

Purrey tram #5 and trailer bound for Dawson Road; differences in driver and guard uniforms are evident.

## Rockhampton's Tram System

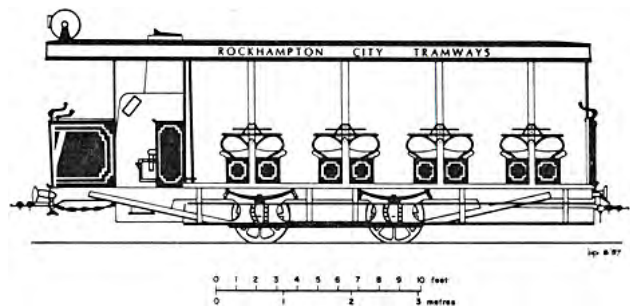
French-built Purrey steam trams provided municipal transport in Rockhampton from 1909 until they were replaced by buses in 1939.

While only a few cities still have functional tram systems, trams were a common sight in many Australian cities in the century from the mid-1800s. Some were horse drawn, others used steam power and still others were electrically-powered before almost universally succumbing to rubber-tired diesel-powered buses.

Rockhampton's steam-powered trams began operating 24 years after Brisbane developed a horse-drawn system and 12 years after Brisbane switched to electric power. As well, the French-built Purrey trams were unique in Australia, although they had been adopted by cities in several European countries and Argentina.

There had apparently been several proposals for tram systems in Rockhampton prior to a late 1907 ratepayer poll and Council decision to

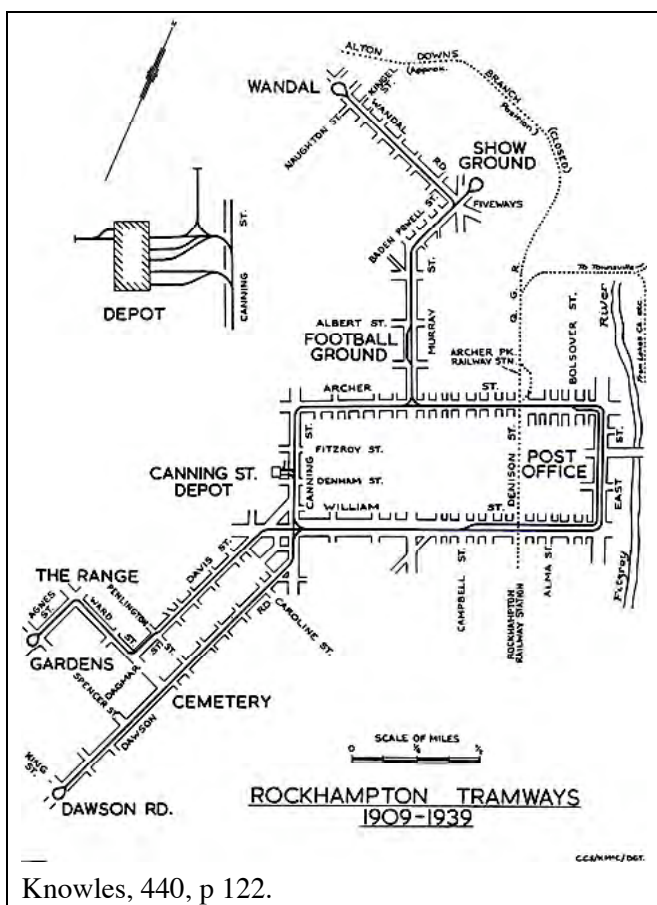
proceed. HC Stanley, a Queensland Government consulting engineer, had been commissioned to carry out a tramway study and had seen the Purrey system operating in Paris. While an electric system might have been superior, the Council felt that they could afford the self-propelled steam cars, promoted as being clean (coke powered), neat and comfortable.



The 3' 6" (1067mm, the same as QR) gauge system opened on 5 June 1909 with five cars, one of which was a maintenance vehicle with side-tipping ballast bunkers. Unfortunately, breakdowns were common in the early days

because of impure water damaging the boiler tubes, the lack of spare parts, etc. The ballast vehicle was soon converted to passenger use and additional vehicles were ordered, bringing the fleet to eight cars and three trailers.

The fleet was expanded by another steam tram and three trailers when the Wandal route was added in 1922. While one tram was built with closed sides, it was converted to match the other 'toast-rack' or open sided cars. Just over 26' (8m) in length, the cars had canvas blinds for weather protection and carried 48 passengers on wooden slatted cross seats.



Knowles, 440, p 122.

Queensland Railways used two Purrey cars for suburban trains to Lakes Creek and Parkhurst from 1922 to 1930, when buses took over. The municipal system had continual financial problems and increasing competition from buses, bicycles and motor cars. In 1938 Council finally called for tenders on a bus fleet which started arriving early in 1939. The trams ceased on 24 June 1939 after 30 years of service.

A search for tram components to restore one of the Purrey trams began in 1976 with the National Trust 18-35 group headed by David Neish. Various parts were found across Central Queensland but many parts needed to be rebuilt

from plans, old parts and photographs. The reconstruction became a Bicentennial project with funds from the Queensland Government, the National Trust and other donations.



Adding fuel to the Purrey's firebox is a two person task. The use of Blair Athol coal and coke ensures steady running and relatively little smoke.

The restored Rockhampton Purrey tram is unique, as none of the other 190 trams built by the Purrey works in Bourdeau, France, appear to have survived. The restored tram was recommissioned on 5 June 1988 and was later (1999) moved to Archer Park, where it operates most Sundays (10:00 am – 1:00 pm) for visitors to the Archer Park Rail Museum.

### Further Reading and Acknowledgments

- Knowles, JW (1974). *The Rockhampton City Tramways*, ARHS Bulletin, 440, 442, 443.
  - Nicholson, Judy (1988). **Rocky's 'Puffing Billies': A history of the Rockhampton Steam Trams**, North Rockhampton: Author.
  - Robert Riddel Architect (1994). **Archer Park Railway Station**, Brisbane.
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