

# The Bellcord



*Melbourne's first light rail vehicle B1.2001 undergoing its many commissioning checks at Preston Workshops (8 October, 1984). Note the dual height doorway that was removed after trials. Photo: Trevor Triplow*

## Light Rail comes to Melbourne

Most Melburnians first heard the term Light Rail (LR) in the 1980s as transport authorities spruiked the conversion of the broad gauge St Kilda and Port Melbourne railway lines. Both lines had been recommended for closure by the 1979-80 Lonie Inquiry as being under utilised and costly.

The term LR is used to describe forms of rail transport that carry 'lighter' loads and incur 'lighter' construction and operating costs than traditional 'heavy' railways. Since the 1970s the term has become common place around the world. While there is a deal of variation among LR systems, characteristics common to all are an exclusive right of way, faster travel times and the perception of being a sophisticated improvement on the humble tramway.

For nearly a century, the Melbourne network has had sections of reserved track providing exclusive right of way for trams, e.g. Dandenong Road, Victoria Parade and Royal Park, but these have rarely been described as Light Rail.

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**Rail closures**

After decades of decline in rail and tramway patronage and infrastructure, the Hamer coalition government commissioned a broad based review of all transport in Victoria led by retired GMH and BHP executive, Murray Lonie.

His report in 1980 recommended a long list of passenger rail and tramway closures as well as numerous other changes. It provoked fierce opposition and while some cutbacks were made, the government rejected the call for suburban rail and tram closures.

The Cain Labor government came to power in April 1982 with a reform agenda. It amalgamated the metropolitan railways and tramways into a single entity, the Metropolitan Transport Authority (MTA or The Met), and adopted a recent proposal to convert the St Kilda and Port Melbourne rail lines to LR rather than replacing trains with buses.

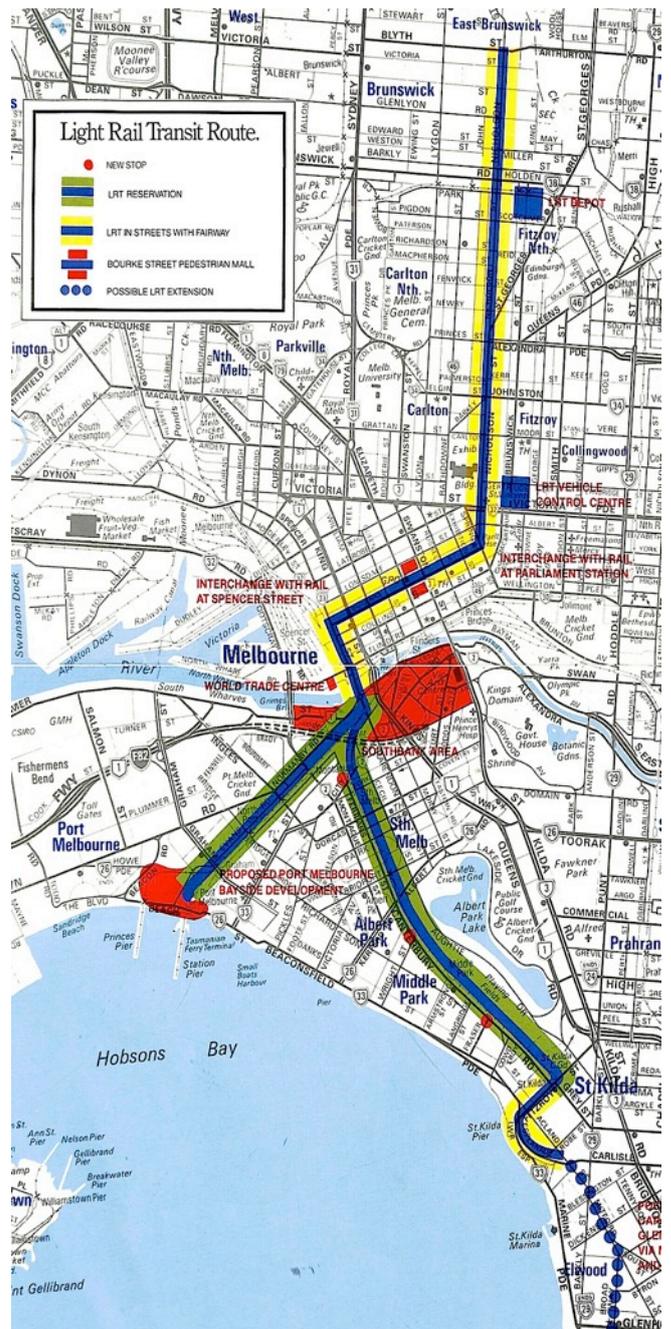
A steering committee was formed to study the proposal and in late 1982 the first contract was signed for two prototype articulated light rail vehicles (LRVs) and 28 shorter rigid LRVs. Also the extension of the East Preston tramway – approved by the previous government – commenced.

