

## **COTMA – The Beginning**

### ***How Did COTMA Really Start? A Hitherto Untold Story***

*Presenter: Bill Kingsley, BTM, Inaugural COTMA Executive Officer*

*Session Chair: Colin Seymour*

*Session Secretary: Peter Kahn*

***and***

## **COTMA – To the Present**

### ***The Development of COTMA Over the Last 25 Years***

*Presenter: John Radcliffe, Inaugural COTMA Chairman*

*Session Chair: Colin Seymour*

*Session Secretary: Peter Kahn*

### **COTMA – The Beginning**

It is both a humble privilege and a great joy to stand before you this morning and to gaze upon this sea of smiling, friendly faces. You are the vital, living endorsement of actions that I took 25 years ago in response to an inner vision. It was a vision that demanded attention, a vision that came twofold – a compelling need and a very relevant opportunity – and led to my convening of our first conference in 1975. That vision has never dimmed.

But how did it all really happen? From whence did the vision develop? There follows an intriguing story that has never been told in full before nor recorded.

In the closing years of the vast and exciting Sydney tramway system I was an occasional visitor to that fair city for the fundamental purpose of riding the trams. I enjoyed the curvaceous route to North Bondi via Bellevue Hill before its truncation. I treated as my own the ride to Watsons Bay – through Kings Cross, around Rose Bay, fantastic harbour views from what we know today as Heartbreak Hill, waiting for the Up tram to come off the single track at the Lighthouse, and that magnificent descent through The Glen into Watsons Bay. A favourite tour was to catch the ferry from Circular Quay to Neutral Bay, interchange into the waiting K-class, grind up the hill to Military Road, and return to Sydney on a corridor tram over that great bridge in the sky and through the tunnel to Wynyard.

But then, someone stole my trams from Sydney. No longer did trams glide through the city streets. No longer did they wait for me at a beachside terminus. No longer did the conductor scramble along the footboard of the toastrack. The formation in The Glen became the scene of ghostly memories. Sydney had totally and irretrievably lost a great asset. Or so I thought.

In January 1967 I was enjoying a camping holiday to Sydney in Jenny, the first of my four VW minibuses (yes, it was red and white). One fateful day as I drove towards Sutherland from the south along the Princes Highway something nostalgically familiar moved in the trees to my right. It couldn't be; were they not all scrapped? But it was indeed a real Sydney tram. I turned right from the Highway. Pure joy. I had discovered the South Pacific Electric Railway. I arrived as a total stranger. The staff were friendly. I was made to feel very welcome in a relaxed atmosphere surrounded by real, live Sydney trams. Thank you, SPER. The foundations for COTMA were laid that day in the Royal National Park.

I returned again in January 1973, this time by train.

It must have been those visits to SPER's Royal National Park site that encouraged me to become active with the Ballarat Tramway Preservation Society later that same January in 1973 (plus a need for some hands-on experience at trackwork). There, at Ballarat, of a weekend and in our gumboots, we would wallow in the mud at our South Gardens site, three woolly jumpers on in winter, building a tramway. On Saturday night we would sleep in the trams in the depot (with none of the comforts enjoyed by PETS at Whiteman Park). The evening was often spent with an old-time slide show, usually trams, trams, and more trams.

One such evening, one of our wandering participants showed slides of his recent visit to Adelaide and of magnificent Glenelg trams back in their original colour scheme. For me, two dimensions were not enough; I had to go to Adelaide. That is when a most extraordinary and incredible sequence of events started to fall into place.

My normal travel agent could not book me into my usual Grosvenor (all the en-suite rooms were taken) but recommended a little historic hotel called The Earl of Zetland (note the Sydney tram terminus and the close spelling to Zealand) at the corner of Gawler Place and Flinders Street, which I accepted happily due to its proximity to the Victoria Square tram terminus.

So, in May 1973, I Overlanded to Adelaide and took up residence at The Earl. Arriving Saturday morning I decided to pay my first ever visit to St Kilda and the AETM the following day (Sunday). How will I get there? No public transport. I'll order a taxi. So Sunday morning I trode down the stairs to await my taxi. As I passed through the foyer I could not but notice a fine young man in clean working clothes waiting near the reception desk. He was also aware of me and there was a strange sense of friendship between two strangers as we said hello and I walked past.

