

Introducing the Victor Harbor Horse-Drawn Tramway

Closing our Sessions by Meeting our Newest COTMA Applicant

Presenters: Kim Bayley & Dennis Bell, VHHDT

Session Chair: Henry Brittain

Session Secretary: Bryce Pender

The History of the Horse Tram

By the middle of last century, an extensive system of paddlesteamers and barges travelled the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Darling River System carrying goods upstream to towns and settlements and returning with produce of wool and grains. This was before the railways penetrated this part of the country, so the river traffic played an important role in opening the inland of Australia.

The only outlet for the produce was at the mouth of the Murray River at Goolwa, South Australia – and from there by ship to European and American ports.

The sandbar at the Murray mouth prevented the navigation of ships into the port at Goolwa, so a railway was decided upon to connect Goolwa to a seaport. Port Elliot and Goolwa became joined by a seven-mile (12km) 5'3" railway opened in May 1854; using horsepower and a variety of flatcars, box wagons and passenger cars, it became the first public railway in Australia.

Port Elliot soon proved an unsuitable port and a more sheltered port in the lee of Granite Island was chosen at Port Victor. A jetty was built at Port Victor along the natural reef, then a "dog leg" out into the dropped water to service the large overseas clippers of the day. This was the mid 1860's, and the railway line was extended from Port Elliot to Port Victor and on the jetty. A large goods shed was constructed using ballast from England.

At this ideal port, the jetty quickly became inadequate to handle the increased shipping, so it was extended to Granite Island and further working jetties were built out from the north shore of the island. By 1875, the rail line was extended along the causeway to the island and along the north shore to service the two new jetties.

Victor Harbor (old Port Victor) has always been a popular tourist spot and it was decided to place a horse tram to run from the mainland across the causeway then along the north shore to the kiosk at the far end of the island. By December of 1894 this service started using tram number seven that was formerly used on the Goolwa-Strathalbyn-Victor Harbor line.

By 1910 another tram was added. Number 25 from the Adelaide Horse Tramway was converted from 4'8½" (1435mm) to 5'3" (1600mm). This tram ran until 1929, while number seven operated until 1931 when two trams, number five and number six, were brought down from the recently-closed Moonta Horse Tramway.

These two trams, operated by the Honeyman family, continued in service until 1954 when the causeway decking was renewed – it was decided not to replace the rusting rails and ageing trams. Number five operated a short service from the Island kiosk to the start of the causeway on the Island for the '54/'55 summer. It then sat neglected on the Island for a number of years where it deteriorated to such a dangerous state that in about 1959-60 it was tipped into the sea.

Number six went to Auburn in the mid-north of the state to be on display outside the BP garage. It was bought and shipped to America in 1971 and restored as a single deck and is now on display in the Johnsonville Museum, Connecticut.

Over the 'in between' years, a motor train was used until the horse trams were reinstated in June 1986. The four new trams are steel-constructed and timber-clad, presented in much the style of the former trams. The roller bearings permit an ease of draught for the horses. Each tram carries about 50 passengers and the service operates year-round.

Additional Notes from the Session Secretary

Dennis Bell reminded everybody that he had many blissful years at Bendigo, but had recently moved to Victor Harbor in South Australia. But He could not be separated completely from trams as he had found a form of the flanged wheel in the Victor Harbor Horse Drawn Tramway.

The Tramway originally commenced in 1894 and ran until 1954. After being tractorised, it was relaunched in 1986 as part of the South Australian state's 150th anniversary of settlement jubilee. It has four trams and 11 horses for motive power.

The ride is from the mainland of Victor Harbor to the Screw Pile pier on Granite Island, a distance of 1.3km, with 630m on the causeway.

Dennis showed a number of slides of the operation and activities, including the 2.5km journey for motive power to take up service and the 5'3" gauge track on the causeway with rubber matting used to provide a decent surface for the horses to walk on and protect the causeway. Also shown were slides of traction motor changes (which are changed every 7-8 weeks) and the new terminus under development.

Other notings include the fact that the horses are regularly walked through the sea on the way to and from the stables.

The tram weighs 4¾ tonnes tare and 8½ tonnes laden with roller bearings carrying approximately 50 people.

Kim Bayley then presented a video and slides on the origins of the horse tramway in the area which was 32 miles long and ran from Strathalbyn, Goolwa, Port Elliot and Victor Harbor. The original railway was entirely horse-worked with 29 horses, 31 passenger cars and 104 freight wagons.

Kim went on to speak about many issues about Victor Harbor, including the speed, which is approximately 10kph, giving a journey time over the causeway of 12 minutes. But a new horse

or fast xxx could take as little as five minutes. The tramway costs about \$300,000 a year to run but earns approximately \$340,000 in income. Kim also mentioned that the optimum number range of horses was around eight, with training starting in the stables getting used to the staff and then slowly into street traffic towing a cart, followed by a cautious introduction to tramway operations. Discussion then turned to track, with only one point having a movable blade, this being the access to a siding at the mainland terminus. The other points at the passing loop being set up to the left track in both directions. Comment was also made that most incidents have occurred at the mainland terminus due to the horses being creatures of habit and the variability that occurs here. It was also noted that it is very important to train the animals to be handled and to discipline them when necessary.

Kim then offered for sale books and videos of Victor Harbor which can also be obtained from:

City Council Victor Harbor
PO Box 11
Victor Harbor SA 5211

Discussion

Hugh Ballantyne (Ballarat) – Regarding the level of horse intelligence.

Answer – Dennis said that mostly they were more intelligent than humans. He recounted the story of how Chester, a now-retired horse, during a night run to the island stopped to prevent running over a penguin crossing the track to its nest in the nearby bank and how the driver was unaware of its presence. He also recounted how the horse is aware of the tram's position in relation to itself.

Dahlene Haigh (Hobart City Council) – Asked about the horse's working life.

Answer – Denis replied that the average is 15 years, with the youngest being five and the oldest 20.

Murray McKay (MOTAT) – Regarding brakes, how does the tram stop in particular emergencies?

Answer – Dennis explained that the main braking system was old screw thread handbrakes with an emergency air brake application. The air system is charged from the depot every morning.

Lewis Nyman (BTM) – Were the tram replicas new or originals that have been restored?

Answer – Dennis replied that all were new in 1986 but done in original style, with minor improvements.

Warren Doubleday (BTM) – How many trips a day does each horse do?

Answer – Dennis answered saying that each horse does about eight then is rested, and with all horses most do one day on then a couple off.

Leon Parker (Hobart City Council) – Was the tramway council-owned or a trust?

Answer – Kim responded that it was council-owned and despite offers to change it or take it over, the council has no interest in this happening.