Opposition to the LR conversion of the St Kilda and Port Melbourne rail lines was strong, with opponents highlighting the triple losses of rail freight services, disability access and a direct connection to Flinders Street Station. While the proposal was confirmed in January 1983, it was not until October 1985 that detailed plans were announced, with completion set for the end of 1987.

**Routes**

As shown in the accompanying map, originally both LR lines travelled through the city along Bourke Street. The St Kilda line continued through to East Brunswick, while most Port Melbourne services terminated at the Royal Exhibition Building.

In December 1993 the Port Melbourne line was redirected along Collins Street and through-routed to Mont Albert. Rollingstock for the LR lines was stabled at South Melbourne and North Fitzroy depots in the early years.



A map of the proposed Light Rail routes.

The Met, May 1987

- YELLOW outline indicates LR using street fairway
- GREEN outline indicates LR reservation
- BLUE dots indicate possible extension to Elwood
- RED sections indicate development areas

The St Kilda to East Brunswick service experienced frequent delays from the outset. This was attributed to sharing tracks with other routes in Bourke Street and Spencer Street as well as congestion in Acland Street and the Bourke Street Mall. Criticism was also made of poor passenger facilities at many LR stopping places.



LEFT: Inside the Comeng factory, Dandenong showing the first stages of construction of A and B class vehicles and four nearly completed Z3 trams in the background (early 1980s).  
Photo: TDU collection



TOP RIGHT: One section of B1.2001 awaiting connection to its other half in Preston Workshops.

Photo: MTA, courtesy Electric Traction (September, 1984 issue)



BOTTOM RIGHT: A2.260 at the former Port Melbourne Station during the first weeks of LR operations (January, 1988). Note the now demolished Beach St overpass in the background.  
Photo: Randall Wilson

## Light Rail Vehicles

The design of the B1 class and later the B2 class articulated vehicles along with the shorter rigid A class was undertaken by Commonwealth Engineering (Comeng). The A class design was derived from the Z3 class that was still in production.

A low floor option for the B class was explored at the initial design stage in 1982 and again in 1989, midway through the production run, but both designs were rejected by government.

A distinctive feature of the B1 design was dual height entrances at each doorway, enabling the car to use tracks with either high or low level platforms, or to load from street level. However, these dual height entrances proved troublesome during trials on the East Burwood route. As the need for them had not eventuated, they were removed before commencing service on the LR.

The contract with Comeng to build the two prototype vehicles (B1.2001 and B1.2002) and 28 A class was signed in late 1982. In February 1985, before the prototypes had been delivered, MTA ordered a further 130 articulated B2 class vehicles of an improved design and 42 rigid A2 class with pantographs. The large order of articulated vehicles was to provide rollingstock for future LR routes, such as the Upfield line, as well as heavily patronised tram routes.

When the St Kilda and Port Melbourne LR opened in late 1987, the only rollingstock available for service were the two prototypes and the second order of A2 class fitted with pantographs. The first of the B2 class vehicles did not enter service until September 1988 with the last entering service in 1994.



TOP: Port Melbourne terminus showing the overhead testing car W2.533 with pantograph used during the conversion. The photo was taken during an enthusiast tour in March, 1989 as 533 waits for an A2 service car accessing the low level platform. The old industrial area along the rail reservation is yet to be redeveloped. Photo: Dale Budd

BOTTOM LEFT: Workmen constructing access steps to the new low level platform at the former South Melbourne Station while track work continues in the background. Photo: courtesy Trolley Wire (November, 1987 issue)

BOTTOM RIGHT: A2.294 at the former Albert Park Station bound for East Brunswick (January, 1988) Photo: Richard Youl

**Conversion**

The conversion took place between July and December 1987 with the St Kilda railway closing in July and Port Melbourne in October. The works included:

