The History and Nature of the Railway

AUSTRALIA’S first steam-hauled train ran in 1854 when the train made a journey over a 4 kilometre line between Flinders Street and Sandridge (now Port Melbourne). It is interesting to note that this line has now been converted to a light rail service.

The Victorian Government Railways was established on 1 May 1856, when the Government purchased the rights and property of the failed Melbourne, Mount Alexander and Murray River Railway Company. Running commenced on 13 January 1859, on both the main line being built between Melbourne and Sandhurst (Bendigo) as far as Sunbury, and the branch line from Footscray Junction to Williamstown.

Prior to this a number of lines existed, such as the Geelong to Greenwich (Newport), which ran as an isolated system until the branch line from Footscray Junction was completed.

In the following years, private railway companies were taken over by the Victorian Railways as they got into financial difficulties. At this time, the great expansion of railways within Victoria began. Firstly, we saw “main lines” built at great expense to the goldfields areas - Melbourne - Bendigo - Echuca, Geelong - Ballarat, etc., and then a proliferation of branch lines in the 1880s and early 1890s when a single Act of Parliament authorised many lines. These became known as the “Octopus” Acts.

Many of these lines were of light construction, including five narrow gauge lines. They were developed at the whim of local politicians and had no chance of becoming financially viable. Railway stations and lines were provided on the basis that no landowner should spend more than a day travelling to the nearest railway station and back by means of a horse and dray.

By 1900, the Victorian Railways was one of the most important organisations in the Colony. Its employees were seen as being so influential (both because of their numbers as a percentage of state public servants and their wide dispersal) that it was necessary to put them into a special electorate and not just treat them as ordinary citizens. This was quickly abandoned after one term, but shows how important (or dangerous) some people saw the Victorian Railways’ influence. In addition, Victorian Railways employees were exempted from serving on juries until the 1950s.

The engine drivers strike at the turn of the century also highlighted the significance of the railways. It only lasted a short period of time, but it paralysed Melbourne and the surrounding community, since essential items such as milk, vegetables, fruit and mail could not be readily and efficiently transported to the city. The Argus newspaper at the time condemned it as striking at the heart of the community.

At the turn of the century the Victorian Railways had expanded to such a degree that it operated over 5054 route kilometres; and despite political strife, financial stringencies, droughts and wars, the network expanded up to 1930 to a total of 7648 route kilometres. Lines extended in all directions, including over the borders into South Australia, the Riverina area of New South Wales, and, excepting the mountainous north-eastern region, all arable areas of the State were within 13 kilometres of a railway.
Minor additions were made until 1942, when the maximum of 7721 kilometres was attained. Since then, a progressive decline of kilometres open for traffic has occurred with the closure of non-paying sections because of continued heavy operating losses. Route kilometres open in 1991 total 5196.

At its peak in the 1930s, not only did the Victorian Railways operate trains, but owned and operated its own:

- trams;
- road motors - both passenger and freight;
- poultry farm;
- bakery;
- butchery;
- nursery;
- holiday resorts;
- workshops;
- refreshment rooms;
- child minding areas for city shoppers;
- staff social centres (Railway Institutes) in many areas.

Its functions therefore had a big effect on the State and on its budget. Its importance remained (more or less) until the development of motor transport, which came into its own with the end of petrol rationing after World War II.

More recent times have seen changes in the pattern of travel - the City of Melbourne has lost its significance as a focal point for business and shopping. Flexible working hours and regional shopping centres have resulted in people not needing to travel into the CBD. Changes in manufacturing and physical distribution of the population and industry significantly changed the freight task, and the rail system is no longer the principal freight and people mover along its radial corridors.

The Victorian Railways operated from 1856 to 1983 when it was decided to split the organisation into two autonomous segments, namely the State Transport Authority and Metropolitan Transit Authority. However, in July 1989 the Public Transport Corporation was formed by the amalgamation of the two Authorities. The established trading names have been retained; all freight services, together with country and interstate passenger services, and marketed as V/Line, whilst all Melbourne metropolitan passenger services (train, light rail, tram, government and private bus) are marketed as “The Met”.

