

HISTORY OF A RAIL LINE TO DONCASTER



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Plans for a railway line to Doncaster have existed for over 100 years with various proposals discussed and refined but none eventuating in construction to date. This has resulted in the perception within many local communities that promises have been made and not kept and that successive governments have fallen short of commitments made to residents and businesses within the Doncaster area.

2.1 THE 1890s

The earliest serious proposal for a rail line to Doncaster appears to have been documented within the *Railway Construction Bill*, first laid before Parliament in June 1890. Known as the ‘Kew, Templestowe and Doncaster Lines’, the railway was proposed as a six mile (9.8 kilometres) extension to the then recently completed Hawthorn and Kew railway, with an estimated construction cost at the time of around £330,000 (averaged across all of the proposed lines).

This proposition formed part of over 800 miles of new lines identified for construction across Victoria. These lines were described by the government of the day as having “the first claim to construction”, ahead of some 6,000 miles of new lines that had been submitted to government for consideration as part of a consultation process.

The alignment proposed was described at the time in *The Argus* newspaper as follows:

“The line from Kew to Templestowe and Doncaster crosses the Bulleen-road, within a short distance of the present station, and runs parallel with that thoroughfare, close to its northern side, passing over the Outer Circle railway just beyond the Boroondara cemetery. When nearing Burke-road the line again crosses the Bulleen-road, and at this point the railway to Templestowe branches off in a north-easterly direction, running between the Bulleen-road and the back road, or direct road, to Templestowe on to its termination. The line to Doncaster continues in an easterly direction, following the main road to that place, and terminating near that township, about three-quarters of a mile beyond Koonung Creek. Both lines pass through a number of small farms and orchards, and also through a somewhat picturesque and comparatively thickly populated district.”

