



## W CLASS TRAMS - BACKGROUND INFORMATION



*W Class tram c1990 (flickr)*

## DEVELOPMENT

The first W style trams were designed in Melbourne in the 1920s. They were unusual at that time for their open 'dropped centre' section containing the doors, in contrast to the standard tram of one door at the front, and a wider one in the centre.

They were a successful design, suited to Melbourne conditions and unusually long lines. Eventually 600 of them were built between the 1920s and 1956, mostly by the Preston Workshops. The cream and green scheme became standard in the 1930s, chosen to blend with Melbourne's tree-lined boulevards.

The early models were open in the centre, with timber slat seats, while the last to be built were more streamlined, with closing doors, all padded seats, and steel windows.

By the 1930s they were the dominant tram type in Melbourne, a position they kept well into the 1980s. Throughout that period, they were an everyday sight on Melbourne streets, dominating street transport in the inner and middle suburban areas.

## REPLACEMENT

In the late 1980s, the Trust identified the then remaining 300 W Class trams be an essential part of the special historic character of Melbourne, one that distinguished us from other capital cities around the world, adding a special charm to daily life in this city.

They were then formally classified in 1990.

During the 1990s the Trust campaigned against their gradual removal from the system, and the sale of many overseas, some to be used in tourist routes in American cities.

While many commuters naturally demanded a service that was fast, easy to access and comfortable, many others felt that the charm and heritage of the W Class outweighed any real or perceived inconveniences.

It seemed that everyone agreed that the W's should be used on short routes in the inner city, especially ones attractive to visitors, to capitalise on their heritage value.

In 1993, out of 250 vehicles then running, the then government agreed to keep 53 W's in operation.

They also declared there would be a fleet of 50 trams 'Ready Reserve' (those in the 'next best' mechanical condition) which could be used for special events.

They also adopted a policy of not selling the removed vehicles. Instead, they were stored at Newport Railway Workshops where about 150 remain in storage.

The ones retained in operation were provided with heating, sliding doors, mechanical upgrades, and the interior woodwork was refurbished. 43 were for everyday service on lines to St. Kilda beach (Routes 16 and 12) and Toorak Road (Route 8), and their exteriors repainted in their traditional cream and green colour scheme. Ten were dedicated to a new City Circle Route in a modern bugandy livery.



*W Class interior – City circle (flickr)*

Following changes to their brakes which saw them become less reliable, all the W's were taken off the tracks in 2000, and gradually fitted with entirely new braking systems. The City Circle were the first to be returned in 2002.

Following a report on the safety of the drivers in the event of collision they are restricted to 40 km/hr (this figure was an arbitrary one declared to be 'safe').

Over the next two years, some trams were returned to service, but only on two isolated lines - Chapel Street, Prahran, and Route 30, the La Trobe Street shuttle.

The Ministry for Transport and Yarra Trams chose these routes (without consultation with the Trust) because they believe that if the Ws run on lines shared with other routes, they will slow down other trams. They are adamant that W's will not run on Collins Street, or Swanston Street, or indeed any another line shared for some length with other trams.

These routes do not use the W's to their best advantage. Furthermore, they only require about 25 of the promised 53 trams.

In 2004, the Trust proposed a 'Grand Circle' route that would connect the Chapel Street trams with the southern half of Route 112 via Spencer Street and La Trobe Street, closing the loop via Victoria Parade / Street. This would use about 50 trams, provide a route to various popular tourist destinations in the inner city, and not run on lines shared with trams for great lengths.

In about 2006 the Trust agreed that the W's could use pantographs instead of their traditional poles, so that they could be used on any route, and providing a substantial saving on wear and tear of the overhead electricity wiring.



*Upgraded W in 2008 (flickr)*

### **Current situation**

It was not until 2008 that the majority of the 53 have actually had the brakes fitted.

Meanwhile, a number of trams involved in accidents, or needing repair, have not been repaired or replaced, and one has been handed over (at no cost) to the restaurant tram operators as a replacement.

The promised 53 is now officially 51, but some are now out-of-service, and others have never been used.

Many of the Ready Reserve have been given away to tram museums, including one to Denmark.

The trams stored at Newport, and possibly some of the Ready Reserve, have been cannibalised for spare parts, ensuring that they are unlikely ever to run again.

Over the last few years it has been made clear that neither the Ministry nor Yarra Trams intend to review or expand the routes, and has a policy of little or no repair or replacements.

In August 2009, Minister for Public Transport Lynne Kosky confirmed that there was no intention to retain any W Class trams into the future beyond the 12 or so used for the City Circle.



*Tram in poor condition 2008*