- regauging the track from broad gauge (1600mm) to standard gauge (1435mm), reusing the existing sleepers and constructing tramway standard special works, such as crossovers

- decommissioning railway signalling and safeworking
- lowering sections of station platforms (or replacing them altogether on the Port Melbourne line) and constructing additional stopping places
- altering the overhead on the street sections of the two LR routes to accommodate LRVs with pantographs
- installing new power substations



*B2.2010, B2.2011, B2.2012, A2.284 and unnamed A2 pictured on the track fan at South Melbourne Depot (April, 1989). All early B2s were allocated to this depot for LR operations. Photo: Richard Youl*

- constructing the ramps and track to connect the rail reserves to Clarendon Street, as well as laying connecting track to Fitzroy Street, St Kilda and to Bourke Street
- installing the fairway system on street tram lines to improve LR right of way
- providing wheelchair carrying taxis for those unable to access the new LRVs

**Plans stalled**

In September 1988, MTA released MetPlan (the Metropolitan Public Transport Industry Plan) for rail, tram and bus transport. It included proposals for numerous LR and tramway extensions, among them the conversion of the Upfield railway to LR.

The world economy took a severe downturn as these plans were being prepared and Victoria was significantly impacted. The subsequent recession of 1991-92 was far deeper than expected, and by late 1992 the Kennett coalition government swept to power.

With political change came new plans to curtail services on numerous rail and tram lines. However some of the 1980s proposals were eventually built in part or in full, including the lines to Airport West, Box Hill, Vermont South and Bundoora-RMIT. These

extensions incorporated LR features including increased or total separation from road traffic.

**Recent years**

Since 2001, Melbourne has introduced over 170 low floor articulated vehicles. Some of these have been allocated to the St Kilda and Port Melbourne LR routes, displacing the original B2 class to other parts of the network.

Over their working life, the B2 class have proven themselves as reliable workhorses. This year a refurbishment program has begun that includes a major overhaul of all B2 class LRVs to extend their service life by up to 15 years.

In the years ahead, further development of LR in Melbourne may yet become a reality. With our increasing population and travel congestion, priority right of way for our trams would make sense.

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My thanks to Dale Budd, Warren Doubleday, Mal Rowe, Randall Wilson and Richard Youl for their assistance.

*Geoff Brown*

## Life as a Junior Clerk at M&MTB Head Office

In March 1979 I joined the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board (M&MTB) as a junior clerk in the traffic branch. My first job was as the mail boy collecting and delivering the internal mail around the head office buildings at 616 Lt Collins St and 673 Bourke St (originally the cable tramway head office) and sending this to the depots via satchel. I got to see some interesting things that were integral parts of the Tramways Board back then but no longer exist today.

The first task of the day was going to the post office and collecting the daily post. This was usually a large canvas bag full of letters that was taken to the second floor where the receptionist would sort and register them. Then I would take the lift to the sixth floor and in a carefully planned route visit various offices, collecting and distributing internal mail. I had a large bag with a place for each floor. If a letter from a higher floor was received for a lower level office, I would place it in the correct slot and deliver it on the way down.

Getting to the top floor required that I travel in the lift driven by Dick, a former tram driver injured in an accident. I wasn't allowed to use the unmanned lift because I was under 18. When caught I would be spoken to and reminded that I was too young to travel alone in the lift! The problem was that Dick was a grumpy old man who didn't like driving a junior clerk in his lift. He would frequently ignore the call button if he thought I was waiting to travel in his lift.

My second daily trip around the buildings was mail for the depots. For this I had to get across to 673 Bourke St. There was a walk though from 616 Lt Collins St on one of the higher floors that went to the next building. Many of the floors and offices were empty in 673 Bourke St, but there was a staff area on the fourth floor with a table tennis table. This was near the caretaker's office. He was also in charge of the men who took the satchels to the various tram lines.

I saw the original Radio Centre where the key method of communication was via track telephones. It wasn't until CHOGM in 1981 that the M&MTB got handheld portable radios for the line inspectors. The switchboard handled all of the calls for the M&MTB with the telephone number 62 0291. You rang this



*M&MTB Head Office at 616 Lt Collins St.*

*Photo: M&MTB Annual Report (1937)*

number, either told them your extension or asked to be put through to a specific office. However, once a year this was a very hard place to work. The Royal Children's Hospital appeal on Good Friday used the number 63 0291 and there were many misdialled calls to answer.