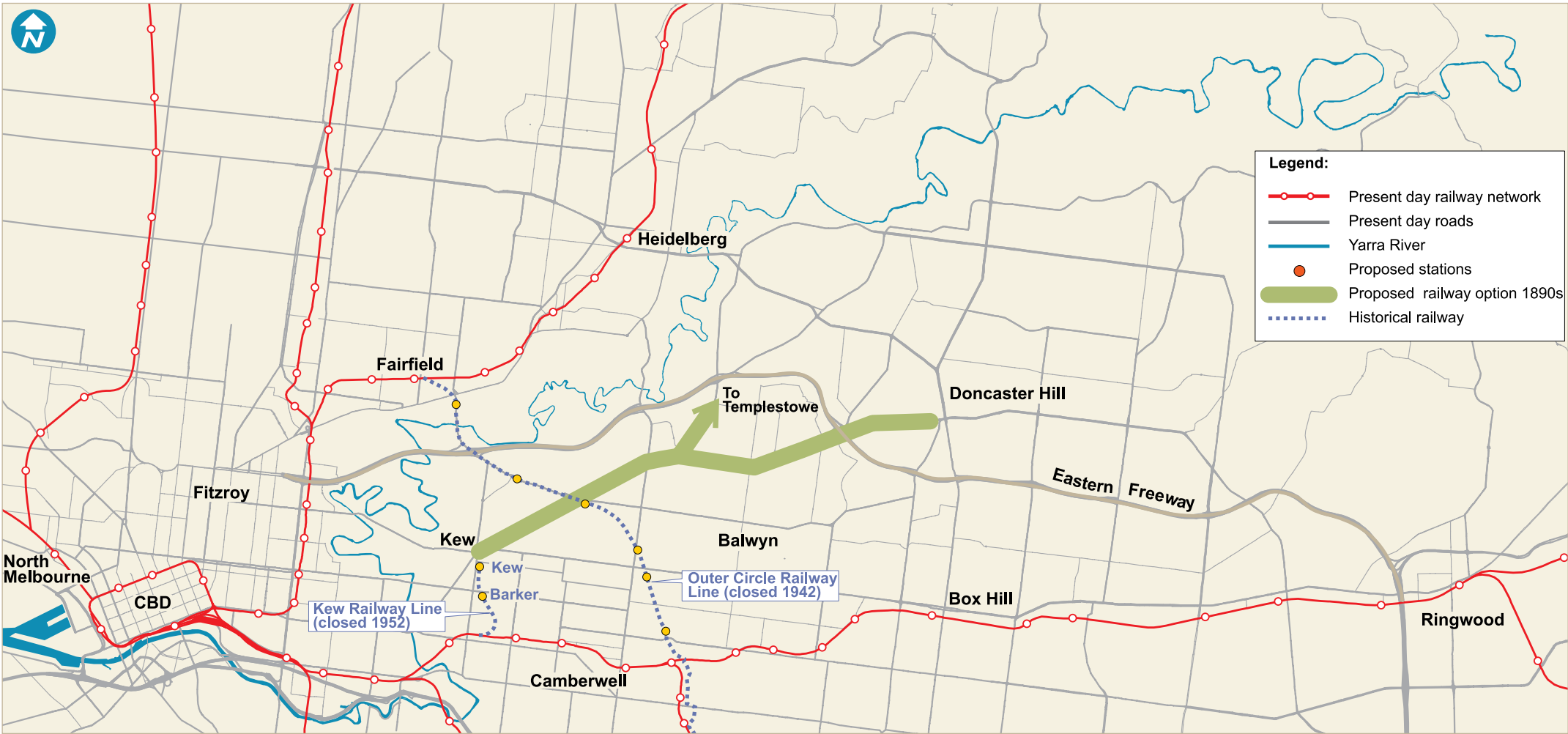


Figure 2-1: Rail alignment proposed in 1890s

The Railway Construction Bill received some considerable criticism, however and lengthy debate ensued within Parliament and in the press regarding the perceived limited mileage of new lines proposed, the process used to select the proposed lines and the cost estimates provided contained within the bill. Ultimately, this disagreement with the line selection, coupled with financial constraints flowing from Australia’s economic depression of the early 1890s, meant that the bill did not become law.

2.2 THE 1920s

Following the formation of the first Commonwealth Government and increased foreign investment, economic expansion was again occurring within Victoria by the 1920s and attention was again directed towards the planning and construction of a new railway line to Doncaster. The first indications for the line were not promising, however, with the Minister for Railways at the time, Mr Eggleston, stating in 1925 that “the cost of the suggested line would be very great, and it is not likely that the line would prove financially successful for some time”.

Mr Eggleston’s comments followed a report submitted to Parliament by the Railways Standing Committee which rejected all proposals submitted to it (14 different routes were considered, including connections to existing infrastructure at Box Hill and a tunnelled option, originating at the existing Kew station) on the grounds of excess cost, reporting that the line proposed through Kew, for example, would cost some £600,000 and operate at a loss of £43,000 per year.

A period of some considerable public debate ensued, culminating in a proposal from Doncaster Council that representatives from Camberwell, Kew and Doncaster meet with Mr Eggleston to request that the proposed railway to Doncaster be referred back to the Railways Standing Committee, which they succeeded in doing.

As a result of this, the Railways Standing Committee reconsidered the proposed line in 1928 and, it seems, changed its position. The committee recommended to the Legislative Assembly that a new line be constructed between the existing Kew station and Doncaster, at an estimated construction cost of £438,500, returning an estimated annual operating loss of £22,011. It was proposed that the annual operating loss should be funded through the application of a seven-year betterment rate to be levied on all properties in the area served by the line.

Although Parliament had not yet passed the necessary Act to enable construction to commence, by 1929 the same alignment was included in the *Plan for General Development* commissioned that year by the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission (although the Doncaster rail line was not as one of the identified ‘urgent works’ within that document).

However, before construction could begin, the project yet again suffered setback as a result of external economic effects: this time at the hands of the Great Depression, which took hold in the 1930s. At this time the Australian Government was highly exposed to debt that had been borrowed to fund infrastructure investments during the 1920s, resulting in a 10-year period of deflation, high employment and destitution. The Doncaster rail line was again placed on hold.



Figure 2-2: Rail alignment proposed in 1920s

2.3 THE 1950s

In the successor to the *1929 Plan for General Development*, the *1954 Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme*, the desire to construct new railways appears to have diminished somewhat, with the report stating that “the high cost of building railway lines will preclude the extension of the present suburban railway system except in special circumstances”. The report made no mention of a rail line to Doncaster, but did propose the ‘City Underground Railway’ now known as the Melbourne Underground Rail Loop or City Loop, and some other rail extensions, described as being included for both operational and patronage reasons. These extensions included a rail loop around Port Melbourne and a new spur between the Hurstbridge Line in the region of Fairfield Station and Preston, neither of which have subsequently been built.

2.4 THE 1960s

Despite losing ground in the post-war era, by the late 1960s the concept of a rail line to Doncaster again came under serious consideration as part of the 1969 Metropolitan Transport Plan. This plan described a vision of Melbourne following significant investment in transport infrastructure, consisting of 510 kilometres of new Freeways; 80 road/rail grade separations; 2,540 new buses; 910 new trams and a series of new railway lines, including a city loop and an Altona-Westona link (which have subsequently been built) as well as the Rowville, Lyndhurst–Frankston and Doncaster lines (for which there currently exists no firm plans for construction).

