

Profile of the Tourist and Heritage Railway & Tramway Sector in Australia



A background briefing paper for Australian and State Government organisation's staff and consultants



Association of Tourist & Heritage Rail Australia Inc
Graeme Breydon and Warren Doubleday, revised Jan. 2008

Background

Railways, once a dominant political and an economic force in developing Australia, have now become an important element in cultural heritage life. Australian railways enabled the agricultural and industrial development of the country, the growth of our major cities and provided the birthplace of many country communities by their strategic placement and the need for services. The evolution of the Australian transport system over the last 50 years has seen rail no longer an important day to day element in people's lives.

Heritage railways and street tramways provide a means of preserving, educating and demonstrating rail's cultural significance to today's society. They form the largest number of vertically integrated accredited railway organisations (AROs) and account for about half of all AROs.



The heritage rail sector provides significant economic benefits to Australia through employment, tourism and expenditure and the intangible benefits of volunteering. Today, these organisations are for many people the public face of the rail industry; that transports the nation's freight and its commuters.

The voluntary nature of this activity provides significant social benefits to the Australian community in enabling people to work together for the benefit of future generations. The commitment of individuals to work as teams, to spend their own time and money as volunteers, is generally done through not-for-profit organisations. These volunteers become professionals in their own right by learning and maintaining skills to operate, maintain, rebuild rollingstock trackwork and bridges etc. The skills themselves are of a traditional nature, often dying in themselves. To manage these organisations requires skills, commitment and time, the latter resource often the most precious.

The Scope of the Sector

The tourist and heritage railway and tramway sector in Australia comprises over 75 operators. Most are non-profit volunteer-based organisations operating only at weekends and holiday periods. Most provide public services on exclusively occupied trackage but some are operated over the commercial networks and a few are member-only operations. In addition there are various heritage groups involved in providing comprehensive rail museums with operable rollingstock, research, publication, static preservation of vehicles and artefacts that may in future become involved in operations.

The organisations mentioned in the body of this paper are only examples. A more comprehensive listing can be garnered by visiting the web sites of the sector associations listed in Section 6.

This paper provides a profile of the sector under the following groupings¹:

1. Large steam railway operators
2. Smaller heritage railways – eg timber and sugar cane tramways
3. Tourist & heritage electric street tramways
4. Heritage operations on commercial networks
5. Museums
6. Sector associations
7. Volunteers and paid staffing profiles.

Excluded are amusement park rides (eg scenic railways & roller coasters), underground tourist mine railways, and miniature passenger-carrying railways (typically of 12 or 7.25 inch gauge or smaller) and the heritage rail activities of large commercial organisations such as:

- Melbourne's free 'City Circle' tram service using heavily-upgraded W-class trams (with augmented braking and addition of deadman's handles), and
- The direct maintenance and operation of heritage equipment and tourist services by commercial operators where they are fully integrated with their other services (notably the former West Coast Rail's steam operation and QR's heritage operations).

¹ Hyperlinks to each organisation current at the time of paper revision – Dec 2007.

1. Larger Steam Railway Operators

Examples of this group who are both employers and volunteer organisations are:



- [**The Puffing Billy Railway**](#) a statutory body, supported by a not-for-profit organisation. Its steam-hauled service operates 364 days per year, carrying about 250,000 passengers annually from its Belgrave

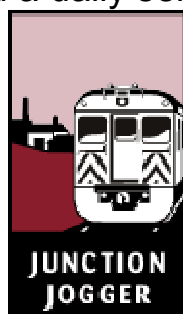
Victoria base on its 25km narrow gauge (2'6) line. It employs over 40 people, and has a volunteer pool of about 600 men and women.

- [**The West Coast Wilderness Railway**](#), a commercial venture operated by the Federal Resorts Group. A reconstructed steam railway operates over 35km of track between Queenstown and Strahan in Tasmania, under a lease from the Tasmanian Government.