**V/Line - Country Services**

Of the network of country lines operated by the Victorian Railways, very few did not have at least some form of passenger service. If there was not a dedicated passenger train there were usually mixed freight and passenger trains and even some very interesting experiments with early forms of self-propelled rail motors. The intercolonial expresses provided superior travelling conditions on the Adelaide and Albury lines.

Sleeping carriages were introduced in 1887, and dining and parlour cars followed in their turn. Trains designated as “Mails” conveyed travelling Post Offices on some routes and in 1936 the first air conditioned carriages in Australia were introduced in order to trial equipment for the famous “Spirit of Progress”. Interestingly, some of the experimental air conditioned carriages are still in service and will remain so until the end of this year.
The Victorian Railways seemed to have a fascination for rail motors and over the years endeavored to improve branch line operations by employing these vehicles. The most successful General Motors Diesel (formerly Petrol) Electric Rail Cars of the 1930s have just been retired, having outlived their Walker Rail Car replacements of the 1950s. A large fleet of these latter vehicles was imported from England with the objective of replacing all remaining branch line mixed trains.

V/Line currently operated 1000 route kms of passenger train services and 6000 route kms of coach services, servicing every major town within Victoria. Freight services, some road based, operate over all of the network. These concentrate on bulk traffic with a very much reduced involvement in general freight.

The Met - Suburban Rail

Melbourne has grown to a city of more than 3 million people. Its suburban rail network developed from a core of early private lines and is entirely radial, a couple of early experimental cross-link lines having failed to live up to optimistic traffic forecasts.

The system was electrified progressively from 1919 using a mixture of both specially constructed vehicles and converted steam stock. Until the construction of Melbourne’s Underground Loop, Flinders Street Station had the doubtful distinction of being one of the busiest, and hence most congested, rail terminals in the world. Replacement of the original wooden bodied trains commenced in 1956 and continued at varying levels through to the late 1980s. The current fleet comprises 919 electric cars.

Major Recent Changes to the Railway System

Up until 1960, apart from the change in motive power which was still in the transition stage, there had been very little change in the operation of the railway over the previous 50 years. However, in the ensuing 30 years a complete change in the management structure, traffic operations and maintenance system has taken place. The major events have been:

- withdrawal of branch line rail car services - in excess of 30;
- phasing out of small consignments of traffic;
- introduction of freight centres;
- virtual elimination of fixed wheel wagons;
- closure of many country station, lines and removal of staff;
- mechanisation of track maintenance with subsequent staff reduction;
- rationalisation of workshops activities and facilities with consequent staff reductions;
- construction of the Underground Loop;
- construction of the Melbourne Hump Yard and its subsequent closure due to changed traffic characteristics;
- interstate through running of locomotives;
- upgrading of country passenger services with new and refurbished cars;
- shift in traffic task to block trains and concentration on interstate routes;
- change in safe working systems and practices;
- introduction of two man crews with subsequent elimination of guards and brake vans on passenger and freight trains;
- significant reduction in workforce numbers;
- elimination of Commissioner and Branch systems of management;
- formation of the Public Transport Corporation on 1 July 1989.

As can be seen from this, the Victorian Railways has undergone a fundamental technological/business revolution! Yet to be faced and its impact gauged, is the creation of the National Rail...
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(13km). It has a variety of rolling stock.

Mornington Tourist Railway only recently obtained its Order in Council, and is currently preparing the track and developing the railway to operate between Baxter and the Nepean Highway, Mornington (12km).

An addition to these is the well known Puffing Billy, a fully preserved 2'6" railway, which after closure as part of the Victorian Railways network was reopened as a tourist attraction, and its operation financially guaranteed and supported by a volunteer preservation group. In 1978, the Emerald Tourist Railway Act was initiated, appointing a Board to operate the railway under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism.

There would have to be the possibility that some parts of the remaining V/Line system could be seen as having tourism potential. For example, the earliest mainlines, Melbourne to Bendigo and Ballarat to Geelong, still have many graceful stone bridges and station buildings, but to date the Public Transport Corporation has not seen these in any light other than as ordinary parts of an operating railway system.

