

The Tramway cultural heritage of our cities;
the New Zealand scene summarised for Europeans and setting the context for our
collective next half-century in Australasia.

Mike Mellor and Alan Smith
Wellington Tramway Museum,
Wellington,NZ

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Kia ora, buongiorno, gidday. Last December Mike Mellor (retired Executive Office at the Rail Heritage Trust of NZ) and I drew up a presentation for ATTS in Turin, Italy. That conference included Zoom papers from colleagues at Launceston and Melbourne, and Mike gave his live at Turin. We aimed to summarise the New Zealand scene for a European audience, as a personal view not claiming to represent formal FRONZ or COTMA societies. The Turin theme was “The Tram in the culture of the city”, so we looked at tram preservation in the culture of NZ, stereotypically still often thought of in terms of sheep. We hope that this presentation, trimmed of some of the European focus, is a useful summary for Aussies, and a reminder for Kiwis. The Turin paper will inevitably repeat some of the things ably covered by others at today’s conferences I am just coming at it from a different angle. The town street tram era in NZ lasted only 100 years - 1862 to 1964, and humans have lived here for just 800 years or so; by contrast, in Europe, as in Australia, the town street tram era is continuous from the 1850s, and human habitation goes back thousands of years. It all reinforced to me how the mid-20th century “cultural context”, when our museums started, no longer exists.

Maps

Tram museums began in the 1950s as voluntary efforts because “official” museum and cultural thinking completely ignored them. Now there are around 80 trams at NZ’s working museums. They are recognised beyond their immediate heritage value as tourist attractions, as useful social capital, and - in Christchurch - as a core part of inner-city regeneration.

Trams still around NZ

I'll give a quick overview of each, generally north to south, rounding off with a closer focus on Christchurch because of its mix of heritage, demographic, cultural, economic and natural factors making the trams there today a real icon of NZ's second-largest city. To me, Christchurch is the exemplar of current and probable future cultural contexts for tram preservation.

Whangarei

Up in Whangarei, 150km north of here, two Lisbon trams have been regauged to 3 foot 6 to carry visitors through the Heritage Park.

MOTAT

Auckland's trams closed in 1956, and our host MOTAT grew from NZ's very first tram preservation steps. Its dual-gauge line links now carries over 100,000 passengers a year. MOTAT also runs the Dockline electric tramway just along from today's venue; I'll come back to that later.

Whanganui

South to Whanganui, where the trams closed in 1950. A one-tram heritage line runs near where Waimarie, the restored coal-fired river paddle steamer, berths - possibly a unique combination of transport modes. There's Mable on the right.

The tram may be extended to an inner-city loop - I hope this conference can update us.

Wellington

In Wellington, NZ's last tram ran in 1964. Street wired electric traction survived as trolleybuses until 2017.

These Fiducia cars were Wellington's most modern. Mike noted to the Turin audience that the lady alighting looks like NZ's answer to Gina Lollobrigida!

Wellington Cable Car

The cable car opened in 1902, including former horse trams as trailers. It was converted to a Swiss-style funicular in 1979 and is still owned by the city council, but seen more as a tourist attraction than as public transport.

Wellington Tramway Museum

Since 1965 Wellington Tramway Museum (WTM) has run across Queen Elizabeth Park. The Park is now in a new post-grazing phase of ecological replanting and wetland restoration, bordered by sand dunes, beach and the Tasman Sea, overlooked by Kapiti Island and the coastal escarpment. You can see all this from a non-polluting electric tram, an attraction in its own historical right.

Dunedin

Now to Te Waipounamu, the South Island, and Dunedin, bits of whose cable car network lasted until 1957. Dunedin had the first electric trams in NZ, the last of those closing in 1956.

Dunedin Cable Car heritage

There's a great plan to rebuild one of those cable lines back to downtown, and possibly through the regenerated warehouse quarter to the quays. Already three cars have been completely restored by enthusiasts. Again, this conference will I'm sure update us.

Historic Christchurch

Which leads us to Christchurch. Trams ran between 1882 and 1954, initially horse and steam, electric from 1905; some of the pre-electric cars lasted as trailers through to the 1950s.

Tram-era Christchurch sprawled over mostly flat land where low-rise Victorian architecture in the centre tapered out to suburbs of wooden bungalows set in quarter-acre gardens.

The photos show typical post-war scenes. Graham Stewart, you'll know: I always imagined that the old bloke on the bike was overtaking the slow tram, but perhaps the tram was just parked up and loading?

