THE PORT MELBOURNE AND ST. KILDA RAILWAY LINES.

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In October 1986 the National Trust classified the Port Melbourne and St. Kilda railway lines, recognizing their formative influence on Melbourne’s railway development and their respective contributions to the city’s economic growth and suburban form.1

The Flinders Street to Port Melbourne railway, opened in September 1854, was Australia’s first passenger steam rail service. It was important in the early development of the city and a crucial component in Melbourne’s great burgeoning as a nineteenth-century commercial city. It established Flinders Street Station as the focus of Melbourne’s subsequent vast rail network, and confirmed the role of Port Melbourne as a major port precinct. This port was Melbourne’s main international passenger gateway until the 1960s. Through its association with the port, the railway has been an integral part of many episodes in the city’s social history.

Opened in May 1857, the St. Kilda railway was essentially different from its Port Melbourne forebear. Whereas the original line had provided a nourishing lifeline between the young city and the world beyond, its St. Kilda offshoot was the first of the suburban commuter railways which were to have such a profound effect on Melbourne’s shape and density. Linking the city with more pleasant fields beyond, it expressed the lifestyle preferences of a developing urban community: the well-off who made St. Kilda Melbourne’s elite residential address and the excursionists from the northern suburbs who contributed to St. Kilda’s development as a premier recreational resort.

While the railway reservations themselves comprise the essence of this heritage, there are also stations and bridges of significance on the routes.

PORT MELBOURNE RAILWAY LINE

The official opening of Australia’s first passenger system railway between Melbourne and Sandridge (Port Melbourne) on 12 September 1854 was a grand occasion. The train consisted of a locally built engine, a second-class and two first-class carriages, which accommodated Sir Charles and Lady Hotham and leading citizens, and an open wagon for the band of Her...
Majesty’s 40th Regiment. As the band struck up, the train pulled away from the cheering crowds at Flinders Street station to begin its procession across the 2½ miles of sand wastes and bullrush swamps. Although folklore claims that the train ‘raced’ at 25 m.p.h. and Sydney newspapers deflated the speed to 8 m.p.h., officially its speed was recorded as a more dignified 15 m.p.h. In ten minutes it had arrived at Hobson’s Bay, where it was greeted by ships dressed in flags and a gun salute, and where a sumptuous banquet in the beachside engine shed awaited the travelers.

The construction of the railway and its associated pier was critical to the development of adequate port facilities for Melbourne. The Yarra river was originally a winding and lengthy passage between the Bay and the Melbourne settlement. Most vessels, particularly the larger ones, did not attempt to navigate the stretch. The alternative Williamstown anchorage, as Governor Bourke noted in 1837, necessitated a long overland trip to Melbourne. The flooded Yarra was unnavigable when Captain Lonsdale arrived in 1836 and he was forced to land at ‘the beach’ (later Sandridge) and transport his provisions overland to Melbourne. This strategy became increasingly popular and in 1838 a boat regularly transferred passengers between Williamstown and ‘the opposite beach.’ A few settlers built ti-tree jetties. A track to Melbourne gradually emerged, and the Government surveyor conferred the name Sandridge upon this fledgling alternative gateway to Melbourne.

As the number of ship visits to Hobson’s Bay increased dramatically in the late 1830s, so too did interest in the Sandridge settlement. In 1839 the surveyor Robert Hoddle proposed that it be the first of a series of bay-side villages. His plan proposed a railway between the settlement and Melbourne. This would cross the river at the site of the existing railway bridge (Hoddle did not specify whether his proposed rail would be mechanically powered). The importance of the proposed line is seen in Hoddle’s orientation of the layout of Sandridge along the route to Melbourne. The route to Sandridge was to be Melbourne’s critical link with the world.

Hoddle’s ambitious scheme did not eventuate and development slowed, perhaps as a result of the recession of the early 1840s. However, the Government did proceed with the all important communication works, building Beach Road (which was later called Sandridge Road and is the City Road of today) in 1842 and a deep-water pier in 1849. A public meeting in 1851 submitted a plan for a steam railway, but the proposal lapsed as alternative ideas for Melbourne-Hobson’s Bay links, including canals and a sea wall link to Williamstown, were raised.