**Railway Museums and collections of Moveable Property and Records**

The Public Transport Corporation has made a deliberate decision not to establish its own museum. However, the ARHS Railway Museum at North Williamstown represents the official PTC heritage rolling stock collection. The Railway Museum currently has 60-odd large items on display with an equivalent number being held in storage awaiting restoration for display. The work of this museum is funded entirely from entrance fees and no grants of any description have been received in its 30 years of existence. All of the exhibits are in the open and are thus subject to the ravages of the weather and salt air in this seaside suburb. This presents major difficulties in maintaining the exhibits in presentable condition, and it is of great credit to the Committee of Management that the Museum is of such a high standard.

There has been no concerted effort on the Corporation’s part to assemble a collection of representative memorabilia. However, a recent decision was made to retain the PTC historic photographic collection and endeavour to capitalise on its market potential.

Interestingly enough, the Corporation has retained and restored a handful of historic tram vehicles which operate on certain routes on Sundays in the summer, and it also has the nucleus of a historic bus collection although these are not operable.

There is also a collection of Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board memorabilia kept at the Malvern tram depot.

**Railway Heritage**

The contribution of the Public Transport Corporation’s predecessor, Victorian Railways, to the state of Victoria has been enormous.

Many lines were built and stations provided for the express purpose of supporting goldfields and the rural economy. Over the years, tourism has been vigorously pursued, as has the consumption of home grown products, especially fruit juices and dried fruits, through railway refreshment kiosks.

Commencing in 1922, the Victorian Railways Commissioners provided a special train known as the Victorian National Resources Development Train which toured Victoria for several days at a time.
and afforded leaders of industry in the metropolis and rural areas the opportunity to live on board and to visit areas of importance whilst sharing views and experiences.

In 1924, the Better Farming Train began to tour country Victoria and bring to otherwise isolated communities news of developments in areas as diverse as farming practices, animal husbandry, handcrafts, mobilsed to the historical to this contribution nil waymen during the Boer and World Wars I and II, the Railway Workshops made very significant contributions to the supply of munitions and equipment for Australian fighting forces.

The heritage and importance of the State's rail system is to be seen in the infrastructure that remains to this day in the form of buildings, structures, rolling stock and artifacts that have escaped destruction or modernisation.

The Public Transport Corporation has endeavored to restore and upgrade a number of important provincial stations, such as Geelong, Ballarat and Maryborough in such a way as to ensure that their historical features will not be lost or spoilt and the buildings are generally enhance, whilst at the same time seeing that such preservation will not interfere with the Corporation's operations.

The recent years, the Corporation has engaged the services of Architectural consultants to undertake a number surveys in regard to the Corporation's facilities:

- Victoria's Railway Stations - an Architectural Survey, in association with the Australian Railway Historical Society;

- Study of Historical Railway buildings and Structures for V/Line - this study included station buildings, goods Sheds, Locomotive Depots, Signal Boxes, Bridges and Interlocking equipment. A similar exercise was suggested for the metropolitan system, but it was not able to be funded and has been deferred;

- Paint Colour Schemes - Victorian Railways - a research study into colour schemes used on stations prior to the mid 1960s. Architects are currently being engaged to fill in gaps in this study in the light of recent information.

In contrast to the above heritage initiatives, the Corporation is now being faced with the difficult decision as to what should happen to the buildings that are no longer required for Corporation purposes. Unless the local councils or communities are prepared to take over the ownership and maintenance, a large percentage of these buildings will inevitably fall into a state of disrepair or will be demolished, as the PTC does not have the funds to maintain them.

On the brighter side of things, a number of closed stations such as Yarra Junction, North Carlton, Bright and Casterton have been sympathetically converted by local groups into meeting places and museums. This provides an example of good community use of buildings and land to the benefit of the surrounding district. Recently, the City of Mordialloc, one of our bayside councils, took over responsibility for the water tower which has not seen use by steam locomotives for many years, and a garden and car park will be developed around the facility.

