

THE HORSE OMNIBUSES

The Melbourne Omnibus Company commenced the service on the 23rd March 1869, with a fleet of eleven buses, 25 men and 90 horses running from the City to the Birmingham Hotel on the corner of Smith and Johnston Streets Fitzroy.

The Company announced in its first half-yearly report dated Oct. 1869, that more routes would be opened as soon as new buses are built, it stated that 22 new buses would soon be ready.

During the following years the Company continued with its building and development plans and opened many new routes in spite of the fact that its object was to instal and operate a horse tram system in Melbourne. In 1877 it went into voluntary liquidation and reformed as the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Company Limited.

By Nov. 1881 the bus fleet had grown to 158, operating from ten different stables. the allocation was -

Fitzroy	37
Clifton Hill	17
Richmond	27
Moatham	9
Moonee Ponds	5
Brunswick	17
Emerald Hill	10
St Kilda	8
Sandridge	11
Prahran	17
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	158.

A close check was kept on the loading and the number of buses required at various points at different times of the day. The Company was careful to avoid sending buses to the City for which there was no loading, nevertheless a regular, reliable and reasonably frequent service was maintained.

Consideration of the welfare of the horses was of prime importance, the individual temperaments and idiosyncrasies were understood, some were stated to be frisky, others quiet, some strong and sturdy, and these factors had a bearing on the type of work to which they were allotted. Long shifts and fatigue were avoided ~~where~~ where possible, and on occasions some bus trips were cancelled, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say- not provided for- in order to save the horses. Stable managers were directed to send out extra buses for special occasions, provided they had fresh horses.

During 1882 the omnibus fleet increased from 158 to 164, and the fleet included six 3 horse buses stationed at Brunswick.

The records of Nov. 1883 disclose the following allocation - Fitzroy, 39; C.H. 18; Richmond 28; Moatham 10; Moonee Ponds 5; Brunswick 19; Prahran 18; E. Hill 10; St Kilda 8; and Sandridge 11 total 166. by this time there were six 3 horse buses at Brunswick, during the Spring race meeting two were sent to Fitzroy in exchange for two smaller buses.

The traffic arrangements for holidays were carefully anticipated and planned- Christmas, New Year, Easter holidays, Exhibitions, Demonstrations, Processions, Picnic days and extra buses to meet the arrival of Country trains; records were kept of the weather, loadings and any other information that may serve as useful guidance for future occasions.

Transfers were available at various points of the network, but this privilege was withdrawn on Public Holidays.

The buses for the race meetings at Flemington were provided by one or two specials from several stables, and on occasions buses on the Moatham route were directed to extend to Flemington, in the report of Cup Day 1st Nov. 1881, it is mentioned that "This year the charge was 2/- to course".

Calico signs were tacked on the side panels of the buses and it is interesting to note that stable managers were directed to use small tacks only.

Weather conditions appear to have been similar to the present time, it is recorded that on 23rd July 1881 "The day was remarkably fine, indeed all that ~~can~~ could be wished, but the traffic was meagre" and on 1st Oct. 1881 "Weather warm with North wind and clouds of dust" throughout the records reference is repeatedly made to the "Dust nuisance".

Although it was not always recorded it appears to have been the custom to send to Flemington, a groom from Fitzroy with feed and rugs for the horses.

The normal service on the Fitzroy route was maintained with about twenty buses, they ran from the City to the Corner of St. Georges Rd. and Scotchmer St. North Fitzroy at approximately three minute intervals, this seems to have been the busiest route, but some of the others were not far behind and a service of four or five minutes headway was not uncommon.

Even although the buses did not provide seating for more than twelve or fourteen they maintained a reasonably satisfactory service to the suburbs within a three mile radius from the City, some of course were a little longer such as- Prahran, Brunswick and Moonee Ponds routes, they built up a solid foundation of patronage for the superseeding cable trams, which when established, in many cases ran a little further out.

On many occasions it is reported that the buses were insufficient to cope with the loading offering and intending passengers had to find other means of transport.

