

ALL ABOARD!
FROM ROCKDALE TO BRIGHTON LE SANDS
BY TRAM
BY
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*Oh! I do like to be beside the seaside
I do like to be beside the sea!
I do like to stroll along the Prom, Prom, Prom!
Where the brass bands play:
"Tiddely-om-pom-pom!"*

*So just let me be beside the seaside
I'll be beside myself with glee
And there's lots of girls beside,
I should like to be beside
Beside the seaside!
Beside the sea!¹*

INTRODUCTION

When we stand on the station at Rockdale, formerly known as White Gum Flat, few of us realise when we wait for a train to the City or to Cronulla that a steam tram used to run from Rockdale to Brighton Le Sands along Bay Street less than 100 years ago! And few of us have even heard of The Pleasure Grounds at Lady Robinson's Beach the wonderful facility for wealthy Sydneysiders in the 1900s.

This essay will look briefly at the beginning of the use of trams in Sydney and its suburbs and explain what happened to the Rockdale to Brighton Le Sands Tramway. This essay will also highlight the important role of Thomas Saywell; businessman, entrepreneur and influential local figure.

THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAMS

As Samuel Brimson says in his book *The Tramways of Australia*, for most people in Australia today a ride on a tram is just a pleasant memory or an occasional treat at a museum such as

¹ I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside, English Music Hall Song, MIDI and Lyrics". Eastbourneousins.com. Retrieved 23 July 2014 20.01 hours

the Sydney Tramway Museum at Loftus (Brimson: 1983: Introduction). Indeed the only city today to have a regular tram service is Melbourne (there is however a high-speed tramline from Adelaide City to Glenelg (Brimson 1983: Introduction). Of course there is talk of light rail extending all over Sydney, but light rail does not seem as exciting as steam trams and electric trams fully loaded running through the crowded streets of Sydney (MacCowan 1990).

As Brimson also notes (Brimson 1983: Introduction) in those days the motor car was rare and indeed few people could even afford a bicycle. There were Hansome cabs, but these were only used by the middle classes who could afford to pay the fare. The great majority of people walked. It is therefore understandable that trams, which could move an enormous amount of people at any one time, in an exciting way, could have such a major impact.

There were basically four types of tram systems. The first was the horse drawn tram. While slow and pleasant to use there were obvious disadvantages because they were very slow and limited in size. The second and third sort of tram were cable and steam driven trams. Cable was clean with no pollution and became very popular in Melbourne. Looking back it is hard to imagine there existed cable tram routes from the harbour to Ocean Street at Edgecliff and to North Sydney (later extended to Crows Nest (cable was used to tow the tram up hills).

Steam trams were obviously polluting and dirty to ride on and people got covered in soot and smoke. Nevertheless the steam trams became very popular in Sydney as we shall see. The final type of tram was the electric tram which eventually appeared on the Sydney tram system and the tramway at Rockdale.

The initial horse-drawn tram in Sydney commenced around about 1860 when a tram line was built from Redfern to Circular Quay¹. Horse drawn trams still operated between Newtown and St Peters Railway Station as late as the 1890s and from Manly to North Manly between 1903 and 1907.

In 1879 a steam tramway was introduced into the Sydney network and despite many very serious accidents was a great success.

The electrification of the Sydney tram system commenced about 1898 and most of the system was converted by 1910.

Even though the trams were very popular they were also dangerous (Wikipedia 2014)² and one conductor either fell or was knocked off the running board by passing vehicles (the design of the tram carriage meant that the conductor had to walk on the outside of the tram on a duck board). According to an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Mercury* quoted in the on line article *Trams in Sydney*, between 1916 and 1932 there were 4097 accidents to employees and from 1923 to 1931 there were 10,228 accidents to passengers either falling off or injuring themselves when getting on board! 63 of these falls and injuries were fatal (*The Mercury* 1926; *SMH* 1934; Wikipedia 2014)³ So perhaps we have an unrealistic image of the good old days of trams and tramways.

Trams were enormously popular right up to the end of the Second World War even though at the same time the New South Wales government was thinking about scrapping the trams in favour of buses. Trams were capable of moving a huge number of people. For example trams transported over 80,000 people at the end of the races at Randwick Racecourse and removed them from the racecourse in less than 20 minutes (Brimson 1983: Introduction). Anybody who has been to a sporting event today such as soccer at Moore Park would know how remarkable that was.