There was a manual time clock for signing on and off each day. You pulled the handle down and the paper was time stamped where you signed. The working day was 0800 to 1636. The line would start forming about 1633 hours with no signing off permitted before 1635 hours. This was earlier than other offices to allow people to get on their tram earlier thus saving space for other commuters later in the afternoon. However, if a senior person saw people gathering too early they would be told to return to their work location until the proper sign off time.

Symbolic of the era, in each male toilet block one cubicle was reserved for senior personnel. It was locked and required a key to open. Yes, those were the days.

*Dean Gilbert  
Museum Member*



*Cable tramway construction in Clarendon St, South Melbourne at the corner of Bank St looking south (1888).*

*Photo: David Wood, Clarendon St, West Side, 1888 sm0430, Port Phillip City Collection*

### About this photo

This photo depicts the final stage of construction of the South Melbourne cable tramway. A short section of exposed rails, slot beams and lateral tie bars is still to be packed with wooden blocks, tarred and topped with sand. The MTOC horse omnibus depicted is working a similar route to the future cable tramway, viz. Victoria Ave, Montague St, Park St and Clarendon St to the Royal Arcade in Bourke St. It carries the signage 'Clarendon St Victoria Av (sic)'. A shorter omnibus route from Montague St began in 1878 and was extended to Beaconsfield Pde in April 1887. The commercial buildings and verandas shown appear remarkably intact today. *Editor*

## Museum News

### Tram ticket catches murderer: fact or fiction?

Readers may recall a query from a guide at the UK National Tram Museum that was published in our June 2017 issue. He asked if it was true that a 1930s murder in London was solved by tracing the time and place of issue of a Melbourne tram ticket.

Museum researcher Noelle Jones recently spotted relevant information in an old issue of the M&MTB's *Tramway Topics* newsletter and subsequently in an Adelaide newspaper from March 1945. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/55862073>

At that time Adelaide police had used an Adelaide tram ticket to solve a London murder. We passed on the details and correct location to the UK museum.

Fortunately the victim had not followed the instructions frequently printed on tickets of the time, 'Please destroy upon alighting.'

### Seasons Greetings

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all museum members and supporters. Thank you to all who have assisted the museum during 2018.

### Museum committee 2018-19

Following our September AGM, this year's committee members are:

Adam Chandler (*Chairman*)

Geoff Brown (*Deputy Chair*)

Mike Ryan (*Secretary*)

Carolyn Cleak (*Treasurer*)

Russell Jones

Kevin Taig

Warren Doubleday

Rod Atkins

Committee members can be contacted individually or by emailing [info@trammuseum.org.au](mailto:info@trammuseum.org.au)

### Tramway artists

Artist Eve Glenn has painted two of Melbourne's art trams in collaboration with her colleague, Megan Evans. The first was W5.829 'The Peace Tram' painted in 1986. Then in 2016 they worked on B2.2018 to produce 'The Women's Mural', depicted in the photo below. Eve also decorated two of the 'Moomba Trams' of the early 2000s.

When preparing the Transporting Art Exhibition, Eve spoke at length about her works and this became the basis of one of the slideshows. She kindly loaned the museum many photographs of her time working on the art trams and has donated the framed photograph taken by photographer James H.H. Morgan, and presented to her by the Melbourne International Arts Festival. The museum is grateful for her generosity.

Her colleague Megan Evans also made many digital images available for use in the Transporting Art Exhibition. They cover the topics of the 1986 'Peace Tram', their work on the original 'Women's Mural' in Smith Street Fitzroy, and their subsequent 2016 Art Tram.

*Russell Jones*



*B2.2018 'The Women's Mural' by Eve Glenn and Megan Evans.  
Photo: James H.H. Morgan*



### Keith Kings

Well known transport historian, Keith Kings, celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday at the museum in mid November. Many family members, friends and enthusiasts shared lunch and stories of their many connections to Keith. He is pictured above holding a 90<sup>th</sup> birthday card from the prime minister.

In recent years Keith has donated most of his extensive collection to the State Library Victoria, the National Film and Sound Archive and our museum. The State Library has begun digitising his photos which will become accessible online in the future.

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 by appointment.

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