News of the discovery of gold in 1851 compounded the chaotic transport conditions and stimulated a railway boom. In August 1852 a syndicate calling itself ‘The Melbourne & Hobson’s Bay Railway Company’ was formed. On 20 January 1853 it gained Parliamentary approval for its proposed 3.6 km link between Flinders...
Street and Sandridge Beach, which included a railway pier. The object of 'securing an expeditious and certain communication with the harbour' was 'so clear,' according to Governor La Trobe, that it was the first railway approved by Parliament, ahead even of favoured schemes to link Melbourne and Geelong with the Murray Valley and the goldfields. It helped ensure the primacy of Melbourne amongst the rapidly developing towns and ports in the colony, and confirmed Sandridge's destiny as a port township. The railway was planned by James Blackburn, City Surveyor for Melbourne and designer of the Yun Yeawater supply system.

The route of the reservation was virtually a straight line, the terrain providing little obstruction. There were no intermittent stops or bridges, apart from the wooden one traversing the river. The line approached Hobson's Bay on the western side of the Sandridge township and had the effect of separating the Port Melbourne township from the undeveloped area of Fisherman's Bend. The railway's diagonal route contributed significantly to the Government's inability to establish an orderly road layout to the immediate south of the Yarra. The line also hampered the easy communication of Emerald Hill (South Melbourne) residents and traders with the Yarra ferries and impeded the development of that locality.

The landscape reserves abutting the line between Graham and Boundary Streets, Port Melbourne, would appear to be a legacy of this embryonic stage of railway development. They are almost certainly the vestiges of the land which was left over when in 1855 the entire railway reserve was reduced in width from the original 100 yards to 100 feet.

The terminus of the railway have been critical to the development of Melbourne. At the beach end, the railway established a necessary improvement in Melbourne's port facilities. Sandridge, rather than Williamstown, became the main commercial gateway to Melbourne. The Company's Railway Pier accommodated more and larger ships than the 'town pier' at the end of Bay Street, and greatly facilitated the unloading and transportation of merchandise and immigrants. The Flinders Street terminus of the line became the seminal point from which Melbourne's massive passenger rail network would radiate.

The relative positions of Melbourne and Sandridge, and the shape of the area at Flinders Street reserved for the terminus, determined the railway's oblique path over the river. The significance of this diagonal route is emphasized by the similar proposals which were occurring at that time for the parallel route of Beach (now City) Road. That road was originally constructed in a straight line along what is now Bright Street, because in 1842 it was planned that the Prince's Bridge would be angled towards it, rather than straight across the river along the alignment of St. Kilda Road. In this period the city's Port Melbourne link
was clearly regarded as vital. Later, in 1853, when Cobb & Co. was founded, four Americans ran coaches along this Sandridge to Melbourne route. The angular railway bridge, pointing towards Hobson's Bay, remains the most striking legacy of this important historical route.

The location of 'The Falls' was an important factor in determining the point at which the railway crossed the river. The Falls were a series of rocky barriers which extended across the river in the vicinity of Queens Street. By their impediment to navigation, and their separation of fresh water from the tide, The Falls had determined the site of the settlement of Melbourne and influenced its subsequent development. It was the furthest downstream point at which the bridge could be built without interference to shipping. Downstream of the bridge, industries developed which either serviced shipping or needed access to it. Shipwrights, storage yards and hinterland railways located near the quay-side, as did traders in primary produce whose establishment led later to the prestigious Rialto precinct and to the predominantly commercial nature of the west end of the city. As part of its flood prevention works in the 1880s, the Harbour Trust removed The Falls. The Port Melbourne reservation and rail bridge remain as a legacy of their location.

The Sandridge Rail Bridge

The National Trust has classified this bridge in recognition of its status as one of Australia's foremost metal girder bridges. Built 1886-88, it is in fact the third railway bridge in this location. The Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Company built the first bridge in 1853, but this was replaced in 1858 by a timber trestle bridge of two lines which adopted the present more oblique angle across the river, thus doing away with the tight approach curve to the original bridge. By the 1880s, the need for a larger modern bridge was apparent. As part of a nostalgic farewell to a Melbourne which was rapidly being transformed by hectic growth and modern technology, artist Frederick McCubbin recorded the timber bridge in his painting 'Falls Bridge Melbourne' (1882).