The New South Wales government passed *The Tramway's Act* in 1861 and this led to multiple tramways extending from the centre of Sydney to Randwick in the east, Pyrmont to the west, the Cook's River to the south and across the Harbour Bridge to the north. Tramways serviced as far north as Narrabeen, Chatswood and West Ryde. Trams also serviced North Bondi, Bondi and La Perouse to the east and south to Canterbury. There were also independent (not connected to the Sydney network) lines between Bexley and Arncliffe, Kogarah and Sans Souci and of course Rockdale and Brighton Le Sands. A map showing the distribution of the tram lines in Sydney and its surroundings suburbs at the back of this essay shows how extensive the network really was (Brimson 1983: 214-214).

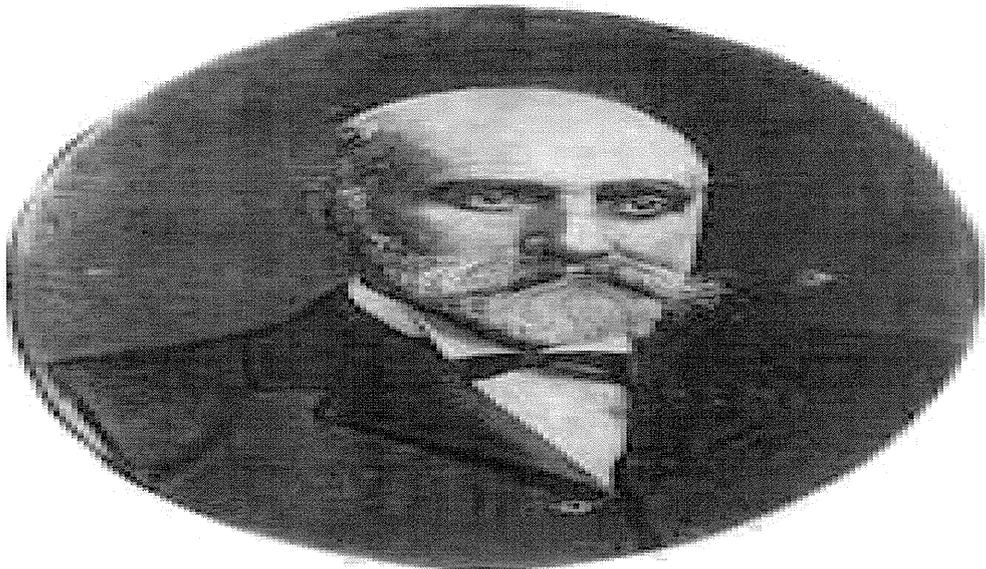
² Trams in Sydney (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trams_in_Sydney). Retrieved 23 July 2014 20.00 hours.

³ *The Mercury*, 19 June 1926, p.3; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1934, p. 13. "Trams in Sydney" (Wikipedia) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trams_in_Sydney). Retrieved 23 July 2014 20.00 hours.

THE TRAMWAYS LOCALLY

Trams had their place to play locally as we shall see and it was the creation of the railway lines that really prompted development in the area around Rockdale and led to the local tramway being built, but built by a local businessman, Thomas Saywell. The establishment of the first railway line in New South Wales between Sydney and Granville in 1855 led to rapid development around Rockdale and the surrounding suburbs (Rathbone 2000: 18). When the railway line was further established between the Illawarra region (around Wollongong) and Hurstville the area alongside the railway line quickly developed as the railway line provided the perfect opportunity for astute business people to benefit from the construction of home and the associated businesses that developed. One of the most important business people in the area to benefit was Thomas Saywell (1837-1928).

THOMAS SAYWELL



Thomas Saywell

Thomas Saywell merchant and developer was born in 1837 at Radford, Nottinghamshire, England (ADB Saywell 1976).⁴ Saywell's family was connected with lace making and when the Nottingham lace trade started to decline following the Industrial Revolution, the family moved to France. In 1848 the Saywell family migrated to Australia and arrived in Sydney on 6 October 1848.