Taxi to St Kilda. The taxi driver actually knew where it was! Wandering around the site for awhile, I was befriended by AETMers Iain Jamieson and Greg King, who adopted me for the day when I told them that I was from BTPS. As they showed me around there appeared from the depths of the shed that same fine young man who had been at The Earl that morning. I was introduced to Ron Jenkins.

Soon it all made sense. Incredibly, Iain was the son of the owner of The Earl of Zetland, the Jamieson family lived on the premises, Iain and Ron were both AETM members, and Ron and his car were Iain's means of transport to/from St Kilda that day.

Early in the afternoon a car with Victorian registration plates pulled in. Mr and Mrs Maurie Hall of Ballarat had arrived with young son Andrew. Recognising me, the former deposited the latter in my tender care and sallied off for more relevant pursuits.

As Ron, Iain and Greg showed Andrew and I the route of the new track to St Kilda Beach, it became very obvious that we were sharing not only a new friendship but a dedication to tramway preservation that transcended museum and state boundaries. The first bricks in COTMA's stage were being placed on that foundation from SPER. Ron had two extra passengers back to The Earl that evening.

Well, Iain had all these beautiful tram slides stored at The Earl of Zetland. More bricks for COTMA's stage were set in place in a little room at The Earl over several evenings of the ensuing week as Iain and I enjoyed our own old-fashioned slide shows. Unfortunately, The Earl of Zetland is no more, for a relevant part of COTMA's prehistory has since been demolished.

Duly I returned to Ballarat. During the months that followed I became very aware of the frequent visits to Ballarat by members of other tramway museums. Often they were not satisfied just to be spectators and would grab a spade or a pick, lend a hand lifting rails, and always join us for coffee and chatter around the table. Well do I remember the same Ron Jenkins bogged to the ankles digging a trench around our depot. At the same time, we BTPS members were also making frequent forays, particularly to Bendigo and interstate. It was most evident that we all shared the same zeal, the same joys, the same problems, the same hopes.

The message was coming home to me loud and clear. If we were all informally responding to a need to get to know each other and to extend our friendships, why not do something formal about it?

The answer was for a conference to share ideas, problems and solutions, and to get to know each other even better.

Anzac Day 1975 created a long weekend. Here was the opportunity.

I was a member of the BTPS Board at that time and early 1975 put to the Board that BTPS should host such a conference in Ballarat over that Anzac Day long weekend. It was a big ask. Financially it involved a considerable investment from a young volunteer community, a financial gamble. To its everlasting credit, the Board accepted the proposition (warmly but with some hesitancy) and gave to me the honour to form a committee and convene a conference.

Supporting me in that committee were Geoff Cargeeg (as a most dedicated co-organiser), Allan Harnwell (to control the finances) and Clyde Croft (as BTPS Secretary). We co-opted Bill Jessup, Richard Gilbert and Barry McCandlish to help. We decided to call the event CATM – Conference of Australian Tramway Museums. We invited all our known fellow museums to come.

I well remember the reprimand from down south along the lines of typical mainlanders forgetting about their island counterparts. Sorry, Hobart. We (the committee) did not know about you. We quickly sought forgiveness and invited the TTMS along. Somehow the news

carried across the Tasman. The Kiwis wanted to be part of it too. They also were welcomed and their intending participation added even more vitality to our task. How relevant! It was the Anzac weekend, and as we remembered the sharing between Australians and New Zealanders in time of war, we were coming together again to share in a quite different pursuit.

Since it was the State Electricity Commission of Victoria that abandoned its Ballarat tramways, would its social club allow us to use its Electra Hall? No worries. Since HA Davis Motor Service replaced the tramways, could they supply us some buses? No worries. Geoff organised for the oldest buses in the fleet and so started a tradition that seems to remain to this day. The Convenor's VW microbus (now Esmeralda, the second of its line) was also commandeered, creating yet another local tradition.

Accommodation! Panic! It was to be Anzac weekend. Ballarat was host to a huge variety of social and sporting events and numbers of returned servicemen and women coming home for remembrance. Every motel was booked out. Well, every motel in the guide book. The Arch Motel was still under construction when we booked the whole motel. Not enough rooms? No worries. The use of lots of 'low boys' nearly doubled the accommodation, a real crowded house! Some overflow was to enjoy the nights and the trains at Bungaree House. The stage on which COTMA could be built was ready.