The metal bridge of 1886-88, built at the height of the railway age and the long boom, was a much more substantial structure and carried four lines of traffic. The Victorian Railways Department designed it together with the south bank viaduct. In January 1886 the contract was let to David Munro and Co., prominent builders and engineers, who were also responsible for the construction of Queen's and Prince's Bridges.

It is similar in design to Queen's Bridge, in that hollow iron columns filled with concrete support the steel plate girders and cross girders. The columns are set parallel to the stream flow in groups of three with each group or pier having an ornamental cast iron pediment standing above the top flanges of the girders. The five spans, each of about 128 feet, are supported by riveted iron arches between the piers. The balustrades are constructed of half-inch sheet iron. On either side of the river the steel girders are supported by bluestone and brick buttresses and on the south side the structure is continued as a brickwork viaduct.

The bridge was erected during the period of transition of the use of iron to steel and it is a major, possibly the earliest, example of the use of steel bridge girders in the Victorian railway system. It is the only example of a railway bridge in this State to have substantial ornamentation. It is unique in its skewness. The diagonal alignment of the bridge and consequent oblique angle of its arched braces to its axis provides an unusually unobstructed view of the structure from the river bank and adds to the overall image of functional railways engineering. Its sturdy form is testament to the era in which the Sandridge railway was, in the words of railway historian, Andrew Ward, 'the freewheel of the nineteenth century.'

The Port Line Developments.

The Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Company was the most successful of the colony's private rail companies. It amalgamated with the Melbourne Railway Company in 1865, becoming the Melbourne and Hobson's Bay United Railway Company, thereby monopolizing Melbourne's south-eastern rail system. Always controversial, the Company was constantly criticised for its attitude towards station facilities, rail crossings, services and fares. From 1872, Port Melbourne citizens were among those who agitated for its acquisition by the Government. In July 1878, after much political controversy, this last private metropolitan rail company passed into the hands of the Government.

Improvements to the line accrued slowly thereafter. Agitation, from 1871, for the replacement of the North Port station (originally built in 1859) was finally successful in the early 1880s. Similar pressure for a station at Graham Street was successful in 1888. In an attempt to make the area more amenable, Port Melbourne Council embarked on improvements to the rail reserves in 1885 and in 1889 some trees were planted.

Detail showing columns, arches and girder supports, Sandridge rail bridge.
The major tree-planting along the reserves occurred later, from 1895-98.28

There were setbacks, as in 1898 when the Graham Street carriage repair workshop was closed, later to be moved permanently to Newport. Also, in 1890 a cable tram commenced operations along Bay and Beach Streets. The number of passengers on the Port Melbourne railway line dropped immediately from 579,000 to 298,000 per annum.29

The popularity of the line was boosted with the operation of the famous Bay paddle steamers from the railway pier. To accommodate the large number of passengers using these steamers, the old Port Melbourne station was demolished and replaced by an imposing brick structure in 1898-99. Boat trains connected with the steamers as they set off on their day or moonlight excursions to Sorrento or Queenscliff. Alterations were made to the railway pier in 1910, to facilitate berthing of the steamers and the Williamstown passenger ferry.30 In 1925 the platform of the Port Melbourne station was extended on to the pier as far as the steamers' berths. These berths protrude like small wings from the heel of the pier.

The City's Gate

From the time that the Harbour Trust cut the Coode canal and then opened the Victoria Docks in 1892, the critical role of the Port Melbourne railway line began to decline, though its absolute volume of traffic continued to expand. Princes Pier was opened in 1915, and in 1930 the new Station Pier was commissioned. Although Port Melbourne's piers and railway still handled large quantities of merchandise in the twentieth century (notably the new export lines, such as dairy and fruit products), by 1930 the heart of Melbourne's port was the lower river.31

