COTMA Conference – Sydney 13th October 2014

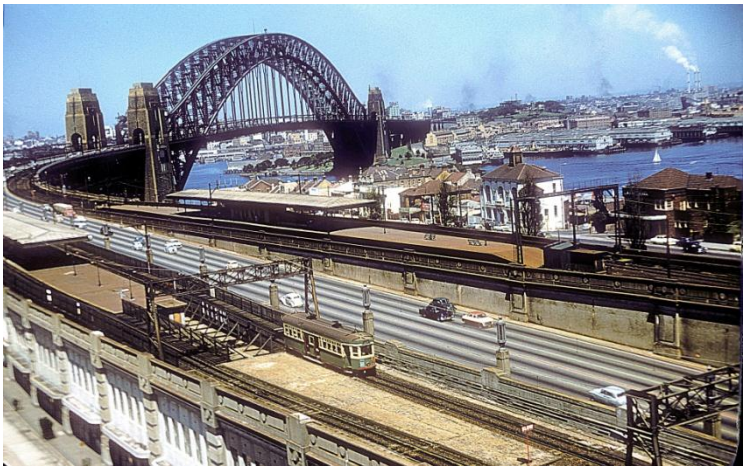
Where Trams and Ferries met

Harbour Cruise – MV Proclaim – 13th October 2014

Welcome aboard! Today we are cruising on board MV Proclaim, built as a charter vessel by Morrison and Sinclair at Longnose Point, Birchgrove, Sydney in 1939, and first used for the Australia Day Sydney Regatta on 26th January 1940.

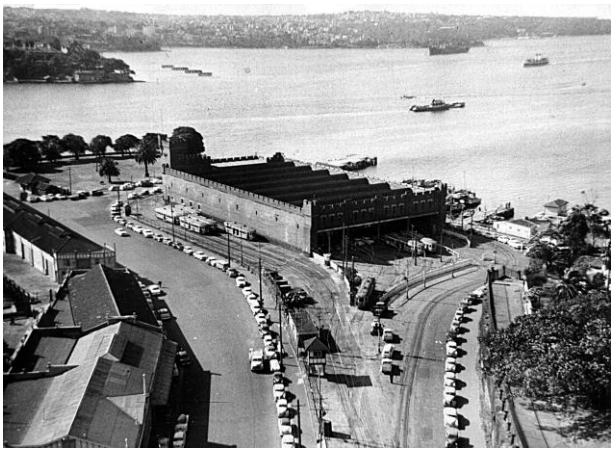
We shall be cruising at sea level past a number of locations where ferries and trams met, so there should be no need for seat belts on take-off from our jetty or for emergency oxygen!

Shortly on our right hand side, after we pass through Pyrmont Bridge, was the location (long gone) of Erskine Street wharf, where electric trams, from March 1905 met the ferries, some of which ended their journeys at Redbank wharf near Parramatta. From Redbank wharf a private steam tram service operated into Parramatta to the Parramatta Park gates. From Erskine St wharf a cable service operated in King Street to Ocean Street, Edgecliff from September 1894 which from October 1898 connected with a pioneer electric service to Rose Bay wharf.



Soon we will pass beneath the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which had tram tracks on the eastern side, originally designed for trains which ran in parallel tunnels to the rail tunnels to a terminus at Wynyard station. Trams ran on the bridge from March 1932 until June 1958 when the North Sydney tram system was abandoned, and the rail tracks were converted to additional road lanes. The tunnels still exist, and in fact Wynyard railway station to this day does not have Platforms 1 & 2, as these were assigned to the trams, and the rail platforms remain as numbers 3 to 6!

Ahead of us is the Sydney Opera House, which was built on Bennelong Point and the site of the Fort Macquarie tram depot. This served the lines running along George Street to the west and until 1950 also provided trams for the line along King Street from Erskine Street wharf to Watson's Bay.



Circular Quay was the terminating point for more than 20 of Sydney's tram routes. The first line connecting Central (aka. Redfern) Railway to Circular Quay was a short lived horse tram which operated from 1861 until 1866. Electric trams reached Circular Quay at the end of 1899 with the opening of the line from Pyrmont, not far from where we boarded our vessel, along George Street to Circular Quay. The service was so popular and congested that public demand created the need for trams to be extended to the Quay operating via Pitt and Castlereagh Streets. Let us hope that the 'back to the future' Light Rail to be introduced by later this decade on George Street will be as successful!





A coupled set of K Class trams climb the grade to Philip St in the 1920's.