- [**Zig-Zag Railway Co-operative Society Ltd**](#), a not-for-profit group operating diesel railcars, and diesel and steam-hauled trains carrying about 80,000 passengers annually on a self-contained narrow-gauge 3' 6 line built on the formation of the former standard-gauge line across the NSW Blue Mountains



- [**SteamRanger Tourist Railway**](#) on the 82km Mt. Barker Jct to Victor Harbor broad gauge isolated line in South Australia. Carrying over 45,000 passengers annually, it operates a range of trains on Sundays and a daily service during School holidays.



- [**The Victorian Goldfields Railway**](#) on the former VR Castlemaine to Maldon broad-gauge (5' 3) branch line in Victoria. The reconstruction of this railway has recently been completed. It carries about 20,000's passengers annually on steam-hauled passenger trains or railcars at least three days per week.

2. Smaller Heritage Railways

Typical of the vast number of weekend-only, almost entirely volunteer operated and managed or less frequently operating groups are:

- [**National Railway Museum**](#), Adelaide: a self-supporting, non-for-profit enterprise, with a small paid staff, large volunteer base (static) museum of railway vehicles and artefacts that is open daily. The site incorporates a miniature (457mm gauge) train ride that operates at weekends and provides passenger trips behind a 3' 6 gauge steam locomotive at special events.
- [**Rosewood Railway Museum**](#) operating on the former QR Marburg branch, volunteers run a short section between Cabanda and Kunkala steam, diesel locomotive and railcars services on a once a month basis and for charter work.
- [**Bennett Brook Railway**](#) a volunteer group preserving and operating narrow gauge (610mm) rollingstock in Whiteman Park, Perth. Operating a 5.7km long line, four days a week plus public and school holidays. The Railway also has a very extensive operating collection of mechanical signalling equipment.



Patronage on many of these services is only a few thousand or at best in the low tens of thousand passengers per annum. Many groups have very modest revenues from public display and trading and between 30% and 50% can be absorbed by insurance costs. Some rely on cash donations from members to cover even modest unexpected expenses such as a truckload of ballast to repair a wash-away and most capital is also contributed by members or sourced from government grants or corporate donations.

3. Tourist & heritage tramways

All Australian state capital cities and many regional cities once operated street tramway systems using steam, cable, horse and electric propulsion. Today only Melbourne has a large comprehensive street tramway system. Adelaide and Sydney have small light rail systems. Most of the heritage rail organisations within this sub-sector operate as formal museums, some as Accredited Museums.

One of the largest most intensive tourist / museum tramways operations is the [Bendigo Talking Tram](#) (Vic). It runs daily over a 4.2 kilometre route every day along the Midland Highway and other city streets on a mixture of single and double track. The operation is conducted by the Bendigo Trust using a mixture of paid and volunteer staff. It's near neighbour, the [Ballarat Tramway Museum](#) is also operates on-street in a less busy setting beside Lake Wendouree.

Most other operating electric tramway museum lines are off-street operations, some without level crossings, on private land or in public parks. Income of most of these groups is quite small - in the order of \$10,000 to \$30,000 pa.



The heritage urban tramway sector also includes operating steam trams, cable trams (powered by low-speed hydraulic engines) and even horse-drawn trams. At some sites these vehicle types may be intermingled with each other and with pedestrians and with other traffic (eg historic buses, vintage cars, etc) on private roadways. They do not use formal safeworking systems such as railways, but generally operate on a “line of sight” basis as they did in the urban street environment. Examples are [Sydney Tramway Museum](#), [Perth Electric Tramway Society](#), [Adelaide Tramway Museum](#), [The Tramway Museum Society of Vic.](#) and [Portland Cable Trams](#).

4. Heritage operations on commercial networks

Currently in the three eastern states, there are one or two organisations that operate on the own line and/or provide locomotives and carriages for 'mainline' excursions using vintage equipment, usually based in a former state railway workshop or similar premises. Some of these are operated by another accredited operator on behalf of the group. Examples include:

- [Australian Railway Historical Society \(ACT Division\)](#) based in Canberra goods yard
- [Seymour Rail Heritage Centre](#) (Victoria)
- [Steamrail Victoria](#) – based at Newport Workshops
- [Rail Transport Museum](#) (Sydney)
- [SunSteam](#) (Qld)



Note that several of these groups also have associated museum &/or tourist railway operations (eg ARHS ACT also runs the Michelago Tourist Railway). Such mainline operations tend to be either once-a-month day-trip excursions to a variety of different destinations with broad public appeal or longer weekend/holiday journeys to more obscure routes, aimed at the railway enthusiast market.

