traffic considerations, proposed a series

of new road types, most of which included trams. In their turn, the trams were built to match the parkways and boulevards (some of which were planted out in the 20s) - a green colour scheme was chosen to "blend with trees lining the route".

Melbourne's electric tramway system is one of the most extensive in the world, and the W Series trams which have travelled it have become, literally, a part of Melbourne. By virtue of their apparent ubiquity and distinctiveness, they have come to characterise the city.

In the USA by the 1920s, motorbuses were the latest and favoured public transport development. While the MMTB was undertaking extension track renewal and intensive construction of rolling stock, in America the streetcar industry was under seige. In response, it developed the "PCC" (1935), a mass produced silent fast and comfortable tram of all steel construction incorporating the sleek lines of the modern age. Only one was built in Melbourne (1950). The SW5 Class tram (1939-40) marked a breakthrough in W Series design, being the first class to be built with sliding exterior doors. Internally, modernisations included the deletion of the bulkhead and internal sliding doors at the entrance of the saloon compartments.

The rise of the motor car in the 1950s saw the closure of most cities' tram systems, though in Europe and Asia, cities upgraded or built new systems. Only three other cities are known to retain vintage trams of the same general style as the W Series (apart from the drop centre), as part of an operating public transport system. These cities - Lisbon and Oporto in Portugal, and Calcutta in India - have significantly smaller systems than Melbourne's, and fewer trams.

Melbourne has retained a tramway system, complete with vintage trams, which is unique. The reasons for its survival bear further investigation, but would include the strength of the MMTB, and perhaps, the Tramways Union. In the 1940s MMTB chairman, Hector Bell, successfully argued that Melbourne's tramway system was the envy of the world, that the city's layout was particularly suited to tram and that the trams could not be matched by buses in their ability to shift crowds. In the early 1960s another Board chairman, Sir Robert Risson overcame a hostile press and government to save Melbourne's trams from the fate of those in Sydney, which finished in February 1961.

Ultimately the success of Melbourne's tramways system has been the most important factor in its survival. The trams have continued to provide the public transport function for the suburbs which they helped create. Melbourne's broad streets and regular layout have played an important part in the continued success of the system in the motor car era. The sheer size of the system has been another significant factor. Public support for the trams, in recent decades perhaps confirms the success of the system. The quality and durability of the W Class trams themselves has also contributed

to the system's survival. They were built in a tradition of government rolling stock construction which was established with railways in the nineteenth century, and designed specifically to endure the extensive distances of the Melbourne system.

The Hamer Government supported an initiative to establish a "Heritage Fleet" of trams of particular ages or virtue. Approximately a dozen of such trams have been restored and kept in running condition at the Hawthorn Depot. In the meantime, Melbourne trams have become famous throughout the world, and are eagerly sought by tram museums and cities which are busy developing small vintage tramways for tourist purposes. While Melbourne modernises or scraps its trams, other cities restore and feature them. Many have been purchased by private museums (or individual tram-lovers including entertainer Elton John). In the USA, San Francisco has purchased 10 W Class trams, Seattle runs its tourist tramway exclusively with its 5 W Class trams, and New Orleans runs 3 W Class trams on a newly developed riverfront tramway. Other USA cities known to be running, or displaying, Melbourne's W Class trams are San Jose, San Diego and Western Springs, California, Dallas Texas, and Durlarh and Chisolm in Minnesota.

San Francisco, Blackpool and the Isle of Mann have established the benefits to tourism of vintage trams. Other tourist tramways with vintage trams are being opened all the time, for example Scanton, Pasadena, Tucson, Lowell, Detroit, Philadelphia, Orlando, Portland, Barcelona, Hong Kong, Cleveland, and Nagasaki. Apparently, these lines are not generally cost-effective in themselves, but they are popular and have been installed by developers, municipalities and transit authorities to revitalise inner city areas and add to the attraction of market-places and tourist precincts. In Adelaide 21 Glenelg trams have been extensively rebuilt and serviced, and the Government is planning to extend the line and recall some of the other remaining original trams. Some cities - Freemantle, Galveston and Hiroshima for example - have even built reproduction vintage cars as originals are so scarce.

Melbourne has the good fortune to possess a whole network of vintage style trams still serving the original commuter task for which they were built. Coincidentally, this also constitutes a much greater, scarcer and more authentic tourist asset than any line which may be contrived for the benefit of tourists. In the past decade, the Melbourne tourist industry has recognised that trams and Melbourne are synonymous. Trams painted by popular artists have been introduced to augment the city's attraction and charter trams made available for tourists. Yet the present program of decommissioning W Series trams proceeds, apparently with the intention of restoring an unspecified, token number for tourist purposes. Melbourne must now decide whether it will maintain or dispense of its most authentic and unique tourist asset and icon. Melbourne faces the prospect of becoming indistinguishable from many other cities which operate vintage trams for tourists.

Despite the reduction of their maintenance program over the past decade, the W Series trams continue to provide an efficient and operationally reliable and cheap public transport service within the city and suburbs of Melbourne.

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