

**Bus Preservation Society of  
Western Australia (Inc)**

A Collection of Historic Buses of National Significance  
**BPSWA Occasional Paper 3/2016**



# The BPSWA Horse Bus



Fig. 1 The restored wagonette horse bus, believed to have been used in the Bunbury area and gifted to the Bus Preservation Society by the National Trust

The oldest vehicle in the Bus Preservation Society of WA (BPSWA) collection is a wagonette (meaning “little wagon”) horse bus which was built around 1900. This horse bus came to BPSWA in December 2005 via the NATIONAL TRUST (WA), “Deaccessioning Project”.

Little is known of the origin and working life of this exhibit. It is believed to have operated in the Bunbury area and is typical of horse drawn



Fig. 2 Arrival of the Horse-bus at our Whiteman Park Workshops, December 2005



Fig 3 Rear of the BPSWA Wagonette showing the rear steps and the seating arrangement.

conveyances for passengers in larger towns and cities around Australia prior to the widespread use of motor vehicles. The manufacturer is not identified but the timberwork is English Oak and Ash, and photographs of seemingly identical vehicles exist in other States. It is possible that the bus was imported assembled or came in kit form from the UK and assembled here.

Wagonettes were not as expensive to build as the larger ‘saloon’ omnibuses so the style was used for a number of different purposes such as Police Paddy Wagons used to transport prisoners, delivery vans, commercial travellers vans, haberdashery vans, green grocer’s vans and the like.

Principal features were four wheels, two inward facing longitudinal bench seats for passengers, a canopy or

'tilt' was optional with entry steps at the rear. The driver sat in a forward looking bench seat in front of the passengers. Our horse omnibus is a double horse configuration. Wagonettes were well suited to country towns where they were used for excursions, picnics, travel to sporting fixtures, school buses, travel to and from railway stations, wharves and the like.

The horse omnibus era in Australian cities lasted from the 1840's to around 1910 when they finally gave way to trams. The wagonette vehicles remained in use, however, in country areas for a longer period until most were replaced in the 1920's and 1930's by petrol driven omnibuses and charabancs.

The BPSWA horse bus has steel axles stamped J. Rigby and Sons, 1906. John Rigby and Sons were axle manufacturers and metal workers, Birmingham, England.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the firm developed a significant export business and had an agent in Sydney for sales of components for horse drawn vehicles and bullock wagons. The firm competed against American manufacturers of similar components who tended to dominate the Australian market.

Local body builders engaged in building an extensive array of horse drawn vehicles before and after the turn of the 20th century. They purchased the axle and metal work components needed for the particular type of conveyance ordered by customers and then constructed the vehicle or wagon to suit. Boltons and others proudly exhibited their finished products annually at the Royal Show and the quality of workmanship was high. Five skilled trades were involved in horse drawn vehicles: body builder, wheelwright, blacksmith, trimmer (canvass and upholstery) and painter (especially the lining out). Each section had its master craftsman as supervisor.



Fig. 4 Rear wheel separated into its component parts before replicating with new timber.

A feature of timber framed, horse drawn vehicles is the need to prevent the timber in wheels from drying out, causing it to shrink with spokes and rims loosening. Our bus wheels are no exception. They have been drying out for

some years while the bus was in storage in a corner of our workshops and the spokes shrank resulting in the wheels becoming generally loose. It was a common practice to remove timber wheels regularly and soak them to maintain their tight fit. The axles and bearings were then greased and the wheels refitted.



Fig. 5 A pair of the completed wheels

### **First Horse Buses between Fremantle and Perth.**

The first dedicated road passenger service between Fremantle and Perth began in 1873, when a Mr. De Latch introduced a horse omnibus service. Previously the only regular road service was a mail run that also carried passengers and was operated by two men with the names Hardman and Drake.

The Hardman and Drake service was operated in two parts, Fremantle to Claremont and Claremont to Perth along the Perth – Fremantle Road, as Stirling Highway was then known. The coach from Perth met the coach from Fremantle at the Half Way Tree near the present corner of John St and Stirling Highway, and passengers and mail changed vehicles. The site is commemorated today by a red Victorian letter box with an inscription.

### **Early motor buses built in the wagonette style**

Early motor buses in the UK were built using the pattern of the wagonette horse bus. But they were soon superseded by an enclosed saloon design with an additional deck on top to triple passenger carrying capacity.



Fig. 6 Fred White's local Peel Estate Motor Service bus built in the wagonette style.

## Restoration

Whilst the timberwork in the passenger saloon and chassis was in reasonable condition after more than a century, the wheels were loose and collapsing, and new ones had to be constructed with suitably seasoned timber. Likewise the canopy timbers had rotted and a complete new canopy frame and coving panels were built. A new canvass canopy completed the restoration. All the skilled work was carried out locally.

It's present condition is that of a restored, static display item. A further \$5-7,000 would be needed to fit a timber shaft for two horses and to provide the bridles, reigns and horse gear.

The wagonette horse bus will be kept at Whiteman Park for future generations to see and enjoy a "State of the Art", two horsepower bus of 1900.

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Fig. 7 A horse bus in Victoria Park, source and date unknown. Image adjusted. (Image cut.



Fig. 8 St Georges Terrace looking South West showing horse bus and cabs 1906-7 - State Library of WA



Fig. 9 Mr. George Brown operated his horsebus from King William Street to Parkside and Eastwood (in Adelaide South Australia) about 1905 (Source unknown)



Fig. 10 Old Sydney “try again” horsebuses were used in Henley Road (In Adelaide South Australia) until after the electric trams began. (Source Unknown)

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