At the same time the Port assumed primacy in hosting Melbourne's share of the burgeoning international passenger traffic. Since the 1880s great progress had been made in the size, speed and comfort of shipping, culminating in the era of international luxury liners in the 1930s.32 Partially in deference to the glamour associated with these developments, the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission in 1929 recommended that the Port Melbourne railway be redirected around Fisherman's Bend, and that its reservation be transformed into a 'Parkway,' a wide and noble entrance into Melbourne.33

Nothing came of this report, but the preparations for Victoria's Centenary celebrations in 1934 again focused attention on the unsightly Port Melbourne entrance to the city. During 1933 a 'Port Melbourne Highway' was the project which captured Melbourne's imagination as it sought to treat itself to a memorial which would at once beautify the city, be useful and productive, and provide relief for the unemployed. Various routes through Port Melbourne, St. Kilda and South Melbourne were discussed. To enable such a highway, however, it was necessary to build a bridge across the railway lines at the foot of Station Pier. In January 1934, after its efforts to solicit funds from municipalities and Government failed, the Melbourne Harbour Trust announced that it would fully fund such a bridge. The design and tender of £58,096 by Messrs. Hancock and Clayton was accepted, and it was built in time for the Centenary celebrations.34 This Centenary gesture by the Trust Commissioners was possibly prompted also by the need to provide access to the pier by the five ton trucks whose suitability for rapid delivery and dispatch was becoming increasingly apparent.35

The formidable and stylish Centenary Bridge thus represents the distillation of the grandiose proposals for highway entrances which Melburnians hoped would provide a dignified portal for its Royal guests and other visitors. In 1954 the Metropolitan Planning Scheme again proposed a more gracious gateway for liner passengers, this time in the form of a City Ring Road.

The importance of the port and its railway continued during the Second World War as troops departed and returned, war materials were crowded on to piers, and thousands of United States soldiers camped temporarily along the Port Melbourne foreshore. In the 1950s the railway provided thousands of migrants with their first glimpse of their new country.

The paper streamer departures of the passenger liner era passed into history when in the 1960s aircraft replaced ocean liners as the main means of passenger travel. The port has since played host to fewer cargo ships and the occasional tourist cruiser. Rail usage has similarly declined.

ST. KILDA RAILWAY LINE

Following an 8% profit in its first year of operation, the Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Company decided to construct a branch line to St. Kilda. On 13 May 1857 the colony's second railway was officially opened, though without the triumphant ceremony which usually accompanied such events.36 Commentators have suggested that this may have been due to the bitterness which accompanied the construction of the line.

The Railway Company had wanted the line to follow Moray Street, while the prospective 'Melbourne St. Kilda & Brighton Railway Company,' which hoped eventually to extend the line, favoured a route close to St. Kilda Road. The Emerald Hill (South Melbourne) Council presented a successful petition to Parliament, calling for the line to pass along the alignment of Ferrars Street, with provision for a station between York and Park Streets. Local residents expressed concern that such a line would impede communication with the bay, and put a stop to sea-bathing altogether.37

This issue of road crossings and bridges brought the Railway Company and local residents into dispute in
scenes which seem to have had similarities to those enacted in anti-freeway campaigns of the 1970s. Whilst Councillors and Company Directors prepared litigation proceedings, their workers presented their respective cases in a more direct fashion. Courts heard cases of assault between the navvies and Council employees, and a serious brawl was prevented only by the intervention of police. 38

At St. Kilda, citizen lobbying was successful in having the line terminate at Fitzroy Street, instead of in the vicinity of Grey, High and Barkly Streets. A tunnel through the hill, unpopular with property owners (particularly as the ultimate beneficiaries of this would be the Brighton residents) was thus avoided. Strong objections resulted in the railway encroaching on only one chain of the Fitzroy Street reservation, instead of the two chains over which it had originally trespassed during construction. The St. Kilda Station dates from the opening of the line. It is the oldest remaining station in Victoria, and with the canopy over the platform and running lines, reflects the feeling of a terminal. 40

