

The Bellcord



W3 661 crossing the Frankston railway line in Glenhuntly Rd on an enthusiast excursion in March 1964. Photo: Dale Budd

Melbourne Trams in the 1960s: A Decade of Challenges

by Dale Budd

Melbourne's tramways in the 1960s were a paradox. The variety of rolling stock was fascinating for enthusiasts, but it reflected the fact that the M&MTB was denied capital funds for new cars. How did the organisation face this and other challenges such as a steady decline in patronage?

The fleet

In 1960 the M&MTB tram fleet totalled 783 passenger cars. All of the W series cars were in service, except W2 313 which had been withdrawn in 1959 as a result of fire damage and had been replaced by VR 52. In addition, there were the L, S, T, X1, X2, Y, Y1 and PCC cars – a very varied fleet. During the 1960s all the 'oddities' except for PCC 980 and the VR cars were

withdrawn from regular service, together with some 65 W2s made surplus as a result of service reductions. The passenger fleet in mid-1970 numbered 698 including 44 listed as being in storage.

As a matter of interest the fleet had reached its highest figure – 810 cars – in 1956 with the delivery of the last W7 in that year.

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These fleet numbers were larger than today's figure (in mid-January 2018) of some 485 trams. However the current fleet is equivalent to about 675 8-wheel trams, if articulated cars are counted as either one and a half or two vehicles depending on their size.

There was a substantial fleet of non-passenger or service stock, which grew from 8 in 1956 to 13 in 1961 and kept growing, including cars converted from W2s. The only addition to the passenger tram fleet in the 1960s was VR 53 which replaced W2 325, another fire casualty, in 1961.

M&MTB annual reports in the 1960s stated that tram availability was around 90-92%. Today on a typical day 407 out of 471 trams are available (not counting Ws), to cover a peak requirement of 391 cars. This indicates availability of 86%, somewhat below what was achieved in the 1960s.

Enthusiast tours

For the enthusiast the 1960s offered chartered tours of great variety. A number of organisations ran them; they were easy to arrange, and not expensive. Within reason the M&MTB would provide whatever tram or trams were requested at whatever depot was specified.

Strange requests were accommodated. On one occasion a tour ran into Preston Workshops for a sideways trip on a traverser.



W2 535, being transferred to Preston Workshop by means of a tour, traverses the Holden Street line on 20 July 1969
 Photo: Dale Budd



On the same tour, freshly painted W2 333 is about to leave Preston. Interestingly, the trip in this 1926 tramcar took place just hours before man's first landing on the moon in 1969.
 Photo: Dale Budd



Tram L 101 on a traverser at Preston Workshops, on a tour in 1965.

Photo: Dale Budd



Y1 611 pauses for a photo in Dandenong Rd on an excursion in April 1962.

Photo: Dale Budd



SW5 cars 841 and 843 being transferred from Hawthorn Depot on its last day of operation, 13 February 1965.

Photo: Dale Budd



W3 659 and W2 244 pass at South Caulfield Junction during relaying work in 1966. The connections at the junction were changed at this time, and the tangle of overhead wires shows remnants of abandoned curves.

Photo: Dale Budd

'All night' trips were run, and service stock made its appearance. Interesting sidings, and the Holden Street line, were frequently visited. On another occasion a tram requiring attention was delivered to the workshops and a freshly overhauled tram was transferred back to its depot.

Patronage

During the 1960s tram patronage declined steadily. From a peak of 208 million passengers per year in 1956, it had come down to 178 million for the year ended 30 June 1960; it declined every year thereafter – most notably following fare increases – reaching 111 million in 1970.

Happily the figure for the year to 30 June 2017 was 204 million, almost back to the 1956 result, on a somewhat larger network.

This patronage run-down, which enabled reduced service frequencies, the tram withdrawals already mentioned and the closure of Hawthorn Depot, was blamed on a variety of factors. These included the growth in use of motor cars, the decline in population in inner suburban areas and the growth in suburban shopping centres. The advent of TV also reduced evening demand.

Traffic congestion was of great concern to the M&MTB, even though photos taken in the mid-1960s show streets almost empty of cars at least in off-peak times. The M&MTB would have been truly dismayed to see the growth in road traffic in recent decades, which has added greatly to running times.

This decline in patronage, together with inevitable increases in costs including wages, led to the M&MTB facing a very difficult financial position. Like other public transport entities, it recorded a deficit each year, but was required to fund these through borrowing rather than receiving grants from government. In 1970 the M&MTB reported that it was insolvent on a commercial basis.

Meeting the challenges

How did the M&MTB respond to these difficulties? As already noted it cut costs by reducing service frequencies, but it did not reduce maintenance of the tram fleet, nor did it reduce track maintenance.