Ferrymead - Christchurch

From the 1960s, determined enthusiasts set about retrieving old tram bodies (often converted to sheds or holiday homes) with a vision, inspired by Crich, Seashore and

by Loftus, of a working museum line at the site - then mostly a rubbish dump - of New Zealand's first steam railway, of 1863.

The first stage opened in 1968 and became a core of "Ferrymead Historic Park" with its reconstructed colonial-era townscape.

Christchurch earthquake

And then something pretty spectacular happened. Inspired urban planners - take a bow, Dave Hinman - worked up the idea of an inner-city electric tram line connecting the Cathedral and the Arts Centre (both classic pieces of the Victorian Gothic), using restored trams from Ferrymead. The initial 2km city loop opened in 1995. Its blend of private-sector operation of volunteer-owned trams on council-owned infrastructure results in an income stream for Ferrymead, improved urban vibe, and an iconic tourist attraction – a win for all. But then something happened to both the architecture and the tramway –

As it happened

In September 2010 and February 2011 earthquakes hit Christchurch, demolishing or badly damaging most inner city buildings and killing 185 people (that's still raw). This pic of tram 178 (seen as a shed in that earlier slide) was taken at the moment the second earthquake struck.

Red zone

Although the track was largely undamaged, for two years the city centre was closed off as a hazardous "red zone". Then, after tram services had returned, in March 2019 a lone gunman killed 51 people at two mosques. This was near where the trams ran, and it's even more raw. And then of course came Covid, with lockdowns, no international tourists, and social distancing: all the opposite ambience of a crowded heritage tram traversing bustling city streets.

Christchurch today

After each of these disruptions, having trams back on the streets was seen as a positive step of getting back to normal: the city tram as an enduring icon while everything else was abrupt change. Even though they had been around since just 1995, they somehow provided a sense of continuity.

Urban renewal has produced some great new architecture, with the trams an integral part of making it both accessible and attractive. In June last year the line was further extended to form double-loop routes.

Lucky eights

A tram painted blue and renumbered with “lucky 8s” to appeal to Chinese tourists; why not? Maybe not conventional heritage, but innovative marketing to help preservation happen.

Dockline - Auckland

On a smaller scale, in 2011 Auckland Dockline Tramway opened as part of downtown waterfront renewal here.

Auckland is 3 times larger than Christchurch, so urban renewal is greater too – so big that the tramway no longer seems to have a place and is slated to close. I’m sure we will hear more about that at this conference.

Run-down Dunedin

So, what are the cultural values from all this? There are three. Firstly, a way of capturing something of the small-town, fairly casual New Zealand of the 1930s-50s and its inherent cultural ambience. This and the opening Whanganui sheep slide both depict the barely post-colonial NZ which was very recent memory when our first tram museums started.

Volunteers at WTM

Secondly, the values of voluntary effort, of enthusiasts rolling up their sleeves to do things that no-one else was doing, here in the early days at WTM. Young Pakeha blokes in the mud predominate!

ChristChurch tram with modern fern building

Thirdly, the spirit of innovation able to see the opportunity in Christchurch for restored trams to play an active part in urban regeneration; and in Wellington for historic tram rides as a non-polluting way of transport through an ecological reserve.

Tram culture and heritage remain valued. A robust blend of museum principles, of commercial thinking, and of volunteer participation will carry that culture forward.

So, that was the Turin presentation. Now some thoughts of mine about implications looking forward. The New Zealand age of the classic tram has vanished. We are now 80 years on from our 1950s origins; this session is not one of those “how do we attract new members” things.

Today the average age of NZ's 5 million population is 37 years, and a quarter of that population were born overseas. All COTMA sites balance expert heritage restoration and those new cultural values which social media, climate change and leisure expectations shape for our future customers, volunteers and landlords. For example, WTM has just renewed its lease at Queen Elizabeth Park. The previous lease dated from 1966 when it was grazing land envisaged as future sports grounds. The new lease rightly has contexts of climate change, restoration of the the natural environment, and the role of Mana Whenua, Te Atiawa - things which were just not part of the NZ 1960s cultural context.

Oriental Bay

Here the old tram routes, though, still leave their mark on the way our cities are shaped - the curves of roads, the placing of suburban shopping centres, the cuts into hills. Our museums provide new populations with the link to why these are so. Tangible links - and fun experiences.

Christchurch Modern

Ka mua, ka muri - we go forward facing our past. We must cherish our origins but not think that their values will be relevant to, or even understood by, our successors.

Restored trams in Aotearoa New Zealand provide both continuity from the past and exciting opportunities for the future.

Nga mihi, thank you, Grazie