The buses maintained an average speed of 6 m.p.h. (including stops) and when the Richmond cable line was opened in Nov. 1885, the cable was run at that speed for a few weeks, but following complaints the speed of the cables was soon increased, as the new lines were opened speeds were mostly in the region of 9 or ten miles per hour.

The maximum number of buses was 178 and they carried annually approximately eleven million passengers, a phenomenal rise took place in number of passengers as the cable trams replaced the buses, the capacity of the cable trams to stack on many times the number of passengers is reflected in the following figures-

Year	Number of passengers carried	Revenue
1877	4,990,077	£ 61,074
1878	6,319,730	82,837
1879	9,251,944	112,388
1880	8,933,933	112,738
1881	10,277,097	131,250
1882	10,211,515	130,433
1883	11,141,192	142,505
1884	11,526,401	147,115
1885	11,659,937	149,009
1886	16,353,250	188,530
1887	17,992,047	207,329
1888	31,133,444	362,580
1889	46,000,364	526,588

The first cable line opened 11th Nov. 1885

After the completion of the cable network a few bus lines were kept running e.g. - Moonee Ponds to North Melbourne; East Brunswick to North Carlton cable terminus; Prahran to Malvern. For many years the chaff cutting machine housed in a building on the corner of Fitzroy and Victoria Streets Fitzroy was run intermittently to provide fodder for the few horses retained.

The following is a copy of the notes relating to Cup Day 4th Nov. 1884

" Start all lines except Fitzroy at 8.30 and run every 10 minutes to 9 a.m., then increase to make out Carlton 12; Collingwood 16; Richmond 12; S.Rd. 12; Hthm. 8; Brwk 15; Prahran 15; Stilda 8; E.H. 8 Sandridge 10; until 1.30 p.m. except as reduced to furnish buses for the races, then reduce largely until 4.30 p.m.. Then have all out again to 7.30 p.m. and keep all that come back from the races and all that you can horse. You can draw in for a trip or two from 8 to 9.30 p.m. if required. Last bus 11.30 p.m..

Fitzroy to start at 8 a.m. and bring out full number in quick time to 20 buses and keep out (as before given). Moonee Ponds start 8.50 a.m. 3 to 9.50 a.m., 4 to 12.30 p.m. 3 to 4.30 p.m. and all out for rest of day and night.

Kew at 8.50 a.m. 3 to 9.30 a.m. 4 to 12.30 p.m.; 3 to 4.30 p.m. 4 to 7.30 p.m.; and 3 for the night, 2 only if short of horses.

Coburg and Northcote, run to suit large lines and according to traffic.

For races 30 buses from 9.30 to 11 a.m. Fitzroy 7; C.Hill 3; Hotham 3; Richmond 5; Brunswick 4; Prahran 3; E.Hill 1; Sandridge 2; and Stilda 2. Total 30

The weather today was most beautiful could not be finer. For the races the buses came on as directed and answered well the first starting full at 9.45 a.m. running 5 minutes to 10 a.m. then every 3 minutes till 10.50 a.m. when we had to begin to take off lines rapidly until 12.15 p.m. when there were 60 on the road some went back on to line but we had 49 on the Course and 42 more sent out by 4 p.m. sharp (The time the Cup was run) making 91.

We should have had three more but for the negligence of Geo. D. in not properly attending to his instructions. The loading out from Town was more regular and steady than before, hardly any rush taking place and the supply of buses being nearly always equal to the demand. Owing to the lovely weather we could have loaded at least 10 or 12 more buses at the finish. Last bus from 2 p.m. but we might have stopped half an hour sooner as the last five buses did have half a load each.

We occupied the same place for our reserve buses as last year and it acted very well indeed, getting all across on to the main stand before the final rush. The paddock where buses are placed was in wretched bad order although the weather was so fine they nearly bogged in many places. The greatest number of buses on a.m. 60; Number of trips out 107; number of loads out 102; the greatest number in p.m. 91; number of trips p.m. 91; number of loads p.m. 91; number of round trips 147½, 3 buses off Hotham from Bridge in p.m.. The general traffic today was excellent, all roads reported good loading except from Town to Sandridge in the afternoon, and the last at Hobsons Bay to Brunswick"

Disregarding fares and wages, the horse omnibus was an inefficient and extravagant way of carrying a handful of people between the City and the Racecourse. On the day quoted more than half the Melbourne bus fleet was used, 91 drivers, slightly less than 200 horses, timekeepers stationed both in the City and at the Course, grooms, stablehands together with chaff, rugs and halters, certainly a few of the buses were sent back to resume their usual routes, but the majority remained at Flemington and were immobilized for several hours in the middle of the day.

