

70 Years of Government Buses

Melbourne's public transport in the middle of last century consisted of horse drawn cabs and buses. It was not until Mr Cameron, the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Board's first chairman, returned from a study trip overseas in February 1924 that Melbourne made plans for motorised buses.

Mr Cameron brought back useful information concerning the engineering and construction of motor buses and by the 3rd of January 1925, Melbourne operated its first bus service from Latrobe Street via Swanston Street, St Kilda Road, High Street, Brighton Road and Glenhuntly Road to Elsternwick Station. Met Bus has since improved this original service and it now operates as route 216 from Deer Park West to Brighton via the City, St Kilda Road and Elsternwick Railway Station.

MOTORISED BUSES

The Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Board was the first tramway operator in Australia to run motorised buses after the end of World War One. This makes the Government Bus division the oldest continuous street transport operator of motor buses in Australia. The Tramways Board had two main purposes for the introduction of the buses. The first was to counter competition from the private bus operators (competition was continuous and at times serious between drivers and operators as well as trams), the second was to aid the conversion of its cable tramways to electric tramways.

By June 1926, there were 56 buses in the Government fleet operating three suburban bus routes and being used on successive cable tram conversion schemes as required. The first motor buses were built on Tilling Stevens petrol electric chassis with 29, 30 and 32 seat bodies. A "de luxe" tourist bus seating 25 passengers in cane armchairs was added to the fleet, built by the Nicholson Street cable tram workshops in 1929 (presently known as North Fitzroy Bus Garage) and used on a series of six routes around the suburbs.

As the severe economic depression of the late 1920's and early 1930's eased, the Tramways Board entered upon the second phase of its motorised bus operation. This was stimulated partly by their decision to continue with the conversion of cable tramways and partly by the need to commence new routes which could be best served by buses.

Conversion of the Elizabeth Street Cable trams commenced at North Melbourne on 21st July, 1935, when buses began running the interim service. Some of the "original" fleet plus two "new" buses, a Leyland "Lioness" and an Albion "Valiant" were used. These new buses were powered by compression ignition engines, otherwise known as diesels.



Tilling Stevens 1925 motorised bus

DIESEL BUSES

The Met Bus route, Footscray to Sunshine, began on the 6th of December 1936 along with several other new routes. A small garage to house and service twelve buses was built opposite the electric tram depot at Footscray (now Met Bus Footscray depot) while a larger depot for 29 vehicles was opened at Port Melbourne.

Many new vehicles were required for this expansion. Ten Leyland Cub chassis received Ruskin Motors bodies in 1935, and were followed by 33 more with Preston Workshops bodies during 1936 - 1938. The most interesting vehicle of the period was a Daimler chassis with a fluid flywheel, a self changing gear box and a diesel engine.

On the 8th of August 1938, an extension was made from Sunshine to Deer Park. This extension still exists today on Met Bus route 216.

When the Board's second chairman, H.H. Bell Snr, returned from his overseas study tour in October 1938, his report indicated that he was most impressed with diesel buses and their development during the middle 1930's. He recommended that instead of converting the Bourke Street cable trams to electric trams, the Board should use diesel buses. Accordingly, tenders were called for 70 chassis and Leyland torque converter type units were accepted. One double deck body was to be imported from Leylands with 44 more built by local contract, and a 25 single deck bodies to be constructed by Preston Workshops.

Another 20 Leyland "Tiger" buses entered service during 1938 - 39, together with one chassis fitted with special equipment to enable compressed coal gas to be used as the fuel, bringing the fleet to 113 vehicles. A new tourist bus was imported from Canada, but circumstances saw it on route work for the rest of its life. It had a full front body, two power operated doors, treadle operated rear door, sensitised door edges, heating, rubber mudguards, special interior lighting and a public address system. During this time, the Footscray bus depot was extended.

THE WAR YEARS

The outbreak of war caused the Federal Government to ask the Board to conserve fuel stocks as much as possible, and this resulted in the cable trams running longer than expected. They were finally withdrawn during the evening of 26th of October 1940, with the new double decker buses completing the nights service.

Conductresses were employed from September 1941, initially working the city area as assistants ensuring that "Brown out" conditions of reduced interior and exterior lighting were completed to avoid possible air raids. This continued until June 1943.

Double deck and single deck rear entrance buses were used for overall wartime advertising and continued into the post-war years until 1950. An extension opened from Sunshine to Sunshine Park on 29th of July 1945 as the war came to a swift end in the middle of the following month. This is still currently part of the Met Bus route 219.

The bus fleet emerged from this difficult period with its heavy diesels starting to show the strain and the majority of its numbers consisting of smaller units, most of the latter being emergency "Munitions" buses and limited life "Austerity" buses.