The trams were subject to an active schedule of overhauls and repainting, while an ongoing program of track and junction renewal saw 37% of track laid in concrete by mid-1970 and 7% in ballast. Single track sections were duplicated including North Coburg, East Coburg and (in 1970) Wattle Park. The Point Ormond line and the local Footscray lines were closed.

These policies of maintenance of the trams and renewal of the track meant that when the financial crunch came, it could be solved by administrative actions. The rolling stock and the infrastructure were in good condition. Contrast this situation with that in Sydney in the years following the Second World War, when the trams were mostly antiquated and run down, and the arrears of track maintenance were one of the excuses to close the system.

The Melbourne tramways benefited from three major infrastructure projects in the 1960s: the replacement of the trams-only bridge over the Maribyrnong River by a new structure; the major reconstruction of St Kilda Junction and the diversion of trams from Wellington Street into Queens Way; and the diversion of trams from City Road, at the southern end of Princes Bridge, into Southbank Boulevard (then Nolan Street) to allow construction of the Arts Centre.



Shortly before duplication of this section, W2 439 is inbound at Wattle Park in March 1970. Y1 610 is in the far distance on driver training duties.

Photo: R S Jones



SW6 917 speeds along Queens Way in 1969 after the reconstruction of St Kilda Junction. Note the sparse motor traffic.

Photo: Dale Budd



A tram turns into City Road in 1969, before the diversion of this line into Southbank Boulevard and the building of the Arts Centre.

Photo: Dale Budd



Work is under way on the new bridge over the Maribyrnong River, and the tram line has been reduced to single track as VR 52 heads for Moonee Ponds in 1966. Photo: Dale Budd

Despite the pressures it faced, the M&MTB continued to plan for a variety of new projects. It developed a proposal in 1962 to put trams underground in the city, which in retrospect had more deficiencies than merit; it built a mock-up of a new tram in 1966 in some secrecy (although access was granted to enthusiasts). An extension of the East Preston line – the first extension in more than a decade – was first foreshadowed in 1967-68. The 1969-70 Annual Report referred to the need for new trams and showed an artist's impression of the future 1041.

So the 1960s drew to a close. The 1970s would see great changes, notably the introduction of the Z series trams. The M&MTB had prepared well for the new decade.

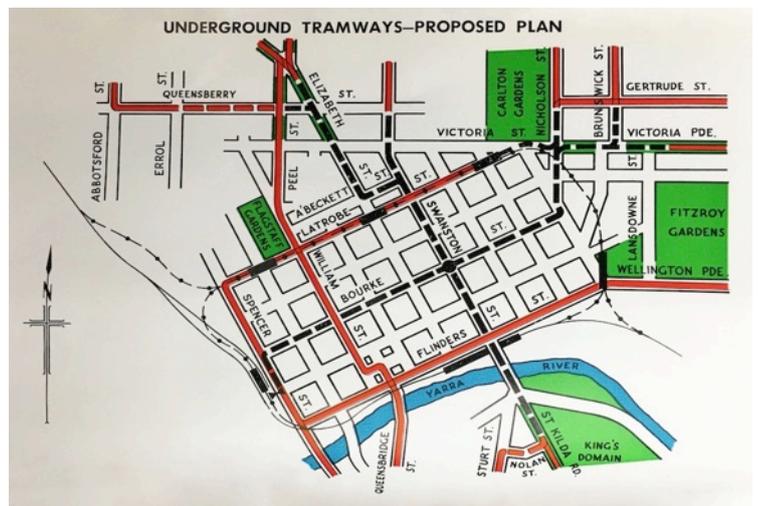
My thanks to Randall Wilson for his help, especially in improving the photographs for this article.

Dale Budd has worked in the rail industry for many years, is active in preservation and is the author of transport publications. He is a museum member.

A diagram of the proposed city underground tramways published in 1963.

Broken black lines show the extent of the proposed tunnelling; broken red lines are new surface tracks.

From the 1962-63 M&MTB Annual Report.



From Ron's Collection



*Bogie car VR 36 outside Elwood Depot, southbound along St Kilda St. (1950s).
 INSET: Workmen in pit between tracks. Photo: Ron Scholten collection*

About this photo

At first glance it would appear that this track outside Elwood Depot could not support the weight of bogie car VR 36 and threatens the safety of passengers, crew and the two workmen in the pit between the tracks. (See magnified inset bottom right.)

However, the photo doesn't reveal the full story. The work shown is an upgrade to one of the large floodwater drains constructed to reclaim the former swamp lands of Elwood. The original track engineers would have installed an underground support structure capable of carrying the tram's weight independent of the drain and surrounding soil. The photo (right) of a New York tramway constructed above large water mains illustrates such a structure. A major break in the mains had washed away the roadway.

The Elwood photo is likely dated 1955 to 1958. Between these years, the state government funded improvements to the underground diversion of floodwaters in this area including the diversion of the Elwood Canal just north of the depot.

