

The No 8 tram in history and folklore



Cable tram on Park Street, South Yarra, 4 June 1920 [Stonnington Library PH2101, cropped]

'The Toorak Tram on a Friday Night'

This is a 1973 ditty by folksinger Bernard Bolan composed especially for the No 8 tram route. It begins like this:

It's half past five in Flinders Street, there's tension in the air.

Girls with curls and cultured pearls are tearing at their hair.

Whilst men with charm and outward calm, begin to cuss and damn,

Then with a roar, they push and pour onto the Toorak Tram.....

Then it's right down the middle please, hold on tight.
Get out your money and stop that fight.

For it's kick and kill and bash and bite,
On a Toorak tram on a Friday night.

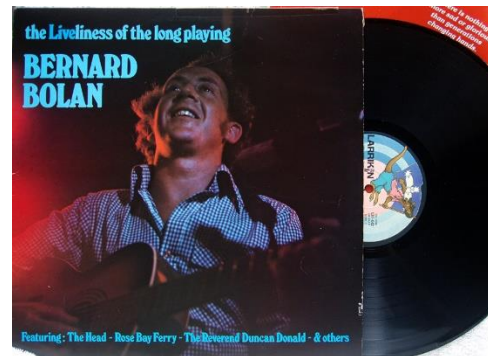
A three yard dash and a dive and "crash", you've won yourself a seat.

Now quickly take your paper out and study ev'ry word,

Don't lift your face or you've lost your place to an ancient, crippled bird.....

And so on, for several more verses, all irreverent.

[Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjdVAINx6n8> to hear him singing it, and try another version at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=210022704011491>]



Today's electric tram routes follow the cable tram lines

Before its famous electric trams, Melbourne had cable trams. These earlier trams were attached by a grip to a constantly moving cable that ran underground along the major roads. The Toorak line operated from 1889 to 1926, deploying the engine house built at the north-western corner of Chapel Street and Toorak Road. This building housed a cable just over 4 miles (6.7 km) in length.

The secret to the cable system was the grip, the device used by the driver (gripman) to attach his tram to the moving hawser, so these engine houses were built at regular intervals across the inner suburbs. The gripman sat among the passengers in the dummy, which pulled another vehicle along (the two vehicles, joined together, had a carrying capacity of 52 passengers). Gossip and news were shared on these cable trams. Passengers could look out directly from the cable trams to the buildings, so advertising and other signage (such as the elegant façade of the original South Yarra Post Office) was placed to catch the attention of these passengers.

The cable car routes were not numbered, as the later tram routes would be, but colour-coded. The geographical lay-out of the cable cars system, importantly, became the system of routes used by the electric trams. Trams were in competition with the colonial trains, so the tram and train routes of Melbourne were never coordinated. This remains a fundamental weakness of Melbourne's public transport a century later. For instance, in South Yarra the two systems have only one (very busy) inter-modal cross-over, the Toorak Road tram line and the South Yarra railway station. Another feature of colonial public transport was that cable cars could not handle steep gradients. This limited the routes that could be taken. A third factor was the reliance on straight lines for the underground cables – again, most of the electric tram system still avoids curves.

Finally, there was the issue of funding: each cable car system, as well as the early electric trams (after 1907), belonged to a specific local government, and the profits were reinvested locally. This is why Prahran and Malvern are better serviced by trams than other localities across the metropolitan area. Cable trams and electric trams co-existed across the period from 1907 to the 1940s, so when electric trams took over, they followed the same routes as the cable trams. This helps explain where Melbourne's trams are routed, including No 8, and some of the surprising holes in the network.

Why was the number 8 chosen?

In 1929 the new Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board assigned the number 8 to the Toorak tram. There was a logic to this arrangement, as it deployed a counter-clockwise clock face as its design, numbering from 1 to 9. So: 5 went to Malvern, 6 to Glen Iris, 7 to Camberwell, 8 to Toorak, etc.

A front-row seat to housing changes

A 1934 tourist guide praised the view from Melbourne's trams: 'Years ago writers used to wax lyrical over the "stately homes of Toorak." Nowadays the trail of the flat builder is all too prominent, and within recent years many an old home standing in splendid isolation has gone, the kitchen garden of the old proprietors being thought large enough for the house and garden of the new. In several of the side streets the old-world charm of a more leisured age can be captured still, however, and if the stables now hold motor cars—well, we can be thankful for the sight of the homes built in the days when "Spanish Mission" types with Norman towers and Gothic arches were but ugly nightmares in the minds of speculative builders.' Gawking from trams has a long history.

The No 8 enters urban folklore

The Route 8 also features in a story told often by 'Ding' Bell, the erstwhile Registrar at the University of Melbourne. 'Ding' served in the force that occupied Japan after the close of the Second World War, meeting many Japanese ex-military. When a Japanese prisoner asked him where he lived back home, he answered, 'Toorak'. 'So you take the Number 8 tram to work then?', came the reply. 'How did you know?' 'During the war I had been promised the job of Governor of Melbourne when we invaded Australia, and so I made a careful study of the city's trams!' Urban folklore at its best!

Admiring the latest fashions

The occupants of the tram crane their necks to observe the latest fashions along this strip. Then the No 8 tram bursts free of the shops and enters bohemian Toorak Road West, once stopping at Fawkner Park opposite the Gothic mansion, Goodrest, that featured in Antony Ginnane's 1978 horror movie *Patrick*. The opening scene of this film begins with the urban innocence of this tram stop, as a nurse alights to work at the private hospital opposite.

Instead of continuing down directly to St Kilda Road, until 2017 the No 8 veered sharply right along Park Street, and then headed westwards once more along Domain Road. Legend has it that this L-shaped deviation was designed to help the important people of Punt Road Hill use the cable car. Tram historian John Keating wrote that it was no accident that the influential E. G. Fitzgibbon, Alfred Deakin and F. B. Clapp all lived near this corner. The ghost of 77-year-old Thomas Wiley, sadly hit by a cable car at this corner in April 1909 is still sighted at his last known address in Millswyn Street. And from here it is a short walk to the majestic Royal Botanic Gardens.



No 8 tram was undone by its success [Lobbecke 2017]