Over the next ten years the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Board purchased a number of newer vehicles as part of the post war re-equipment program. By 1954, an influx of 232 new Leylands buses in less than seven years caused a dramatic transformation to the bus fleet which resulted in most of the old vehicles being sold.

NEW SERVICES AND INITIATIVES

A service from Footscray to Sunshine via South Road had commenced on the 21st of November 1948, and it and the original route (via Ballarat Rd) were extended from Footscray station to the city on the 9th of November 1952. This is now similar to the Met Bus route 220 today. June 1952 saw the introduction of street collection fares by conductors or conductresses equipped with ticket issuing machines at four main stops in the city area. This proved successful and was extended.

Two experiments were conducted on the Bourke Street buses. "Honesty Boxes" were fitted to the 45 double deckers on the 7th of April 1952 but results were poor and their use was not extended. The last of the double decker buses was retired shortly after early in 1954. The second experiment was designed to ease congestion in bus doorways by introducing signs placed at each doorway displaying "Circulator Loading" - in at the front and out at the rear. This was initially well received and the concept, while not strictly enforced, is still used today.

Surveys were carried out late in 1953 on the North Kew and Sunshine/Deer Park routes to determine the likely patronage for express or minimum fare buses. The results showed that minimum fare buses on the North Kew route would be warranted and they commenced on the 12th of October. Industrial trouble took place about the same time in relation to the use of ticket machines by bus drivers and the question of one man operation of buses with more than 31 seats.

UNDERFLOOR ENGINE BUSES

The 25 underfloor engine buses, known as A.E.C. Regal MKIV, which had been built in 1956 were fitted with florescent interior lighting and were purchased for the Melbourne Olympic Games. In 1962 a contract was let for 100 new underfloor engine buses. These buses were the A.E.C. Regal MKVI. The "All Night" bus services that had been introduced a number of years ago, were withdrawn from service on the 17th of November 1968 due to lack of patronage. The Deer Park route was however extended westward to service a new housing area on the 15th of September 1969.

REAR ENGINE BUSES

During the early seventies, the Government bus fleet mainly consisted of A.E.C. buses. The first Volvo bus was put into service on the 30th of May 1977. These buses were mainly used throughout the late seventies and are still operational today. 130 M.A.N buses with Ansair bodies were ordered and delivered in the early 1980's and replaced the majority of the A.E.C. buses, some that were up to 29 years old. The average age of the bus fleet was then just under four years old.

On the 20th of November 1978, the City to Altona via the West Gate Bridge bus service was opened as route 232. This operates today under Met Bus.



New Livery on M.A.N. 2 bus 1995

METROPOLITAN TRANSIT AUTHORITY

On the 1st of July 1983, The Metropolitan Transit Authority was created replacing the old Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Board. Footscray depot was upgraded around the same time with new traffic offices and staff amenities plus a new vehicle maintenance and servicing complex. The integration of Train, Tram and Bus services allowed for a great improvement in the ticketing system with a single ticket now being valid for all transport modes based on time and not distance travelled.

AUTOMATIC VEHICLE MONITORING SYSTEM

The introduction of Automatic Vehicle Monitoring (AVM) in 1985 was an example of high technology in action. The AVM system enables communication with bus drivers, the monitoring of each bus on the systems network, and the creation of improved scheduling through recommending better running times. This created a more secure and publicly responsive transport system that was unique to the Government Bus and Tram Division.

THE PUBLIC TRANSPORT CORPORATION

On the 1st of July 1989, another change in name was decided upon. The Metropolitan Transit Authority became The Public Transport Corporation. During this time, delivery of 100 new M.A.N Mark 2 buses was nearly complete. Ten of the new buses were fitted with dual fuel, one bus fitted with a step lift for disabled passengers and the other six fitted with special air bags that allowed the bus to "deflate" on one side when picking up passengers. During the early nineties, the new M.A.N. Mark 2 buses received "pop up" security screens in the drivers compartment for improved safety measures.

MET BUS

During 1993, agreements by the Minister of Transport, Mr Brown and the Unions, paved the way for Automatic Ticketing Systems and tenders for the then existing Government Bus Division. The Public Transport Corporation tendered for all its bus services and were awarded the right to operate routes in the Footscray, Sunshine, Elwood, Brighton and Sandringham areas. This was won against private operators. The remaining two thirds of the original Government Bus Fleet was awarded to the National Bus Company.

The new Government Bus Division, known as Met Bus, started operation on the 28th of December 1993. Improvements were made to many existing routes with better frequencies to shopping centres and improved infrastructure. The buses are now cleaner and with the introduction of a fresh new colour scheme, improved presentation and customer service, a new image has been created.