2.5 THE 1970s

In the early 1970s, Doncaster rail line came perhaps as close as it has ever come to construction through the passing into law of the *Eastern Freeway Lands Act 1971* and the *Eastern Railway Construction Act 1971*. These documents put in place the appropriate legal framework to allow construction of the new railway envisaged by the 1969 Metropolitan Transport Plan, while also putting in place immediate protection for the route corridor of the proposed alignment. Of specific note was the right to acquire additional land as part of the Eastern Freeway project to provide for the future new rail line.

Towards the second half of the 1970s, the 1969 Melbourne Transport Plan began to fall out of favour, reaching its nadir in 1976 when road reservations for urban freeways not already built were repealed by government.

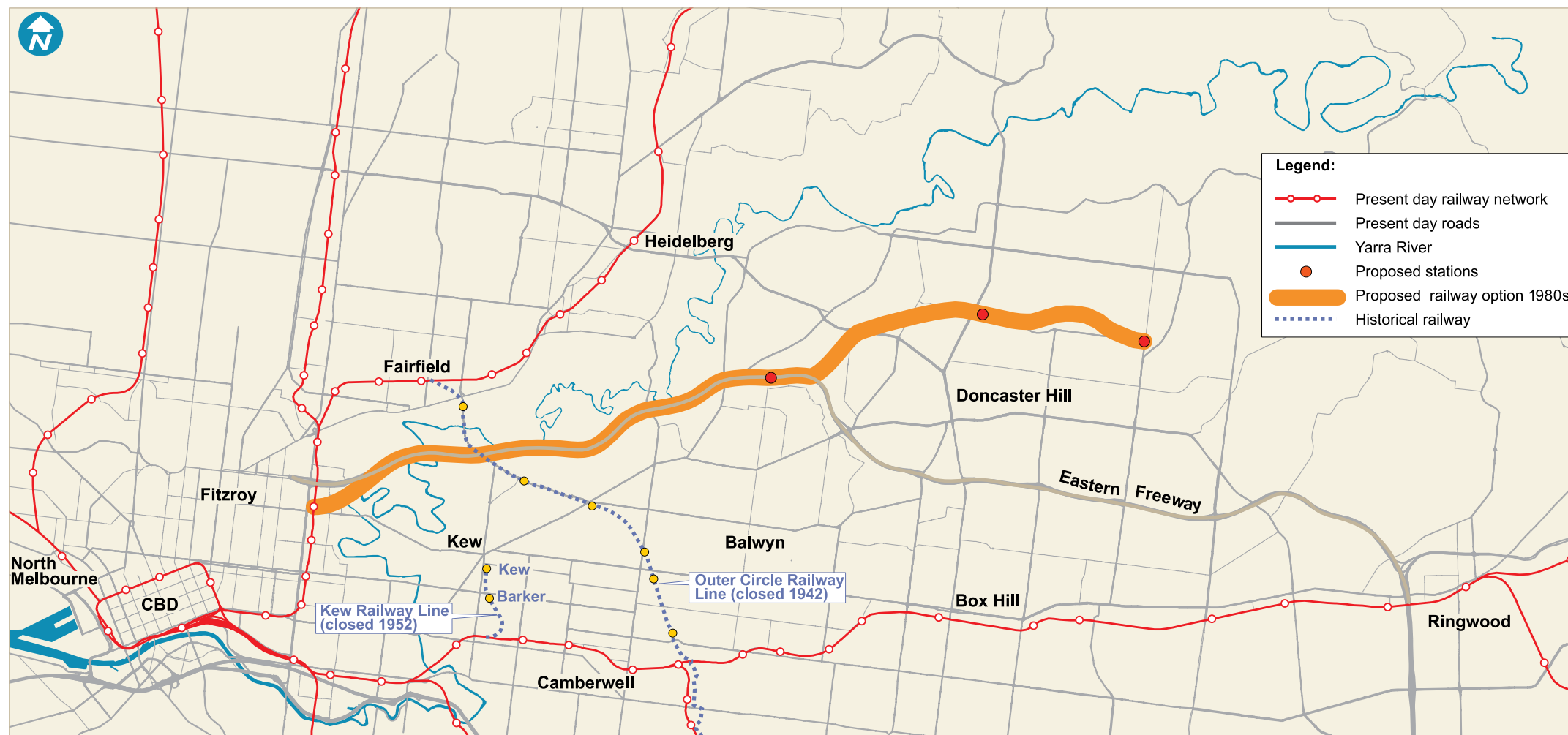


Figure 2-3: Rail alignment proposed in 1980s

2.6 THE 1980s

The move away from building new railway lines continued into the 1980s. This was initially evidenced by the surrender of legal powers to build the railway through the *Eastern Railway Construction (Repeal) Act 1982*. By that time the line had been deemed to be too costly at \$200 million and the government sold its interests in the reservation previously acquired for construction of the line. It seems that the Victorian Government was making a clear statement at the time that construction of the Doncaster Rail Line was no longer to be pursued.

2.7 THE 1990s – 2000s

Calls to reconsider the construction of a rail line to Doncaster continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 2003 the draft *Northern Central City Corridor Strategy* was released, which again considered the public transport needs of the CBD to Doncaster corridor. This study was the first to propose the introduction of a Doncaster Area Rapid Transit system, providing a dedicated, high-quality transport link to Doncaster based upon bus, light rail, heavy rail or ‘hybrid’ technology.

Most recently, in 2008 the study *Investing in Transport-East West Link Needs Assessment* undertaken by Sir Rod Eddington on behalf of the Victorian Government, again considered the need for a new rail link to Doncaster. This study concluded that there was insufficient need to justify the investment in new heavy rail infrastructure, with the report estimating the construction cost of connecting Doncaster to the CBD via the existing Clifton Hill line to be in the range

of \$1.7 billion to \$2 billion. The report did commend the implementation of the proposed DART system, utilising a high-quality SmartBus service between Doncaster and Melbourne’s CBD. Most of the recommendations made in this document in relation to the new DART service have subsequently been implemented.

2.8 THE 2010s

Ongoing public support for a rail line to Doncaster has continued, despite the 2010 introduction of increased DART services recommended by the *Northern Central City Corridor Strategy* and the *East West Link Needs Assessment* reports in 2008. In 2011 the Victorian Government undertook to carry out detailed investigations to assist in understanding the requirements for providing a heavy rail link to Doncaster and potentially beyond.