As we pass the Opera House on our right we will see the Botanical Gardens, the Woolloomooloo finger wharf and the naval dockyard at Garden Island. During the Great War, two purpose converted ambulance tramcars carried wounded military personnel from the Woolloomooloo terminus to a Military Hospital at Randwick. Fort Denison, on the left, was built in the late 19th century due to a perceived invasion threat from Russia. These days it is hired out for functions.

We will shortly cross to the northern shores of the harbour where trams provided several feeder services to ferry wharves, which were particularly busy in the days before the Harbour Bridge was opened in 1932. These days the ferry service to Athol Wharf is used more as a tourist service for visitors to Taronga Zoo Park, where the giraffes have one of the best views in the world from their home there. Tram services to Athol Wharf from Taronga Zoo top gates commenced in October 1917 and ran on a reserved track down the hill to the wharf until all North Sydney tram services were replaced by buses in June 1958. This was the location where trams literally 'met the ferries', as over the years there were three spectacular early morning runaways with trams ending up in Sydney Harbour.





Mosman Bay Wharf c1903.

Three other wharves between Athol and the Sydney Harbour Bridge had tram to ferry connections. These were at Mosman Bay, Cremorne and Neutral Bay. All three of these lines opened in the early years of the 20th century and were progressively replaced by feeder bus services between November 1955 and May 1956.



Cremorne Wharf.

The most significant of the three lines was the Neutral Bay line which opened in June 1900 and closed in May 1956. The line was steeply graded, and had its own wharf built on the level as the terminus. Of note was the requirement, until 1952, for the line to be operated exclusively by four wheel trams fitted with track brakes. As a consequence, otherwise obsolete cars of the E and K types, most of which were scrapped in the 1930's and 1940's, would not have survived for later preservation. E cars 529-530 were returned to the main system in 1952, when R1 car 2029, fitted with dynamic braking, took over main duties on the line while K cars 1295 and 1296 were retained as standby/relief cars.



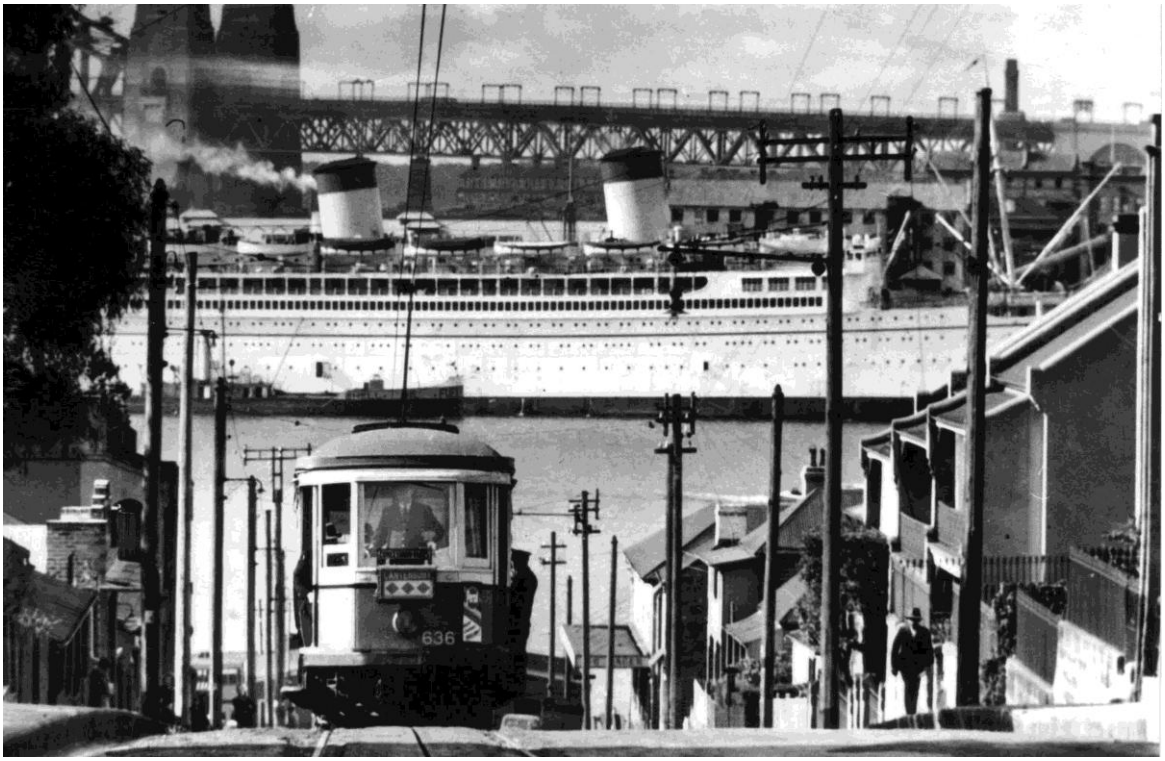
K 1296 lingering on in service until the last day of the line on 26th May 1956. The E cars 529-530 and K 1296 were amongst the first cars preserved by Sydney Tramway Museum in 1956 and eventually, K 1295 (somewhat derelict) also ended up at Loftus in 1997.