Maintaining the regular tram service was a high priority in those years, so workmen laboured below passing trams. A workman at the swing barrier on the right of the tram acted as lookout and traffic controller.

The building with the verandah on the left is the depot office. The presence of the Holden ute beyond the milk bar on the right confirms the 1950s date. By 1959 the tramway was closed and replaced with buses.

Editor



*Manhattan Ave, New York
 From Electric Railway Journal (26 June 1915)*

Our Collection

Until recently members may have noticed in the base of the model display cabinet a flag containing the M&MTB logo or monogram. It had been folded such that only the logo was visible. Following receipt of some more Coeee model trams, the flag has been removed. But where did it come from?

The flag was used by the Victorian Tramway Bowls Association. Measuring some 1800mm x 1080mm, it was made by well-known Melbourne flag makers, Evan Evans Pty Ltd. It was donated to the museum by John Bradley in August 2010. John was a past president of the association and donated a number of items at the time. We have also received from the family of supervising foreman Fred Turner a number of photographs of the VTBA events.

The Evans Evans manufacturing label notes that they were the Official Flag makers for the 16th (XVI) Olympiad which was held in Melbourne in 1956 and the 8th (VIII) "B.E. & Cwealth" Games – held in Kingston Jamaica during 1966. This dates the manufacture mid to late 1960s.

The 1966 games was the last time the term "B.E." (standing for British Empire) was used in the title of the games. The games were first held in 1930 in Hamilton, Canada and during April 2018 will be held in Australia's newest tramway city, the Gold Coast.



Bundy clock



The Bundy clock located in the driver training room at the museum is being overhauled. Our thanks to museum guide Kevin Stanes who obtained a key to wind the clock and arranged, through a friend at Puffing Billy, for a 'clock doctor' to make a house call.

We hope that soon it will be possible to demonstrate how the clock operated, including the printing of the time and table (shift) number on the roll of paper.

The article, *Keeping Time*, on the museum's website explains the history and workings of the Bundy clock. See hawthorntramdepot.org.au/papers/keepingtime.htm

Updated Format

Readers will have noticed a change to the format of *The Bellcord*. This is part of our rebranding exercise, which is being implemented across all our hard copy and electronic publications over the next few months. The rebrand is intended to provide a fresh image that is more attractive and relevant to the general public.

Museum News



New arrival at the museum shop: tram socks!

Loads of colourful tram socks are now available at the museum shop.

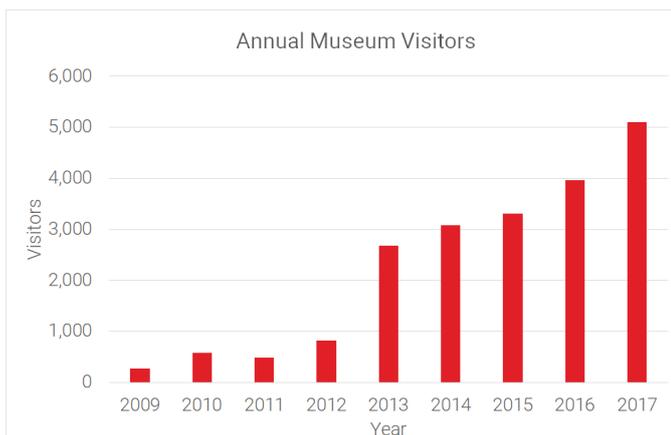
Bright blue tram socks from Lafitte are cotton elastane and come in three sizes – small (ladies’ shoe size 2-8), medium (men’s size 6-10) or large (men’s size 11-14). Just \$12 per pair.

If you prefer something slightly more conservative, cotton blend my2socks are one size, suitable for feet between a women’s size 8 to a men’s size 12. \$12 per pair.

See the socks and much more at the museum shop during our open days or by emailing us at shop@trammuseum.org.au.

Annual visitor numbers

The graph below illustrates the growth in visitor numbers between 2009 and 2017. The large increase in 2013 was the year the museum began participating in Open House Melbourne.



Getting involved at the museum

We are grateful for the many hours of assistance provided by members over our 15 years. Unfortunately age or poor health catch up with all of us and the number of museum assistants has declined.

In contrast, our visitor numbers continue to increase and the museum is the beneficiary of a steady stream of donated tramway materials.

If you have wondered whether you might lend a hand on open days, now is a good time to offer your assistance. Museum guide or archive/library assistant are roles you might find rewarding.

Contact the museum committee at info@trammuseum.org.au or speak directly with one of the committee members.

We are also promoting these volunteer roles through the local volunteer network and to museum visitors. Training will be provided.

The Melbourne Tram Museum Inc is open on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays of each month (except the 4th Saturday of December). Normal opening hours are 11am–5pm. It is also open during Open House Melbourne in July and by appointment.

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