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST ELECTRIC TRAM

For slightly over six years, from 14 October 1889 until 6 January 1896, the residents of Doncaster and nearby Box Hill enjoyed access to the first electric tram to operate a regular service in the Southern Hemisphere.

Melburnians had become used to the presence of cable trams for three years when WH Masters and Company exhibited the first working electric tramway at the Centennial International Exhibition, held in the city's Exhibition Buildings in 1888 and 1889. Among the favourite attractions at the exhibition was a 300 yard journey that visitors could take on an electric tram for the fee of only three pence, providing users with a glimpse of the future barely 12 months after the technology had first become available in the United States of America.

The tram was a great success and a syndicate of investors from the Doncaster area, sensing an opportunity to improve land values in their area, soon set about raising the £15,000 required to capitalise the Box Hill and Doncaster Tramway Company. Having purchased a tram, a steam powered dynamo and some second-hand steel tracks from Tasmania, the company then set about planning the construction of a 3.6 kilometre track between the two towns.

Many locals were against the advent of the tramway, fearing it would bring unsavoury tourists to the previously unspoiled and picturesque, fruit-growing area. The Tramway Company prevailed, however, and after almost two years of both legal and physical dispute, the tramway was opened to public acclaim, offering patrons "one of the most pleasant, novel and withal cheapest of outings". The price of a trip on the tram was one shilling and sixpence, including return train travel from Flinders Street to Box Hill Train Station.

The tram ran from the Box Hill Post Office, along what is now called Tram Road, to a terminus at the junction of Williamsons and Elgar Roads in Doncaster. Here, patrons could alight the tram and visit Mr Hummel's famous Beaconsfield Tower, a 200-foot high structure that had been erected by the enterprising publican (at a cost of £1,000) "for the sole purpose of obtaining the extensive and magnificent view which it commands" — although Mr Hummel did also charge tourists a shilling for the privilege.

After an auspicious beginning, the disputes with landowners that had plagued the construction of the line re-emerged and the frailty of the infant technology

resulted in lost revenue and increased maintenance costs. Ultimately, in 1896, these difficulties prevailed upon the line's third set of owners and Melbourne's first electric tramway was unable to continue. The end had come to a glorious five-year period of running tourists from Box Hill to the picturesque tower in Doncaster, providing "a grand panoramic view of the Dandenongs, the Plenty Ranges, Kew, Melbourne, Mount Macedon, Keilor Plains, Port Phillip Bay, and, on a clear day, Port Phillip Heads". The perfect day trip for a picnic among the orchards.