5. Museums

In each state, there is a major collecting organisation that conserves railway rollingstock and memorabilia. Some operate trains in their own right or operate small demonstrative railways for visitors. Examples are:

- [The Workshops Rail Museum](#), part of the Queensland Museum, Ipswich, Queensland
- [Rail Transport Museum](#) (Thirlmere/Valley Heights) NSW
- [ARHS Railway Museum](#), Melbourne
- [Tasmanian Transport Museum](#), Hobart
- [National Railway Museum](#), Adelaide
- [Rail Transport Museum](#) at Bassendean, Perth

6. Sector Associations

National Associations



- [Association of Tourist and Rail Heritage Australia Inc \(ATHRA\)](#) ATHRA is the Australian body formed in June 2004 to represent the interests and needs of all tourist and heritage rail organisations at a national level. It is formed by the state and territory associations as an over-arching umbrella body.

The primary reason for the formation of the body is to represent the interests and needs of all tourist and heritage rail organisations at a national level. It follows on from the benefits that have flowed, within the states, since the formation of the State bodies.

Current critical issues include access to affordable public liability insurance and representation of the tourist and heritage rail needs in the formation of Australia wide regulatory controls and railway codes of practice. The management committee draws on member representatives from all states and brings together considerable skills and experience. It is a member of the Australian Railway Association (ARA)



- [Council of Tramway Museums of Australasia Inc \(COTMA\)](#) Over 25 heritage tramway & trolley-bus groups in Aust & NZ are generally members of both COTMA and the relevant NZ or Australian state-based umbrella group. COTMA was established in 1975 and holds a bi-annual residential conference. COTMA is a member of the ARA.

Between conferences its voluntary executive provides a major clearing-house and co-ordination role between museums and with the Melbourne tramway operators and authorities on matters such as allocation of surplus electric tramway vehicles, equipment, technical information and the operation of heritage tramcars.



State Associations

- [Association of Tourist Railways Inc - Victoria](#) (ATR-V). ATR-V members include 22 Victorian accredited operators from the tourist and heritage (including tramways) sector plus associated groups. It maintains a common Rail Safety Accreditation Manual, Rulebook and Examination System shared by many of its tourist railway members. Meetings are held bi-monthly.

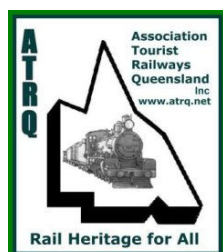
A 2006 organisational [statistical survey](#) of its members, in summary, showed that its members had a total turnover of \$9.9m, supported by 1894 volunteers, employed 46 full times staff, on five different gauges using over 450 rail vehicles and 110 tramcars.

RAIL HERITAGE AUSTRALIA (NSW) INC

- [**Rail Heritage Australia Inc \(NSW\)**](#) (RHA NSW) In August 2003 RHA (NSW) was established as a new peak organisation with an initial membership of about 20 rail heritage groups. The foundation chairman is David Hill. The main activities of the new body and its predecessors over the past 20 years have been to provide advice to the State Rail Authority and other organisations, on matters such as: the distribution of NSW heritage railway rolling stock and spare parts, and provision of technical support for organisations obtaining accreditation under the Rail Safety Act.



- ***Council of Historic Railways and Tramways of South Australia Inc. (CHRTSA)*** All 14 non-profit tourist & heritage organisations in SA belong to this group, established in 1994. The Victor Harbor horse tram, being a municipal-owned venture is not a member. CHRTSA meets regularly at member premises and in recent years has organised a weekend seminar. Whilst there are now 14 groups belonging to CHRTSA only 7 are accredited under the SA Rail Safety Act. The others are non operational museums or displays. The Victor Harbor horse tram is excluded from rail safety accreditation under the SA Rail Safety Act.



- [**Association of Tourist Railways Inc - Queensland \(ATRQ\)**](#) The Association was formed in 2003 as a result of some of the non-profit organisations in Queensland meeting to share experiences relating to Public Liability Insurance and to collectively work together to solve the challenges facing the issues facing the Queensland rail heritage organisations.