After spending some time in the goldfields Saywell opened a tobacconist shop in Sydney. Saywell quickly became the managing director. In 1871 Saywell sold the business and invested in the coal and brick business in the Illawarra region in particular. He also established the Vale of Clwydd and the Zig Zag Coal Company at Lithgow and the South Bulli Colliery (Rathbone 2000: 20). Saywell obtained government contracts to supply coal to Sydney and needed means of getting the coal to Sydney efficiently. Initially Saywell constructed a jetty at Bellambi to transport coal to Sydney by barge (a significant engineering feat in itself), but the establishment of a railway from Sydney to the South Coast gave Saywell the perfect means to transfer coal more efficiently and at less cost than moving it by sea and soon coal was travelling by train to Sydney.

But it was the real estate investment opportunities along the new railway line to the south coast via Wollongong that really took Saywell's interest (Rathbone 2000: 20). As Rathbone notes between October 1882 and April 1883 Saywell bought three allotments of land between Bay Street and Bestic Street totalling about 100 acres on what is now Lady Robinson's Beach (Rathbone 2000: 20).

Saywell obviously benefited from other people's lack of good business sense because the land that other people thought was 'worthless', not even suitable for farming or grazing of animals took his eye as a place to build what he called The Pleasure Grounds. This was to be a place of pleasure for the wealthy people of Sydney to come and play and relax.

⁴ "Saywell, Thomas" *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Melbourne: MUP, 1976. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/saywell-thomas-4540> retrieved 23rd of July 2014.

Saywell erected the New Brighton Hotel (on the site of what is now the Novatel Hotel on the corner of Bay Street), a bathing enclosure described as the best in Australia, parks for picnics, and a racecourse.

What was needed though was a way of getting these wealthy Sydneysiders to the Pleasure Grounds and Saywell came up with the idea of building a private tramline from Rockdale Railway Station to the Pleasure Grounds at Lady Robinson's Beach (formerly known as Seven Mile Beach and home to the Aborigine Gameygal and Biderigal clans (White 2013). This approach of building a private tramway purely for personal profit was slightly unusual because the great majority of trams in Sydney at the time were owned by the government and were part of the Sydney tram network.

Saywell addressed the councillors of West Botany Municipal Council for permission to build his tramway which was initially going to be steam operated but met with strong opposition from Council and also from Randwick Council. Both councils were concerned about the costs associated with the construction and equally importantly who was going to be in charge and responsible for the construction and maintenance. The councils were also concerned about who would assume responsibility and the cost of removing the sandstone cliffs that were aligning Bay Street on the route of the tram (Rathbone 2000: 21). Eventually Saywell's agent T S Huntley persuaded council to support his scheme (Rathbone 2000:21). After much debate at local and state government level Huntley won the argument and a special Act of Parliament was passed with the NSW Parliament allowing to Saywell operating his tramway for a lease period of 30 years (Rathbone 2000: 21).

Saywell also needed to get a special act of Parliament passed and in 1883 New South Wales Parliament passed the *Tramways Act*. Saywell was at last free to build his tramway to the sea.

THE ROUTE

The Tramway commenced at Rockdale Station and then proceeded to cross what is now The Princes Highway before travelling east along Bay Street. Because there were considerable

sandstone cliffs on Bay Street , construction workers had to be employed to cut through the rock to open up the right of way for the tram line. Interestingly Bay Street was not as it looks today and an embankment had to be constructed to take the tram lines over a swampy section of Bay Street. The tramline also passed through small farms owned by market gardeners such as Samuel Tatler and Samuel Warren a pig farmer (Rathbone 2000: 28). The Tramway ended somewhere around Princess Street but when the tramline was electrified around the turn of the century the terminus with the turn-around was at the end of Bay Street. Saywell's *Tramway Act* allowed for the line to be extended to what is now Bestic Street but the extension was soon abandoned because it got covered in sand (Rathbone 2000: 29).

ELECTRIFICATION

In July 1900 the NSW State Government passed an Act of Parliament granting Saywell the right to electrify his tram plus amazingly, the right to provide electricity to the rapidly growing surrounding suburbs (MacCowan 1990: 106). Saywell's initial successful electric tram trial took place on 27 July 1900 and soon he was using electric trams. Two tram carriages were imported from England that looked like Sydney C cars (for the many differences between the various classes of tram cars see MacCowan 1990: 107). Some of the remaining steam trailer stock were converted to either electric motor trams or electric trailers. Additional electric trailers were purchased from the relevant NSW department (MacCowan 1990: 107).