Sources:

The Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil,
14 August 1880

The Argus Newspaper, 3 June 1891

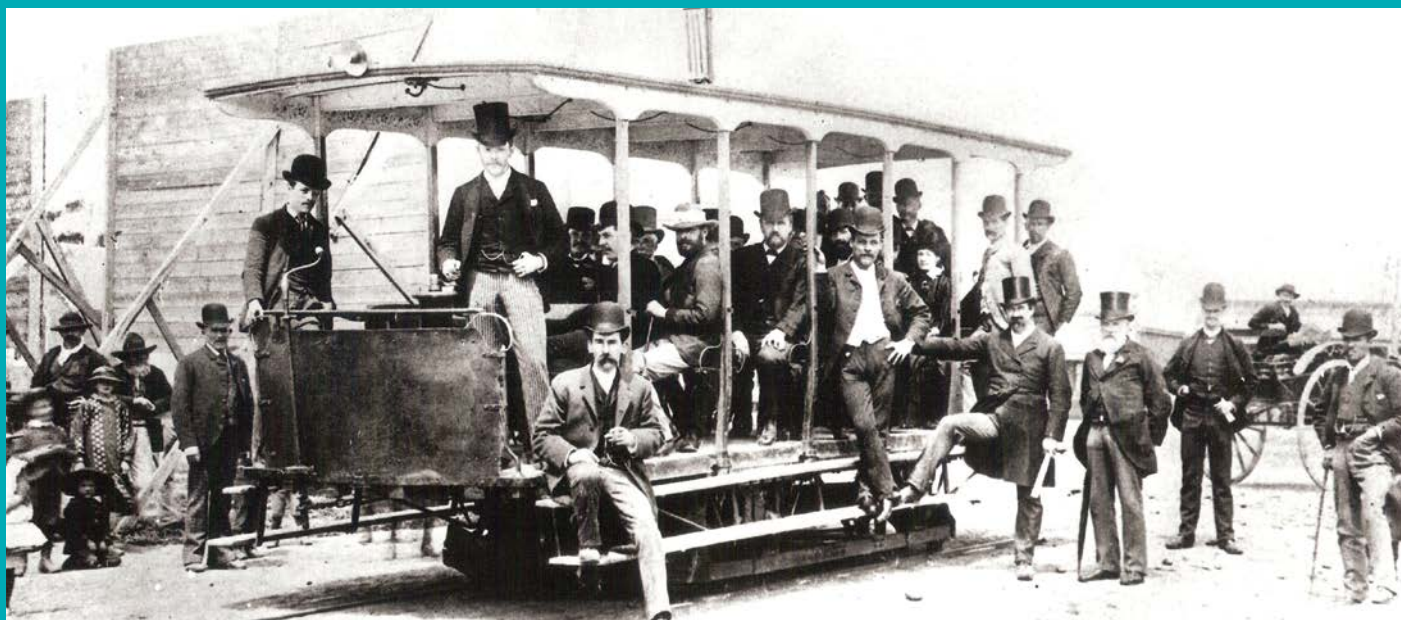


Figure 2-4: The first electric tram (from the collection of the Box Hill Historical Society).



Doncaster Park + Ride

metlink

Route	To	Route	To
207	City/Lonsdale St via Doncaster Rd > Kew Junction	309	City/Queen St via Eastern Freeway > Hobbs St
207	Donvale via Doncaster Rd > Doncaster Shoppingtown	309	Donvale via High St > Reynolds Rd
280	Manningham Loop (Clockwise) via Bulleen > Templestowe	313	City Russell St via Doncaster Rd > Killy Rd > Eastern Freeway
282	Manningham Loop (Anti-Clockwise) via Doncaster East > Donvale	907	City (Spencer/Lonsdale Streets) via Eastern Freeway > Hobbs St
284	Box Hill via Greythorn Rd > Union Rd	907	Milcham Station via Doncaster Rd > Milchem Rd
284	Doncaster Shoppingtown via Doncaster Rd	908	City (Spencer/Lonsdale Streets) via Eastern Freeway > Hobbs St
285	Camberwell via North Balwyn > Canterbury	908	The Pines Shopping Centre via High St > King St
285	Doncaster Shoppingtown via High St > Manningham Rd		