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Open House Melbourne

FOHTD participated in the Open House Melbourne program for the first time this year, on the weekend of 27 and 28 July 2013.

Our first Open House Melbourne was a great success. Over the two days 1325 people of all ages visited the Melbourne Tram Museum at Hawthorn Depot.

Open House Melbourne is a non-profit association that runs annual events providing a free and rare opportunity to discover a hidden wealth of architectural, engineering and historic buildings nestled around the city of Melbourne.

The Open House program started in 2008, opening eight buildings to the public with over 30,000 visitors on that weekend. In 2012 one hundred buildings participated over the Open House weekend, with 134,900 visits being recorded. This year, 111 buildings were open.

Significant effort from our volunteers ensured that our museum was ready for the Open House weekend – in particular the information stands for our trams. Each of the signs consists of two A4 sheets covering the history of the relevant tram, together with some technical details and a photograph. To cater for the more technically oriented of our visitors, each sign was labelled with a QR-code, allowing those with a suitably equipped smart phone to link to a relevant page on our website.

The Bellcord

Journal of the Friends of Hawthorn Tram Depot

Volunteers noted a number of visitors using this hi-tech feature.

One of the most popular exhibits was the new display of tram destination boxes at the rear of the depot building. The boxes were loaned to the museum by VicTrack from their store at Newport Workshops.



Open House Melbourne symbol for Hawthorn Tram Depot. Image courtesy of Open House Melbourne.

The feedback from our visitors was overwhelmingly positive, matched only by the happy expressions on their faces. Much of the success is due to our loyal volunteers, who answered a constant flow of questions about our trams, the building and their place in Melbourne's history.

FOHTD was fortunate in being allocated additional volunteers from the Open House program to assist with controlling entry to the museum.

One visitor blogged that her visit ignited her romantic notions of public transport. Another wrote that he had intended to visit six Open House sites on

the Sunday, and only managed one – the Hawthorn Tram Depot. At the end of the day he felt like a kid who had to be dragged away, kicking and screaming.

The following open day, many visitors mentioned they had been told how the museum had been highly recommended by people who came on the Open House weekend.

FOHTD looks forward to continuing our relationship with Open House Melbourne.

Open Days – 2013

14 September 28 September 12 October
26 October 9 November 23 November
14 December

Hawthorn Depot is open on the second and fourth Saturdays from January to November, and the second Saturday of December.

Opening hours are 11am–5pm.

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Annual General Meeting

The FOHTD Annual General Meeting will be held on the first October Open Day, 12 October 2013, commencing at 5:00pm, at Hawthorn Depot. Notice of the meeting and the agenda is enclosed with this issue of 'The Bellcord'.

Website News

After a long drought, two new articles were published last month on the website. The subject of the first article was American Romanesque architecture in Melbourne, and its significance in the design of the Hawthorn Tram Depot. Written by Noelle Jones, this article is a valuable addition to our series on tramway art and architecture.

The second article to be published was on ghost trams of Melbourne, written by Russell Jones. The article has been reproduced in this issue of 'The Bellcord' for those members who don't have access to the Internet.

One of the consequences of the Open House weekend in July was to lift the monthly number of unique visitors to the website to a record high – 2307. This was the first time we registered more than two thousand unique visitors since our website went live in October 2008.

There are currently two articles in the pipeline for future publication on the website – one the long-awaited treatise on Melbourne substation architecture, and the second on the history of tram route numbers. We hope to have these completed over the next couple of months.

Vale Eric Sibley and Austin Brehaut

It is with sadness we note the recent passing of FOHTD members Eric Sibley of Kew and Austin Brehaut of Ballarat. Our condolences go out to their families and friends.

Metcard Machine

Readers will remember from our last issue that Public Transport Victoria has donated a Metcard ticket machine and validator to our collection, along with a box of ticket blanks. However, taking delivery of this significant part of Melbourne's public transport history was not so simple.

We arranged with Tony Smith of the Melbourne Tramcar Preservation Association to transport the ticket machine from Preston Workshops to Hawthorn Depot, using his motor vehicle and trailer. As the machine weighs about 250 kg, it was loaded onto the trailer by forklift, and firmly tied down in the vertical position

There was no drama in transit, although Tony said as he drove down Bridge Road, he received many odd looks from passers-by at the sight of a ticket machine cruising down the street.

Offloading the machine took a little bit of planning, but through careful handling and the use of a large trolley it was moved into position in the training room.

The only issue left is figuring out how to safely remove the large Perspex sign from the ticket machine console advertising the replacement of Metcard by myki. We will keep you posted with our progress.

Haunting the Rails

In Melbourne, the term 'ghost tram' is occasionally used to describe trams with mysterious route numbers and strange destinations that never appear on public timetables. The majority of passengers are reluctant to board a ghost tram, for fear that they will be left at some unknown location, waiting in vain for a 'proper' tram to take them back to the safe and familiar.

Long-term Melbourne residents and tram enthusiasts do not have this concern, leaping on board ghost trams in the sure knowledge that an 18 will get you to Queen Victoria Market just as well as a 19, or that a 76 will safely take you to Camberwell Junction without having to wait for the next 70 or 75. They also know the locations of all the tram depots, so are unafraid to hop on a tram going back to the depot. In fact, some prefer to take uncrowded depot-bound trams, knowing that the tram driver will be eager to finish her shift and will do her best to give them a quick trip.

