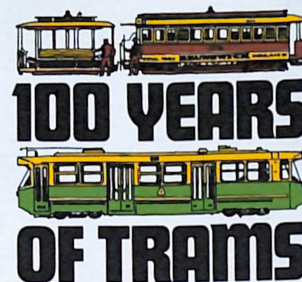


Media Information



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF MELBOURNE'S TRAMS: A SHORT HISTORY

When passengers took their seats on Melbourne's first cable tram departing from Richmond for Spencer Street on 11 November, 1885, they were about to enjoy the smoothest ride ever experienced over the rough and tumble roads of the nineteenth century city.

Two major elements had made possible this new-found comfort: the cable and the tram.

Trams had been used in industry for many years, ever since miners discovered it was easier to move ore-laden carts over rough ground by mounting them on rails.

Eventually, this principal was applied to passenger transport in the form of trains and trams.

Horse power was at this time still the most widespread means of pulling street transport, whether carts, omnibuses or the earliest trams.

But in 1869, an Englishman living in San Francisco, Andrew Hallidie, perfected a safer and smoother method of powering trams.

This was a cable, run in a channel under the road and between the rails, which was continuously propelled by a stationary engine located in an engine house at a particular point along the line. To start moving, the tram gripped hold of the cable by means of a mechanical device. To stop, the grip was let go.

By 1873, using Hallidie's inventions, the world's first cable car system came into operation in San Francisco.



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Closely watching developments across the Pacific was American-born transport entrepreneur Francis Boardman Clapp, whose horse omnibus fleet had already given Melbourne its first organised street transport.

One of the original tram buffs, Clapp had bought the Victorian patents to Hallidie's inventions and put pressure on the colonial government to legislate to allow the massive construction work necessary to give Melbourne the most advanced street transport system of the day.

In 1883 the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Act was passed and the local councils whose streets would become part of the network set up the Melbourne Tramways Trust to build tracks and engine houses.

Clapp, with New Zealand-born engineer George Duncan, selected the best features of the various systems in use in San Francisco, and Duncan further refined the system by improving the way trams negotiated curves.

The first line to be built ran from the corner of Bourke Street down Spencer Street, along Flinders Street, Wellington Parade and Bridge Road to Hawthorn Bridge. The road had to be excavated to a depth of nearly four feet and tunnels constructed which would house cables running in both directions.

The engine house for the line - still standing - was built on the corner of Punt and Bridge Roads. Here, large steam engines powered a 24,870 ft rope - as the cables were called - to the city, and a 14,754 ft rope to Hawthorn Bridge.

The cables consisted of six strands of seven steel wires with a hemp core. Threading the cable - the task which crowned the labour of engineers and construction gangs - called on the resources of an army of men and a team of horses. To drag the cable up Jolimont Hill, the number of horses had to be augmented to 25.

Over the next six years, many city streets and suburban thoroughfares witnessed similar upheavals and similar feats of engineering. By 1891, 44 miles of double track cable tramway had been built and 11 engine houses.

On completion, the whole system was leased to the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company - run by Francis Boardman Clapp - to operate regular services until the year 1916. Nice work, Mr Clapp!

As lines ran along every main street of the city and all major exit roads there was no room for competitors to the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company. This also meant that when electric trams began to appear, they could only be introduced in outlying, separated areas.

'Outlying' in those days described such suburbs as Prahran and Malvern, and it was these two councils who pioneered electric tramways in Melbourne.

The Prahran & Malvern Tramway Trust brought its first electric tram into service in 1910. By 1920 it had built over 35 route miles of track, operated nearly 100 trams, covered suburbs from St Kilda to Hawthorn to Mont Albert, and a number of other municipalities had begun to follow its lead.

But by 1920, Melbourne's tramways scene had changed considerably.

In 1916, the lease of the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company on the cable lines had run out. For the remainder of World War I its operations were temporarily taken over by the Melbourne Tramways Board until, on November 1, 1919, the Melbourne & Metropolitan Tramway Board was set up.

Alex Cameron, energetic head of the enterprising Prahran & Malvern Tramways Trust, became the Board's first chairman.

The Board not only inherited the cable lines but, in 1920, took over operations of the various municipal trusts' electric tramways.

By now, the cable system was wearing out, and carrying far more traffic than it had been designed for. The board embarked on major upgrading and extension of Melbourne's tramways - and electricity was the power of the future.

Through the 1920s Melbourne witnessed another major feat of engineering and construction that brought its tramways up to world standard. Essential to the dramatic extension of the network and expansion of rolling stock, was the building in 1925/26 of the tramway workshop at Preston.

Cable tramways were gradually phased out, some electrified, some replaced by motor buses - the up and coming transport of the time.

In the 1930s progress in electrification was slowed first by depression and then by world war. Cable trams received stays of execution, but the last dummy and car made the run to Northcote on October 26, 1940.

Back in 1920 when the M&MTB took over the electric rolling stock of the municipal tramways trusts, it inherited fleets of tramcars of all shapes and sizes. In the alphabetical classification system which the Board adopted, these various styles took up designations from 'A' Class to 'V' Class.

The Board standardised on a newly designed tram, based on one of the last trams of the Prahran & Malvern Tramway Trust, and this became the 'W' Class - Melbourne's familiar old 'green tram'.

At first, though, they weren't green. The original colour scheme, based on the Prahran & Malvern livery, was chocolate and cream. But when the St Kilda Road line was electrified, trams operating on that route were painted green to blend with the trees lining the road. Gradually, green and cream was adopted throughout the fleet.

The first 'W' Class tram was built in 1923 and variations on it - with brief experiments with 'X' and 'Y' classes - provided Melbourne with its distinctive style trams right through to the mid-70s, when the 'Z' Class began to make its streamlined appearance.

Today we have come the full circle and the tramways - now part of the Metropolitan Transit Authority - have now introduced a new 'A' Class Tram.