The 1858 South Melbourne Station was rebuilt in 1883. Nestled in the cutting and enclosed by the Dorcas Street stone bridge at one end an an iron footbridge, reputedly erected in 1863, at the other, it forms a particularly attractive railway precinct. The Albert Park Station (originally called, in 1860, 'The Butts') was rebuilt in 1880. 41 Also amongst the original works on the line are the stone road-over-rail bridges at Dorcas, Bank and Park Streets. They were constructed by Hope and McKenzie in 1856-57 to the design of William Elsdon, whose name is incised in the entablature of the Dorcas Street bridge. 42

The character of St. Kilda had to a large degree already been established when the railway opened. From the time that the Government sold larger allotments there in 1842, the pleasant bay-side hill attracted the wealthy who built bright mansions in the manner of English Regency seaside resorts. The gold rush introduced another dimension, as denser housing, much of it jerry built, and 'beach squatters' filled in the landscape. 43

Although an omnibus had previously served the area, the railway prompted a new era in St. Kilda's growth. Until the 1880s, railways mostly serviced Melbourne's most affluent travelling public, so the presence of the Hobson's Bay Railway Company signified an area's status, and helped maintain it. This was undoubtedly the case at St. Kilda, the destination of Melbourne's first exclusively suburban railway.

Many of the area's mansions date from this time. To the older established residents, the railway meant the invasion of 'strangers' into their isolated 'little village.'
The tramway along Grey over the proposal to divert the line around the Esplanade and on to the Brighton line at Elsternwick. Historic Environment VI 4 (1988) extension of the line. Kilda Council favoured the Grey Fearing the ruination of its attractive foreshore, constructed over City Road and then Kerferd Road. 

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Further Developments

The St. Kilda and Brighton Railway Company extended the railway to Brighton in 1859. This line was carried from St. Kilda station across the Albert Park swamp by means of a wooden viaduct 400 metres long, then over St. Kilda Road by a timber bridge to Chapel Street (Windsor) station, and thence to Brighton. The Company was never financially sound and in 1862 it was purchased by the amalgamated Melbourne & Hobson's Bay United Railway Company. The 'loop,' as the portion between St. Kilda and Prahran was known, was now superfluous, as the consolidated ownership enabled trains to travel direct from Prince's Bridge to Brighton. Unused from September 1862, the loop was dismantled in 1867. 

The forming and draining of the swamp areas to the north and south of St. Kilda led to some new developments. Middle Park station was established in 1882 on that part of the line which had become the boundary of the newly developing areas between Beaconsfield Parade and Canterbury Road. The efficiency of the line and access to Port Melbourne was upgraded when, in 1898, a bridge was finally constructed over City Road and then Kerferd Road. Reclamation of Elwood swamp from the 1880s stimulated a vigorous campaign by local property owners for extension of the line.

Fearing the ruination of its attractive foreshore, St. Kilda Council favoured the Grey Street tunnel scheme over the proposal to divert the line around the Esplanade and on to the Brighton line at Elsternwick. The tramway along Grey Street would be the best means of connecting St. Kilda and Brighton across Elwood. This tram was for many years operated by the Victorian Railways rather than the Tramways Board. 

In the 1900s various ideas for improvement were proposed. The Metropolitan Town Planning Commission, as part of its idea to transform the Port Melbourne line into a 'Parkway,' planned for the St. Kilda line to be re-routed into Spencer Street. The Commission argued that the usage and efficiency of these lines seemed to be declining. At the same time St. Kilda citizens argued that their station needed modernizing and upgrading to harmonize with the palatial buildings in Fitzroy Street and the status of their city. At their meeting with Railway Commissioners it came to light that the volume of traffic passing through St. Kilda station was second only to that using Flinders Street Station. 

In 1987 similar figures, showing that patronage on the line was increasing and that most commuters wanted to travel to Flinders Street, were not able to prevent the replacement of the train by a light rail service.

There have been alterations in the lines associated with fluctuating demand and changes in transport technology, (e.g., duplication and electrification). The recent conversion of part of the routes to light rail is simply another example of this.

What is of concern, however, is the Government's plan to remove the embankment and viaduct between Clarendon Street and Flinders Street station. The future of the Sandridge Rail Bridge remains uncertain.