Moonee Valley Races 15th Sept 1883. quote - Today was the opening of this race course The sports having been held previously at Kensington. From the first our impression was that it would not suit bus work, especially as the train which is only a short distance away advertised to run for 6d. return ticket First Class. However a trial was given with the following result.

Four special buses were provided one from Motham to start at 12 noon, then three more from Richmond, Clifton Hill and Fitzroy to start at 10 minute intervals.

We managed to get Motham away after 35 minutes waiting with 13 passengers and Richmond after 30 minutes with 14 passengers The other buses were not wanted and were sent back.

Comments - Mr Cox never even advertised in a single paper but got some large square calico placards for the cabs. Mr Clapp decided to run no more special lines. If Mr. Cox wanted buses he must engage them giving a guarantee. unquote.

Scanty records of the actual number of passengers carried are available but just as a sample - Christmas Day 1882, 16 buses on the Royal Park line carried nearly 400 people; Easter 1883 twelve buses on the same route made 52 trips and carried 1265; Sunday 23rd Dec. 1883 thirteen buses made 40 trips and carried 1040 passengers; and Christmas Day fourteen buses made 44 trips and carried 1232.

There were several other periodical functions to which special buses were sent, two buses were sent to the Roman Catholic picnic at the St.Kilda Cricket Ground on Boxing Day 1881 it is recorded that the drivers had great difficulty in collecting the 4d. fare, the group held another picnic on Easter Monday 1882 and upon enquiry for the special buses were told that none had been put on. On Boxing Day 1882 the Company relented and sent a couple of buses on this occasion the 4d. fare was paid quietly, then on Easter Monday 1884 we read that seven special buses carried 268 passengers.

The German Picnic at Studley Park was another gathering for which the buses catered, some of the Carlton buses were extended down Johnston St to the Bridge, on New Year's Day 1884, 688 passengers were carried. It has been frequently asked, why was the cable line to Johnston St. Abbotsford called the Carlton line, the likely answer is that the cable cars took over the route of the horse omnibuses which served mainly in Carlton and did not normally go so far down Johnston St.

Saint Patrick's Day Saturday 17th March 1883- "The weather was fine and warm, The procession started at 11.30 a.m. from the Model School, went down Lonsdale St. to Elizabeth St. then up Gt. Bourke St to Spring St. down Gt Collins St to Swanston St. along Swanston St to the Bridge and down to the river side.

The time occupied in going through the City was from 11.30 a.m. to 12.40 P.M. but for half an hour there was indescribable block and confusion at the intersection of Flinders and Swanston Sts. at Fish Market, the police not only being powerless were simply useless!"

During holidays when the weather was fine the weakness of horse drawn transport was exposed, on many occasions, by evening time, the horses were "Used Up" on Boxing Day 1881 it is recorded that when the last bus left the Gardens at 7.5 pm there were still 200 in the "Grounds" and two loads on the footpath "hundreds walked" but there was a limit to what horses could do.

On the journey to Brunswick it must have been long tiresome drag up Elizabeth St. and Royal Parade over indifferent roads, and yet some local politicians vehemently opposed the installation of tramways. Horse tramways were envisaged at the time and although there would not have been much saving in journey times they would at least have given a smoother ride to approximately twice the number of passengers. The Company anxious to make the change was prepared to accept the financial responsibility for the installation of the tracks, apparently confident of the increased revenue the trams would attract, this confidence was born out when reference is made to the annual passenger and revenue figures of the period 1877 to 1898 1889.

However the opposition and delays did benefit the travelling public in the end, in that it became apparent that the endless rope system of drawing tramcars was far superior to horses or steam. Notice was taken of George Duncan's recommendations and subsequently his plans were adopted, which gave Melbourne a uniform network of tramways of which many other cities were envious.