There were two more tram ferry connections on the north-side near where the Sydney Harbour Bridge now stands. The very first was a cable tramway which opened in May 1886 from Milson's Point to Ridge Street, North Sydney. It was replaced by electric trams from January 1900, and closed with the opening of the Bridge in March 1932. The other connection from McMahons Point to North Sydney was opened in September 1909 and also closed with the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with its direct tram services across the bridge to Wynyard from North Sydney.

Milson's Point Tramway Arcade c1906



Our next point of transport interest is the former Manly ferry MV Baragoola, moored for many years in this location. It was built by Mort's Dock at Balmain in 1922 and was withdrawn from service in 1983. It has a heritage order attached to it; however due its current poor state its future is unclear. Also of interest is that Mort's Dock won the contract to build the last 30 of the P type toastrack cars in 1928-1929, of which P 1729 survives and is undergoing restoration at Loftus.



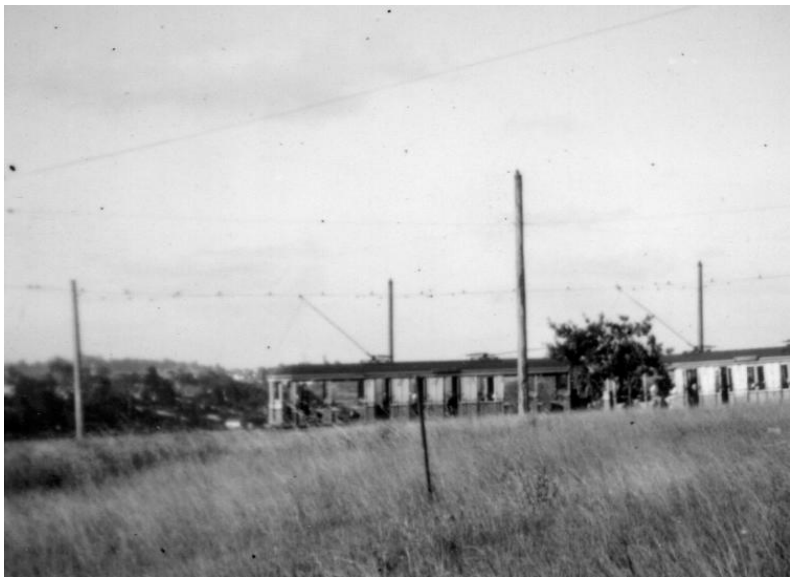
The unique counterweight tram line down Darling Street to the wharf of that name (now known as Balmain wharf) was opened in November 1902 and closed in November 1955.

There were two swing bridges at Glebe Island and Gladesville which carried trams on the Ryde line. The Glebe Island Bridge (which is similar to the Pyrmont Bridge) is no longer used and remains in the open position to allow free access to water traffic, having been replaced by the Anzac Bridge in the early 1990's. Incidentally, the Anzac Bridge is unique in flying both the Australian and New Zealand flags for its highest points, while statues of Australian and New Zealand soldiers from the First War guard the western approaches.

The bridge at Gladesville (which allowed free passage for pedestrians on the trams due to its narrowness) was removed entirely, with the opening of the new concrete arch bridge exactly fifty years ago, and only the stone abutments remain. Trams last ran over the old bridges in June 1953 and March 1950 respectively.

If there is time, we may venture further up the Parramatta River to Abbotsford Point, where steam trams operated from August 1893 until replaced in April 1905 by electric cars which extended the line a short distance closer to the point. This line was cut back in August 1954 and services were replaced by feeder buses, a common feature in Sydney of progressively cutting back longer tram lines.

The western-most locations on the Parramatta River served by trams were the lines to Mortlake and Cabarita Park on the isolated Enfield system. Steam trams reached Mortlake, an industrial area with a large gasworks in September 1901 and the short branch to Cabarita Park opened in July 1907. The steam tram service was replaced by electric trams in March 1912 and in turn by buses in August 1948.



Railway Square and Quay Street in tramway days.



Looking north across Railway Square from Broadway c1907



An O Class turns out of Quay St enroute to Circular Quay c1927



Coupled O Class cars climb the grade to Railway Colonnade, with the iconic Railway Clock Tower in the background.



Railway Colonnade on opening day.