A working party is currently investigating the possibility of using the historic East and West blocks of the Newport Workshops, which date from 1888, as a home for the Railway Museum and to
provide a location for the operation and restoration of railway equipment by various recognised railway preservation groups.

There has never been an audit of machinery carried out with the PTC but recently a survey of equipment and machinery was undertaken at the Newport Workshops, in connection with the establishment of the proposed Museum complex.

The Corporation maintains a Historic Vehicles Register which details the allocation and current location of all retained historical rolling stock.

Apart from the ARHS Museum, there are two major rolling stock preservation groups in Victoria, these being the Seymour Loco Steam Preservation Group and Steamrail Victoria. The Corporation treats the Seymour group as "Semi-official" in that the majority of its working members are present or past railway employees mainly based at Seymour. This group undertakes major restoration work to locomotives (steam and diesel) and a variety of carriages, rail motors and freight stock. It is also the custodian of a number of PTC heritage rolling stock items which it maintains on behalf of the Corporation. A close link exists between this group and the Railway Museum.

Steamrail Victoria, based at Newport, is involved in the restoration to operating condition and maintenance of steam, diesel and electric locomotives, passenger carriages and electric suburban rolling stock. A small amount of freight rolling stock is also held, such as wagons for the transportation of coal. Steamrail is a business venture employing a few staff but the majority of the work is carried out by volunteers.

The restoration of former suburban electric rolling stock and diesel locomotives rests with two subdivisions of Steamrail, namely Elecrail and Dieselrail. There also exists a number of smaller railway preservation groups around Victoria who have been allocated a particular item of rolling stock to maintain and operate.

The Corporation uses the word "allocated" in the sense that it retains the ownership of vehicles in the hands of these groups as distinct from vehicles which are sold to Tourist Railways.

Small groups such as the Signalling Record Society, Australian Association of Timetable Collectors, and the Australian Association of Ticket collectors, actively pursue the retention of records, and to some degree equipment, that reflects the past railway heritage.

The Government of Victoria has recently launched its "Cultural Policy", details of which are shown in Attachment A. The Public Transport Corporation is yet to address the issues that this raises but has just recently taken a decision to appoint its first Heritage Manager. This officer will generally oversee the heritage activities hitherto carried out in an uncoordinated way, whether by Corporation officers with official responsibilities or, more usually, by others, simply because they had an interest in doing so.
Attachment A

Heritage Notes

Victorian Government Cultural Policy

This policy was recently launched by the Victorian Government. Its objective is to provide a framework for developing culture in its many forms: traditional and innovative arts, recreation and sport, education and heritage. The policy booklet 'Mapping our Culture', points out that culture is relevant to all Victorians, whether we place value on the Melbourne Cup, regional art galleries or our universities and schools. Victoria has often been the seedbed of new forms of culture, and the Cultural Policy aims to encourage this.

With regard to the heritage aspects of the policy, the area that the various railways/tramways fall within, the policy points out that:

"Conserving and enhancing Victoria's cultural heritage is a priority of the Cultural Policy. That heritage is not only the many buildings and objects of the past but also the social history of Victorians. Information collections and access to them are an essential part of developing ways of improving Victoria's future."

Some of the Strategic Actions proposed by the Heritage and Tradition section of the policy are:-

- develop appropriate legislation and infrastructure for heritage protection, including objects and artefacts.
- develop a State Cultural Heritage Strategy based on widespread public consultation.
- establish and maintain a State Register of significant portable cultural heritage.
- implementation of the Museums and Historical Collections Policy of the Museums Advisory Board.
- the development of thematic museums, based on existing collections, facilities and sites, such as a multi-location Victorian Maritime Museum and a network of Historic House museums.
- the provision of support services to encourage regional co-operation between museums and historical societies.

The policy also addresses the aspect of social history. This would allow the development of social history collections and research to reflect Victoria's social development through the construction of transport links and their support facilities. For example, the importance of the railways in providing employment to local communities, in extending the settlement of the State's population and the acceptance of immigrants into the railways/tramways employment.