The National Trust first brought these lines to the attention of the Historic Buildings Council (HBC) in October 1986. In mid-1987 the Council considered the St. Kilda line, and recommended that the reservation and various structures on it be added to the Register of Government Buildings. Mr. Kennan chose not to approve this recommendation. Several requests have since been made to the HBC and present Minister, Mr. Roper, for the HBC to comply with its statutory obligation and consider the more historic Port Melbourne to Flinders Street railway reservation. Finally, in mid-June, the Minister replied that he understood that the HBC were reviewing the possibility of including 'parts' of the Port Melbourne line on the Register.

In its plans for the south and centre areas, the Ministry for Planning and Environment has largely overlooked this first railway line in Australia and its historical significance. Redevelopment of the area is proceeding although the amending planning scheme has not even been exhibited. Although the Albert Park, St. Kilda and South Melbourne stations have been listed on the Government Buildings Register, no planning controls are currently in place to prevent the removal of the line. Meanwhile the Government is attempting to demolish the Clarendon Street railway bridge. Not significant in itself, this bridge is, however, integral to the preservation of an intact and operable Flinders Street-Port Melbourne link.
In the tradition of disputation which seems to have accompanied the planning of suburban public transport facilities since the building of the St. Kilda Railway, the National Trust has joined local Councils and transport groups in securing the support of unions in opposing this scheme. The Trades Hall Council has recently placed a ban on the demolition of the bridge prior to an inquiry into the heritage, transport and tourist value of the Flinders Street link.

Other individual structures are threatened. Despite Ministerial assurances, doubts have been raised concerning the 'Falls,' or Sandridge, rail bridge. In the meantime, it continues to be used as an advertising hoarding, its embellishments and rivets unenhanced by paint. The location of light rail platforms away from stations have left historic stations at St. Kilda, Albert Park, South Melbourne and Port Melbourne unused and at the mercy of vandals.
From the time of the gold rush until the end of the era of migrant ships in the 1960s, the short Flinders Street to Port Melbourne rail link has played a major part in Melbourne's economic and social history. The allied St. Kilda route was the first of the purely suburban railways which would profoundly effect Melbourne's form. It would be a pity if such important components of our transport heritage were to be lost without having been considered by Government and while arguments concerning the continuing availability of the lines for commuter and tourist purposes are still unresolved.

NOTE:
The historical research in this article was carried out by the authors in the preparation of National Trust Classifications and campaigns. See, in particular, D. Dunstan, D. Moloney, G. Austin 'Port Melbourne and St. Kilda Railway Lines,' National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Classification Report, 1 September 1985, and C. Sagazio 'Research into the Sandridge Rail Bridge,' National Trust of Australia (Victoria), September, 1985, FN.5620.

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20. Register of Miscellaneous Grants Folio 23 (30 November 1859); 'Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Improvements at the Yarra,' 28 November 1857 (CPO); L.J. Harrigan, 'Centenary of the Melbourne - Sandridge Railway,' in The Australian Railway Historical Society, Bulletin No. 203, September, 1954, p.109. This second bridge was designed by W. Elsdon, the Company Engineer, and built by Messrs. Parks & Robertson.
23. VR Contract Book, Melbourne Terminus, Spencer Street, p.411; The Age 29 February 1888.

25. Personal conversations with Andrew Ward and Colin O'Connor; Butler, loc.cit.


27. U'Ren, Turnbull, op.cit., pp.30-32, 139-140.


29. Ibid., pp.141-2, 213.

30. Rail Plan 147 (South Melbourne) 'Proposed Extensions of Ozone Wing,' 17 October 1910 (CPO).


34. The Argus, 1933: 21 April, 12, 13, 20, 24 May, 2 June, 21 September, 18, 31 October, 13 December; 1934: 23, 24, 29 January.


36. Melbourne & Hobson's Bay Railway Company, Minute Book No. 2, p.198 (27/4/57) states: 'It was resolved that the branch line to St. Kilda be opened without any festive demonstration;' Harrigan, Victorian Railways, op.cit., p.41.


41. Harrigan, Victorian Railways, op.cit., p.43; National Trust File Nos. 4952, 4953, Port Melbourne - St. Kilda Railways.

42. Melbourne & Hobson's Bay Railway Company, Minute Book No. 2, pp.94-193.


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