Lon Wymond, Chairman of Puffing Billy Preservation Society, was our first guest speaker. David Rawlings from SPER presented a case for "the formation of an Association of Australasian tramway museums". A tall young man also from SPER offered "Trolley Wire" as the voice of such an association and has been our editor throughout our 25 years. Please applaud Bob Merchant. Graeme Breydon (then TMSV) and Dr John Radcliffe (of AETM) were also speakers and are again speakers at this conference 25 years later, although both in different roles.

But that first conference was mainly of workshops, 24 workshops, up to five parallel at a time. We discussed matters of management, finance, engineering, trams. We shared, we gave, we learnt.

What had really happened was that BTPS had reached out to all its fellow museums in Australia and New Zealand. We had created an extended friendship. We had taken a major step forward. We had found that to be part of an Australasian-wide movement enlarged the compass of enjoyment of our dedicated hobby far beyond the limitations of our own individual museums. We were all so much better for our sharing. We now all were one, in a huge and rewarding way. This remains the basis of COTMA to this day.

On the last day of the conference, on Sunday April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1975, the presidents and chairpersons of all the museums present called their own special workshop. I was not there, but I well remember our late Bill Jessup of BTPS emerging from that workshop to tell me that they were officially forming a "Council of Tramway Museums of Australasia", that Dr John Radcliffe would be the inaugural Chairman; would I be his Executive Officer? Yes.

COTMA had been built upon the stage. The vision was complete.

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It is for John to take up the story from here.

Thank you, one and all, for your continued, essential and wonderful support of your COTMA.

## **Additional Notes from the Session Secretary**

### ***The Beginning***

The idea really started with the AETM and SPER.

Bill Kingsley asked why Colin Seymour's hair is now grey.

He said he was glad to see smiling faces.

Reviewing to 25 years ago, he went back further to the last days of the Sydney tramway system, mentioning among others the Watsons Bay and Neutral Bay lines and across the Bridge. Then, in 1961, no more trams.

Coming to Sydney in 1967, he was approaching Sutherland from the south when he saw a Sydney tram – the Sydney Tramway Museum. Here he found a welcoming feeling of friendship.

In 1973 he visited Sydney again, then became active at the Ballarat Tramway Museum, spending weekends in Ballarat with night slideshows.

Bill then visited the St Kilda museum of the AETM and, after witnessing the friendly setting of St Kilda, felt something missing in his mind. In January 1975 Bill was back again at SPER and felt the need for something to link the museums.

The BTMS afforded the organising of a conference of tramway museums. Originally intended for mainland museums, Tasmania was then included (TTMS) then also New Zealand.

Ballarat reached out and COTMA was formed at the final session of the conference.

### ***To the Present***

John Radcliffe spoke supported by electronic slides.

He quoted from the first conference proceedings the principal purpose “was to bring together the office bearers of the various tramway museums in Australia so that we can learn from the expertise which each might have, or have developed over the years.”

John referred to a list of conferences and participants and the gradual increase in member museums – now 16 at this conference, with 108 participants.

What we have talked about over the years:

- Accounting matters;
- Advertising;

- Mechanical – air systems;
- Internet;
- Disaster management;
- Planning;
- Safety;
- Security.

### **Success and Benefits**

- Networking – equipment, visits;
- International recognition – eg TMS Crich;
- Confidence to tackle major restoration projects.

There have been specific successes and also failures, such as no means of knowing what's happening in museums.

### **Looking to the Future**

Many of our museum visitors no longer remember the trams in service.

However, volunteers are now offering their services to museums. There is now a need for succession planning. This leads to issues such as specialised manufacture of parts, social, technical, environmental etc. This has been experienced by the TMS at Crich.

What we cannot do is look inwards.

### **Discussion**

Bob Pearce (PETS) – to both speakers: What did Bill Kingsley see as his idea?

Answer (Bill Kingsley) – Questions being asked – how, etc. Technical sharing – didn't know what to achieve – probing.

(John Radcliffe): It was competitive among museum groups in Victoria Relationships – reflecting of what each was trying to do. All have strengths and weaknesses. Combining capabilities.

John Shaw (PETS) – As we are getting older, he barely knew the early years in Perth. Is there any chance of recording for posterity the formation of COTMA:

Answer (Bill Kingsley) – His presentation was based on his slides and the article in the proceedings. He never saw it as a challenge; he just wanted to do it.

(John Radcliffe): What is the market? Is it for us or more general? He referred to the book *Trolley to the Park*. The question is, what are we trying to achieve?