According to MacCowan, Saywell chose to use overhead trolley bus style power lines instead of 'bonding' the existing track, with one wire being negative and the other one being positive. When an electric tram gets its power from the overhead grid the electric current driving the tram must have a return path to complete the circuit back to the substation installed by Saywell. This usually takes place via the rails. However in the early days of trams around Sydney the state of the roads and the infrastructure was pretty poor and

often the current would short-circuit as the current entered the water or gas pipe creating electrolysis which led to damage of the pipes.⁵

The early electric tramway and trams used by Saywell probably should have been bonded but they were situated in an area with few gas or water pipes and this may well be the reason he chose to go with the overhead wires.

The closeness of the two poles to each other on top of his tram meant it was impossible to turn the poles around at the end of their journey. According to MacCowan having the two poles ‘spearing forward” was dangerous and could lead to fire and damage to the equipment but there was no other real alternative. Rockdale Station had to be modified to allow the tram into the station and it was necessary to install a turntable so the tram had the ability to turn around at the end of its journey (there was a turnaround at the other end as well). The operators also had to connect the track to the main line in able to obtain the coal and bring it to the power station that Saywell had constructed to supply electricity to the tram and also to the surrounding suburbs (MacCowan 1990: 106-107).

As MacCowan notes Saywell’s agreement with the New South Wales Government to operate his private tram service ended in March 1914; however he did continue operating the trams for a little while longer (MacCowan 1990: 106)

Over the course of the next few years the government brought the overhead power supply in line with the system used on government trams, upgraded the track and built an improved depot just off Bay Street. Gradually they replaced Saywell’s rolling stock. It seems clear the NSW government was standardising the types of carriages/trams used on this line.

RIP - THE END OF THE LOCAL TRAMWAY

Over the course of time the trams had become overcrowded and contributed significantly to congestion in and around Sydney. Crowded trams had to compete increasingly with private

⁵ Thanks to Mal Rowe tram enthusiast for this information (Personal communication by email.)

motorcars and public buses for limited road space and there were constant calls for their removal from organisations such as the NRMA but these were generally against public opinion. Overseas experts were called to Sydney to advise on Sydney's transport needs post-war and these experts recommended closure of the system. The system was wound down in stages and the last service to La Perouse was in 1961.⁶

The Second World War was also a turning point in the history of trams. During the war of the trams had fallen into disrepair but after the war they were not repaired (MacCowan 1990: 107).

Many argued that the trams should be converted to trolleybuses which had been operating very successfully during the Second World War to transport troops but nothing seems to have come of that proposal.

The last tram to run from Rockdale to Brighton Le Sands was on a Saturday in 1949 in the early hours of the morning and over 300 people jammed onto the service at 1 AM. Apparently there was only three days' notice of the closure and it is strange that over 300 people had to cram themselves into one car for the final trip in the middle of the night. It was as if the government didn't want anybody to know of the end of the tramway (MacCowan 1990: 107).

On the following Monday and Tuesday eight trams were taken from the depot to Teralba Road and loaded onto a vehicle called The Lizard (a special vehicle introduced by the Department for taking trams between tram lines and systems)(MacCowan 1990: 107). They were taken along the Grand Parade and General Holme's Drive and driven to Randwick Workshops to be scrapped. For some reason Tram 154 was not turned into scrap or disposed of. Instead it seems to have been given a coat of paint and apparently put to one side to be preserved (MacCowan 1990: 107).

WHERE ARE THE TRAMS NOW?

⁶ Trams in Sydney (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trams_in_Sydney). Retrieved 23 July 2014 20.00 hours.

There are no trams running in Sydney on a regular basis. What trams that do run are run by enthusiasts for pleasure. Tram LP 154 (shown above on its last day of operation at Brighton the Sands) now rests at the Sydney Tramways Museum at Loftus while Sydneysiders battle with the terrible traffic in another era perhaps wishing that the trams were back to help.