- [Tasmanian Association of Tourist Railways Inc](#) (TAT-Rail) TAT-rail embraces all the non-profit heritage operators. The commercial operator of the West Coast Wilderness Railway has observer status.
- [Association of Rail Preservation Groups \(WA\) Inc](#) The WA association includes not only the Perth/SE heritage groups but also the Goldfields-based and Carnarvon operators to give state-wide coverage.

Heritage railways and tramways are worldwide; in both developed and developing countries. Transport museums are one of the largest groups of museums by type throughout the world. There are also links between Australian umbrella groups and the Heritage Railway Association in the UK (www.ukhrail.uel.ac.uk), the European Federation of Museum and Tourist Railways (FEDECRAIL) (www.fedecrail.org) and the National Federation of Rail Societies Inc - New Zealand (www.railfed.org.nz).

The NZ federation was formed over 30 years ago and holds an annual national conference, which is usually attended by the NZ regulator. When bi-annual COTMA conferences are held in NZ (every 6 years) they are conducted con-currently with the Federation conference.



7. Staffing profiles

The predominant staff profile of the Tourist and Rail Heritage Sector is volunteer with a small percentage of paid employees. Volunteers come from all sectors of the community, including those attracted by social responsibility issues as well as those with a particular interest in heritage transport. Over-represented groups often include; retired people and those with current or former transport employment and people with trade skills. Under-represented groups typically include people with business and management skills currently at the peak of their career commitments and women.

In general, the voluntary management and administrative personnel in these groups also form a significant part of the hands-on operating and maintenance personnel and therefore have an in-depth understanding of the tasks involved in all roles. Through their detailed involvement in the various tasks, they have become professionals in their own right.

Being volunteers, the time to devote to external requests and requirements as simple as replying to a letter is often quite limited. Attendance at weekday workshops requires the person to take time off work or to travel large distances to a capital city. The decision making process typically revolves around a monthly committee meeting cycle and communication with all workers is typically a monthly newsletter/roster mail-out or by email.

Substantial administrative tasks such as drafting risk assessments or revised rules and manuals can stall either through lack of a suitably skilled and willing volunteer, or due to unforeseen employment or domestic matters.



For most groups, the small numbers involved mean that there is an emphasis on individual on-the-job tuition rather than classroom instruction. Formal training can be a drawn-out process involving night and weekend classes spread over months and practical sessions.

Maintenance of competency is necessary through being available as a volunteer and is generally reviewed on a regular basis.

Individuals often participate in multiple organisations in the sector. This might include for example;

- A Melbourne resident volunteering as a tram driver at multiple heritage tramways in regional Victoria,
- An Adelaide resident working at both the tramway museum and railway museum,
- A Puffing Billy paid employee performing a voluntary role at another tourist railway on his rostered day off.

Consequently there is rapid informal exchange of news and ideas. There is also a good knowledge within the sector of issues and practices in the commercial sector. The major Australian rail industry publications covering commercial operations and issues (eg [Railway Digest](#) and [Transit Australia](#)) are actually produced by organisations in the tourist & heritage sector.

Crewing of locomotives and trains generally follow traditional railway practices of a driver, fireman and guard all skilled to carry out their relevant duties including emergency situations. For most tourist railways, they use the traditional safeworking systems that were used in the former state railways, example staff and ticket in Victoria, Train Orders in South Australia. Some railcar and tramway operations may be one-person operated whilst on others a guard, conductor or guide may also be rostered.

8. Conclusion

The Tourist and Heritage Railway & Tramway Sector represents Australian rail cultural heritage in a diversified way. It is the public face of Australia's rail and tramway industries to many people.

It comprises the single largest group of accredited railway organisations. Operating these railways and tramways requires teamwork; administrators, rolling stock and track maintainers, restorers and operational workers who are skilled and professional in what they do. The sector is primarily managed by volunteers with a small percentage of paid workers.

The dedication of its volunteers is typical of volunteer organisations throughout Australia. Without them, there would be very little rail heritage left for the community in many places to tell the story of Australia's economic development.