During the period where the tram system was operated by the Melbourne & Metropolitan Tramways Board (M&MTB), ghost trams hardly existed. Timetables were wonderfully detailed and annotated, showing every service. Short workings – the trammies' name for ghost trams – were assigned route numbers close to that of the normal full-length service. For example, route 71 was a short working of route 70, terminating at Warrigal Road rather than going all the way to Wattle Park.

There were some ghost trams during the tenure of the M&MTB. In 1954, to celebrate the Royal Visit to Australia of Queen Elizabeth II the M&MTB

decorated and illuminated PCC prototype tram 980. Appropriately painted white with royal insignia, the ghost tram – known as the 'silent' car for its smooth and quiet operation – was operated over the entire network, without carrying any passengers in its temporary role.



M&MTB PCC 980 decorated for the Royal Visit of QEII in 1954. In this guise it ran over the entire Melbourne network as a ghost tram. M&MTB photograph.

After privatisation of the tramway system in 1999, infrastructure savings were obtained by removal of many intermediate crossovers. Additionally, increasing population on the outer sections of most tramlines resulted in rising patronage and changes in traffic patterns. These two factors have caused the reduction or outright elimination of many short workings, particularly on the outer sections of longer routes. Consequently, many route numbers assigned to short workings have fallen out of use, or have been reassigned to other routes.

Additionally, in order to prevent 'confusion' to the travelling public and provide 'better' customer service, the new operators stopped publishing timetables with the remaining short workings – most of which were depot workings. This was partly



Route 40 was a short working of route 48 to North Balwyn. W5 815 is short shunting for its outward journey at a crossover in Flinders Street on 9 March 1970, as Swanston Street is closed for the annual Moomba parade, preventing 815 from shunting at the normal terminus in Spencer Street. Photograph courtesy Warren Doubleday.

driven by the conditions of the franchise agreements with the State Government, and set the scene for the public perception of ghost trams.

The end result has been that the underlying logic behind the original allocation of route numbers has evaporated, leaving the public – unaware of the history behind route number allocation – with the impression that numbers have been assigned more or less at random. In 2008 ghost tram services accounted for 10% of total tram kilometres.

The first known use of the term ‘ghost tram’ dates back to 1914, just prior to the closure of the Beaumaris Tramway Company’s horse tram service between Sandringham and Beaumaris via Black Rock. The Company – which had never paid a dividend since opening in 1889 – desperately hoped to stave off total financial ruin. Victorian Railways proposed to open an electric tramway between the same termini, so the Company wanted to remain open long enough to force a compensation payment. However, in order to claim any such compensation it had to be shown to be a going concern, and the terms of the contract with the

Moorabbin Shire Council obliged the Company to run at minimum a daily service.

By this stage the rolling stock and line were in a parlous condition, most of the horses had either died or been sold, and those few remaining more fit for the knackery than hauling a tramcar. Operation of the tramway in such a state almost guaranteed a serious accident, leaving the Company liable for consequent claims which it could not afford. Therefore in order to meet its contractual obligations, the Company operated a single ghost tram service at midnight, to avoid taking any passengers.

Even this limited service proved too expensive, until the Company realised there was a clause in its contract that, following an accident, required it to restore service within a fortnight. It was not a stretch to declare an accident with each operation of the tram, so the ghost tram service frequency dropped to every second Sunday. Only a few more ghost trams were run before the Beaumaris Tramway Company finally collapsed into bankruptcy in the middle of 1914.



Beaumaris horse tram, c1900-1910. Photograph from the FOHTD collection.

The Act for the new electric tramway between Sandringham and Black Rock was passed in November 1914. The route was chosen specifically to bypass the former tracks of the Beaumaris Tramway Company to avoid claims from its creditors.

Today, the operation of ghost trams on the Melbourne system is hardly so dramatic. In fact, Yarra Trams is attempting to eliminate them.

To meet this challenge, in 2012 Yarra Trams re-introduced route letters to Melbourne trams, suffixing two-digit route numbers with either 'a' or 'd'.

The 'a' suffix is used to denote a short working, often as a result of service disruptions such as track or overhead maintenance. There is no permanent assignment of the suffix to any particular short working on a route, as passengers are expected to familiarise themselves through reading information on disrupted services issued via traffic notices or the Yarra Trams website. The only exception to this rule is on the weekends-only route 3a, which is an alternate routing of route 3 to East Malvern via St Kilda, instead of the normal weekday routing via Brighton Road.

The 'd' suffix denotes a short working direct to a tram depot, rather than to the normal terminus. For

example, a 75d is a short working of the South Vermont route 75 tram, terminating at Camberwell Depot.

While this rule is logical enough, there remains a problem due to the three character limitation on most programmable destination displays when combined with the small number of three digit route numbers. It also does not address short workings on the few remaining W class services – routes 31, 35, 78 and 79 – and the traditional two digit route number boxes. The abandonment of individual route numbers for short workings means there are large gaps in the list of route numbers published on timetables and the Yarra Trams website.

Perhaps ghost trams will be haunting the rails for some time yet.

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