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Photographs

Tram 154 on last day [Photograph] at

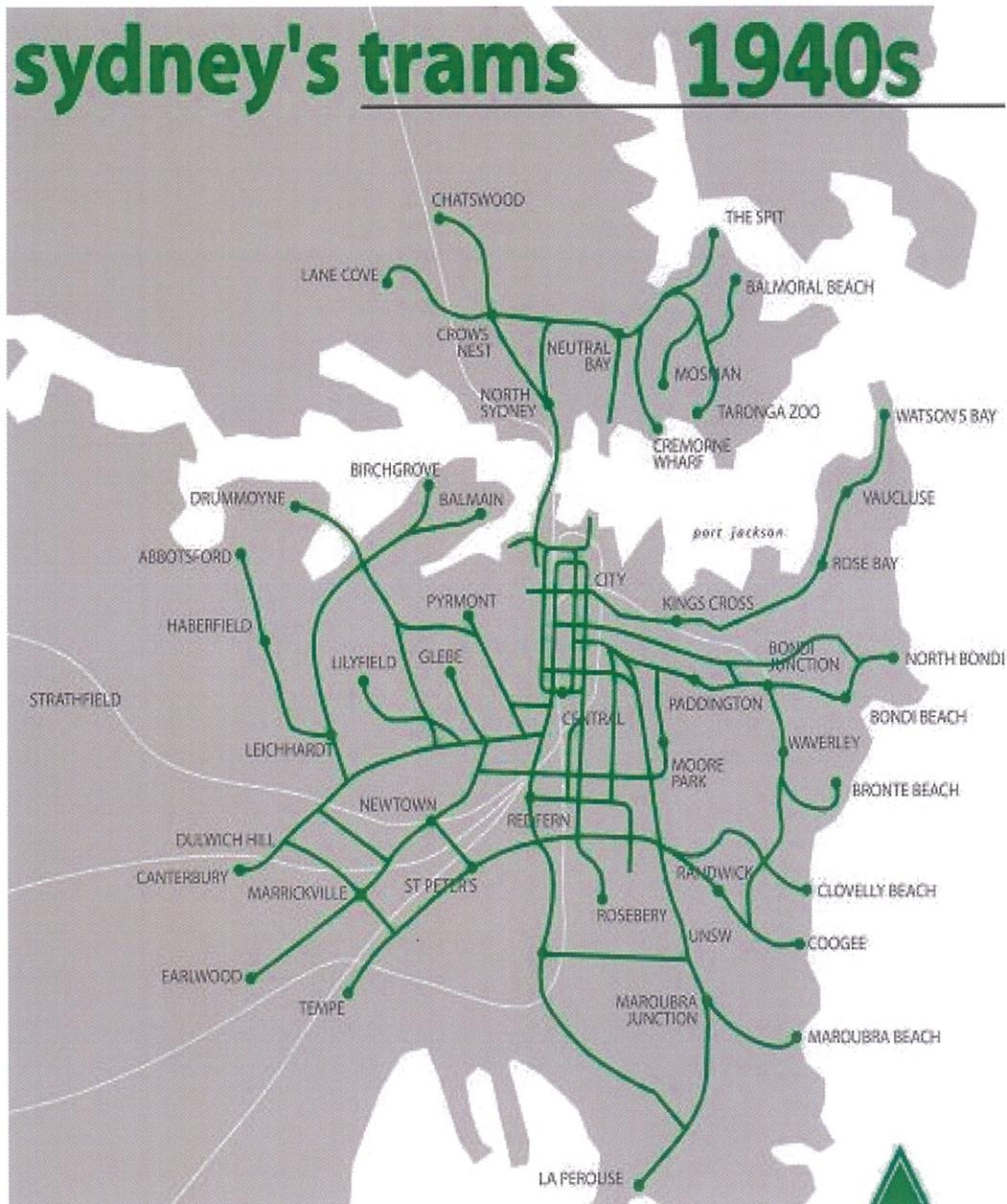
<http://tdu.to/a33749/LP154%20Brighton%20le%20Sands%204%20July%201948%20N%20F%20Reed.jpg> Kylie obtained from Noel Reed.

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- Noel Reed for kind use of the photograph of the last tram to run on the Rockdale to Brighton Le Sands line: Tram 154, which is currently in the Sydney Tramway's Museum at Loftus
 - The librarians at Rockdale and Kogarah libraries for their enthusiasm and help
 - Rachel Lee. It was only after starting this essay that I came across and read Rachel Lee's very impressive essay *Thomas Saywell's Tramway and the making of Brighton Le Sands* which won the 2012 Junior Ron Rathbone Local History Prize. If I have not credited Rachel sufficiently in the essay I apologise because her essay provided me with very valuable information about this fascinating period of local history.
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SYDNEY TRAMWAYS IN THE 1940S¹



¹ With acknowledgments to 'But Nought' 2011. Retrieved on line 25 July 2014 09.15 hours.